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Re-historicising and the Clash of Cultures in Mahasweta's *The Book of the Hunter*

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is a Bengali novelist, playwright, short-story writer, journalist and a social-activist par excellence. Her works are densely loaded with the lives of the poor farmers, labourers, tribals, children, women; in short, all the downtrodden, the oppressed, the marginalized and the most neglected. She vividly documents their plight. With the pen in her hand becoming a sword, she wages a relentless battle to provide them justice. This research paper aims to study the life of Shabar tribes as depicted in her novel, *The Book of the Hunter* (2002) which was actually published in Bengali as *Byadhkandha* in 1994. For reasons unknown, and for reasons unaccounted and baseless, the Britishers had declared the Shabar tribes as 'Criminal Tribes' in 1871. This stigma against them continues even today though the Act that declared them as criminals was repealed. The paper also tries to highlight the importance of preserving the forest, its resources and the culture of the inhabitants there. The novel implicitly makes a statement that the mainstream has to inculcate awareness of those whom they always considered as 'the other.' This research paper also presents how the cultures – the mainstream and that of the Subaltern come into clash with each other and how the former tries to superimpose itself on the latter. The paper also tries to trace how the history of the Shabars which has been hitherto neglected is to be re-told. It stresses the importance of preserving the oral traditions, folklores, myths and legends of the tribals as the 'National Culture' is not just the 'Culture of the Elites/Mainstream'. It is the sum total of all the cultures in the land.

Key words: Shabars, Subaltern, Mainstream, Re-historicizing, Myths, Legends, Folklore

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Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* was first published in Bengali as *Byadhkhanda* in 1994. It was translated into English and was later published in 2002. It tells the story of Shabar tribes (also known as 'Sabar' or 'Saora') whose population is predominantly found in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. This

novel is the one in which fact and fiction, legend and history, folklore, myth, oral history coalesce to create a remarkable dramatic whole. This research paper makes an attempt to present how Mahasweta has tried to delineate the clash of cultures, the differences between the mainstream and the subaltern, the ignorance and lack of understanding

of the mainstream in the issues concerning the subaltern 'Shabar' tribes. The paper also seeks to trace out how the 'Counter-historical discourse' or 'Re-historicising' or as Mahasweta fondly likes to call it, 'the history, as told from below' brings to surface the reality concerning the 'Shabar' tribes and the role they play in preserving the ecology which is being exploited by the town-dwellers.

"The Shabar tribes were declared as 'Criminal Tribes' by the Britishers in 1871. The term Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) refers to various pieces of legislation enforced in India during British rule; the first enacted in 1871 as the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 applied mostly in North India. The Act was extended to Bengal Presidency and other areas in 1876, and, finally, with the Criminal Tribes Act, 1911, it was extended to Madras Presidency as well. The Act went through several amendments in the next decade and, finally, the Criminal Tribes Act, 1924 incorporated all of them."¹ (The Hindu, 1)

"In January 1947, the Government of Bombay set up a committee, which included B.G. Kher, then Chief Minister Morarji Desai, and Gulzarilal Nanda, to look into the matter of 'criminal tribes'. This set into motion the final repeal of the Act in August 1949, which resulted in 2,300,000 tribals being decriminalised."² (Revankar, 238) However, in spite of the decriminalization of these tribes, the stigma towards them is still continuing. Mahasweta in the 'Preface' to *The Book of the Hunter* gives the case of Chuni Kotal (1964-1992), the first woman graduate among the Lodha Shabars of Medinipur, a district town in West Bengal who went on to Post-graduate from the Vidyasagar University in Medinipur. However, she was persistently harassed by the faculty members of the University owing to her low caste and the past history of her tribe being a 'criminal tribe'. Unable to endure this, she committed suicide on 16th August, 1992 which stirred the entire nation and raised alarming questions on the path that our nation is treading.

In the backdrop of all these, Mahasweta became intensely devoted to the study of Shabars and began to document their origins, their life, culture, calamities and the very many sufferings

they are subjected to. She has said in the preface to this novel,

"In this novel, I undertook for the first time to seek out the tribal identity of the Shabars. Whatever I have written about Byadh (hunter) or Shabar life, every detail will certainly be corroborated by the Shabars themselves – the day they are no longer driven from place to place, cruelly oppressed, and insulted....The encroachment of towns and non-advasis upon their territory, advasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home, and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about advasi society-these are all truths about our own time."³ (Mahasweta, Preface, xi)

Mahasweta Devi, in the 'Preface' to this novel humbly acknowledges her due to Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti who is regarded as the greatest sixteenth century Bengali poet. He was the author of an epic poem, *Abhayamangal*, better known as *Chandimangal* which recorded the socio-political history of the times. In that epic poem, there is a section entitled, *Byadhkanda* (The Book of the Hunter) where Mukundaram wrote about the life of the Shabars and the 'Panchalis' (the ballads celebrating the life of the local deities). He talks about 'Abhayachandi', the goddess of the forest to whom the Shabars were extremely devoted. Apart from this source, Mahasweta's own social activism and her intimate familiarity with the tribals of West Bengal, Orissa, Chhattisgarh made her write this novel. We find in it Mukundaram himself as a character and the circumstances that drove him to write his illustrious epic.

The novel is divided into nine chapters of unequal size. An account of the domestic life of Mukundaram is given in the first chapter. Madhab Ojha, Mukunda's great grandfather, was brought by Birdigar Datta to Daminya to maintain the cycle of daily worship for the gods in the temple, in the Datta's family home and in the village as well. Mukundaram, a Brahmin by caste and the great grandson of Madhab Ojha has been living as a protégé of Gopinath Nandi, the Talukdar in Daminya. He was given land to cultivate along with cattle and other provisions and facilities for a happy

sustenance. However, times changed and a new ruler of the land Mamud Sharif who was a tyrant came to power. He imprisoned Gopinath Nandi and began to wreck havoc in the lives of the people of Daminya. Mukunda begins to feel inconvenient and sensing the danger pays a visit to his uncle Ganesh who has deep knowledge about the affairs of the state and life. He counsels Mukunda to leave Daminya and go to Ararha along with his family.

Mukunda feels very sad to leave his birth place, particularly where his dear mother Daibaki had planted several trees, nurtured him and had made him a scholar. Daibaki had passed away by then. With all these memories lingering in his mind, Mukunda, with his wife Jagadishwari, his son Shibu and daughter Shiuli sets off to a new land. On their way, they came across Shilabati river. They fell asleep on its banks and Mukunda dreamt of a motherly figure blessing him and saying that he will write an epic. Mukunda woke up startled and began to move ahead thinking about this enigmatic dream. He reached Ararha which was ruled by the King Bankura Ray. He was well received by him and made him the teacher of the crown prince Raghunath. Rani Dauna Devi was also equally magnanimous to the newly arrived Brahman couple. There was a huge jungle called Chandir Bon beyond the town of Ararha. At the edge of this jungle, there lived a tribe of hunters or Akhetiyas belonging to the Shabar clan.

The town-dwellers have a low esteem about the marginalized or the subaltern. "In Postcolonial theory, the term *subaltern* describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society: a subaltern is a person rendered without agency by social status."⁴ (Young) It designates those populations that are socially, geographically, politically outside of the hegemonic power. Antonio Gramsci was the first one, who through his work on cultural hegemony wrote about those groups which have been kept away from the established institutions of the society and hence are deprived of a voice, the very basic human right. Mukunda, with all his goodness and scholastic knowledge is also no exception to this. Unconsciously, he too harbours less regard for them in terms of knowledge, "Mukunda did not believe

that a forest-dwelling Shabar could know much about anything. In his arrogance, stemming from the prolonged study of numerous Sanskrit texts, he believed that knowledge only came from the formal cultivation of learning." (Devi, 55)

However, Mukunda becomes inquisitive to know about the history of the tribals and meets Tejota, the mother of young Kalya Shabar. Tejota is greatly venerated by the Shabars for she possesses great wisdom that has been passed on to her by her own father Danko Shabar who has retreated into the forest to safeguard a mythical and mysterious temple of Abhayachandi, the forest goddess. Tejota narrates the age old story in which the Shabars had firm conviction and by which they all abided. The legend says that in the ancient times, Abhayachandi, the forest goddess gave 'Abhaya' (or) 'reassurance' to all the tribals that she will safeguard all of them including the trees and animals. There was a king of the town who wanted to construct a temple for Abhaya but he was oblivious of how the idol should be. A young Brahmin promised him that he will get the image of Abhaya and went into the forest. He met the Shabar priest and lied to him that he has been ostracized and hence needed shelter. He guiled Kapila, the priest's daughter and entered into the forest. He stole the idol and ran away. Abhayachandi gets flared up and curses him that his family would perish and it really perished as it was said. The goddess also cursed the Shabars for foolishly trusting a Brahman and saying that they would be scattered in all directions and they should never touch the feet of a Brahman or befriend them thereafter.

After several generations, however, she took pity on the miserable lives of the Shabars and created a man and a woman from clay and named them as Kalketu and Phullora. She promised to them that Kalketu would become King Meghbahan and his wife Queen Meghabati once Kalketu finds a golden monitor lizard on the eighth day of Durgashtami. It happens thus and the goddess further gives them seven pots of riches every day which will be replenished every night. The legend and the folk tale says that Meghbahan ruled for millions and millions of years until his treasurer stealthily cast an evil glance at night by peeping into the prohibited

chamber of riches through a drilled hole that brings out the curse again as the kingdom is lost and the temple of the goddess gets surrounded by the forest and disappears and she finally says to Kalketu that anyone who finds the golden monitor lizard in future would again be the king and until then the Shabars have to suffer.

Kalya Shabar, the son of Tejota is married to his childhood playmate and the daughter of his mother's friend Phuli. Their affection knows no bounds. Kalya, in particular is so possessive about Phuli that he does not like her even to speak to Jagadishwari, Mukunda's wife for two reasons – one is that they are town-dwellers and their culture is different and the other is that she is a Brahmin and according to the legend, Abhayachandi, the forest goddess had cursed them for trusting a Brahmin. So, Kalya wants Phuli to abstain herself from interacting with them. He even mercilessly beats her at times. This rage of Kalya perturbs Tejota who wants to pass on her wisdom to him but is doubtful whether he is matured enough to carry it on. Tejota pleads her son to restrain himself,

“Kalya! Kalya! Why won't you learn lessons from the forest even now? Do the tigers and deer thrash their females mercilessly like you do to yours? Look at the kingdom of animals and birds! When a tiger is hungry, it kills a deer; an elephant eats leaves and twigs from the bamboo and banyan tree, but there is no needless killing, violence or destruction. Meanwhile, you beat Phuli, get angry whenever you see town folk-you burn like a hot fire! You have hopes of getting knowledge. I want to give it to you. I do, but now I am afraid and I have doubts.” (Devi, 100-101)

Thus, in the world of Shabars, everything is analogous to the nature that they see around them. The laws that govern the animal world, the forest and those laws enunciated by Abhayachandi are to be followed and emulated upon. Any attempt to go astray from them is likely to doom them.

The town-dwellers have a different notion about the Shabars. Kalar-ma, the house-maid of Mukunda makes an insight, “They're a wild race, and do they know anything? Never mind about them! Whatever comes out of the jungle, they'll eat it

scalded or roasted. They won't work on any schedule, they won't farm, and they'll retort, why plough when there's a forest?” (Devi, 76) However, it is also to be noted that the Shabars are not lazy and irresponsible in terms of indiscriminately exploiting the forest resources. Danko Shabar, the headman of the community before seeing that Kalya is married to Phuli says, “Kalya is my grandson, the eldest son of my only daughter. So now I'm going to make a rule that only five deer skins may be taken. And one or two wild boars – no one will ever give more than that. You've got a daughter's wedding and she's under Abhaya's protection-what's the point of inviting Ma's curse by killing too many deer, tigers or boars?” (Devi, 77-78) Danko further says, “I can see in front of my eyes that eight or ten boys have already chosen their brides...I'm going to have them all set up to be married at the same time.” (Devi, 78) This is a wonderful economic measure that is followed to safeguard the resources of the forest. This is in stark contrast to the lavish, reckless and indiscreet spending of resources in the marriages of town-dwellers. Their regard for the nature, forest, its dwellers can again be noted when Kalya drives away the traders who were ready to pay a rupee coin of pure silver for a male deer's skin and they wanted a hundred such skins. Hence, exploiting nature and earning money like the so-called cultured, civilized town-dwellers has never been the agenda for Shabars. On the other hand, they are its protectors.

In an interview with Gabrielle Collu in 1997, Mahasweta Devi said, “I respect the Tribals too much. I respect Indian tribals because they are much more civilized and sophisticated than we are. Their own social codes say widows can remarry, divorce is allowed, men and women can divorce, a woman's place is of honour, there is no one who becomes an orphan because he or she has lost their parents. The community rears them. There are many such laws prove that they were most civilized most sophisticated and they are the people all India has exploited like anything because they are black, because they don't speak the language.”⁵ (Collu, 147-148)

The stark reality is that the Shabars are confined into their own sphere of activity that they are not even aware of some of the injustice that they meet. Kalachand says, "They don't even know they're poor. They sell meat, feathers, skins, wood, honey, incense, fruits, *kul*, roots and bark. They buy nothing except for rice, cloth, salt, pepper and oil." (Devi, 58) Awareness is the first step for enlightenment. However, the Shabars are not even aware that they are impoverished. On the other hand, it appears that they are least bothered about it. They are contented with what they have and they do not make any effort to come out of the vicious cycle because they consider it as the law of the nature or the law of Abhayachandi. Phuli says to Mukunda's wife, "Whatever Abhaya wants us to have. She has allotted you rice daily, and so you've got a stock of it at home. We Shabars, despite being her children, are not destined to have it that way. She hasn't allotted rice to everyone!" (Devi, 87)

Danko Shabar is able to observe that the town is slowly encroaching the forest. More and more people from other places are making in-roads into the forest and are constructing houses. The population of Shabars is gradually dwindling and is on the scale of descendancy. Perceiving this threat from the people of other cultures, Danko Shabar, the old man incessantly seeks for the roots of the *amritagandha* plant, which will help him to increase longevity, make him more virile and robust so that he can again marry any Shabar woman, impregnate her and go somewhere and increase the population and generations of the Shabar tribes. These thoughts of Danko Shabar may appear to be ridiculous to the town-dwellers but they also speak about the kind of desperation that Danko is subjected to as against the eclipsing of his community by the town-dwellers.

Danko Shabar himself knows that it is a futile exercise. He, in sheer desperation says, "Enough of this daydreaming that we'll cover the three worlds with Shabars. They don't know how to survive. After this, they too will be short and dwarf-like. And on top of that, other kinds of people will drive them out of their ancestral homes. What can Abhaya do, Ma? What you want is what will come to pass." (Devi, 104)

Kalya is so proud of his own tribal customs and heritage that he does not like his wife Phuli to be so subservient to go from house to house of the elites and sell. He feels it is below their decency and decorum. Phuli, in a conversation with her friend Sana says, "He dislikes my doing so and says, it's one thing for you to sell meat and skin in the market because that's what we tribals do. But I won't let you go selling door to door in town." (Devi, 86) This thought-process of preserving human dignity, individuality and reverence for the status of Shabar tribals is reflected at another instance when Kalya tells his mother Tejota the reason why he doesn't like Phuli to be in proximity with Mukunda's wife or any other upper caste/class people, "They give her handouts, as if she were a beggar, Ma! Rice, coconuts, bananas and all kinds of other things! Nowadays Shabars do see other folks too. The time is gone when we were the only people! Their houses are nice, they talk well and have good hearts. Phuli sees how they are and judges me by their standards." (Devi, 121)

This may appear to be as inferiority complex on the part of Kalya but at a deeper level, it is a lamentation and despair at the insecurity encroaching on the Shabar community. It is not just the matter of accepting the basic needs, provisions and help of the elites. It is not just materialistic subservience but it is also emotional, social and cultural. In a way, it is eclipsing their own identity. Kalya cannot digest the idea of comparison or relative merit with those of the elites. The Shabars have their own code of conduct, their own paradigms, their own values which they feel should not be put to test or made to come into clash with those of the elites.

The views of Kalya are actually the voice of the Shabar community. His words reflect the apprehension and the very many fears of the Shabars as they are under perpetual threat from the geographical, material, conceptual and cultural invasion of the mainstream/elites which may lead to the erosion of their own. The thoughts of Tejota justify this, "...the town and its people would spread out, and the dwellers at the edge would set their eyes on the other's houses, yards, ways of living and customs. The younger generation would be

influenced. Sana's family had learned to save. This year their roof was not made of leaves, but of hay. It was quite an event to see Shabars suddenly smoothing mud over their house walls and painting pictures on them! Their ways were quite different from the other Shabars. Sana's husband did not thrash her, and Sana had oil in her hair and rice in store. There was no stopping the times from changing! A Shabar understood that the more others encroached, the more his existence would be threatened." (Devi, 121-122)

The culmination of the text reaches where Kalya and his young fellow Shabars decide to hunt down the majestic elephant which has come of age. However, Danko warns them that Abhayachandi's forest was governed by Abhaya's unwritten laws and no Shabar should enter into the Abhaya's fortress with the intention of killing. If they find that the elephant is advancing towards Abhaya's fortress, they should restrain themselves from hunting, lest a curse would befall on them. However, Kalya is blinded with a sense of victory and glory that he would have by hunting the elephant and thus becoming the inheritor of Tejota's wisdom. He feels that this would be the first step to become a King like Kalketu and repeating the legend. Kalya, in a high spirit, breaks the rules and gets away from his clan of hunters. He gets into the very interior of the forest and lies exhausted when he finds the Airavat elephant staring at him infuriated for disturbing even its peaceful death. It holds him in its trunk, lifts him up and throws him down heavily crashing him to earth and kills him. Later, it also dies. The body of Kalya is brought and Phuli becomes speechless. She commits suicide in the pond at night. The Shabars considering all these events think that something ominous has befallen on them and decide to leave Chandir Bon in search of a new forest dwelling. They also observe that their habitation is gradually being reduced by the expansion of the habitation of the town-dwellers. So, without informing anyone, the entire clan just moves away seeking some other forest shelter. The novel ends with Mukunda invoking the goddess Abhayachandi and beginning to write the epic, *Abhayamangal* in which he decides to write about the tale of the Shabars.

Kalya's attempt to search and hunt down the majestic elephant by going into the core of the forest is actually an attempt to return to the primeval life of Shabars. He is trying to search his identity by coaxing with the ways of the past lives of the Shabars whereas the present life of erosion of their own culture stands in his way as their own culture has gone astray due to the influence of the mainstream. They have become valueless. His becoming isolated from the rest of the clan indicates that there is no one to stand by him. Thus, Mahasweta Devi, through this novel wants to create awareness among the mainstream that their ambitiousness to encroach and influence the forests and influence the lives of the traditional tribals there has resulted in chaos and conflicts. She intends to say that the lives, beliefs and traditions of Shabars should be respected and it is as well the duty of the mainstream to protect the forests and way of life over there. It is not just physical but also spiritual. The 'National Culture' is not just the 'Culture of the Elites/Mainstream'. It is the sum total of all the cultures in the land.

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Dr. V. B. Chitra works as Associate Professor of English in Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU), Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh. She has a vast experience of nearly two decades and is actively involved in research activities and projects. Her areas of interest are American Literature, Indian Writing in English, Commonwealth Literature, British Literature, ELT, Diaspora Writings. She has contributed widely in International and National Journals and has presented research papers in several International and National Seminars / Conferences.
