



Research article

The Silenced “Other” Talks Back from Jungle: A Study of Hunting Ritual by Indigenous Women in Mahasweta Devi’s “The Hunt”

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Abstract

The idea of “nature” as something pure, pristine, untouched by humans, a pastoral piece of land, creates an exclusivist version of nature preservation. Likewise, performance is also thought to be exclusive, executed only on stage, removed from ordinary life, but in reality, the human body is continuously in a state of performance; we are continuously acting according to or “performing” our cultural beliefs, functions, gender roles, politics, etc. This paper intends to present a postcolonial ecocritical study of the short story “The Hunt” (1995) written by Mahasweta Devi, by focusing on the Indigenous ritual of hunting or performance of hunting named *Jani Parab* and its importance in the scenario of postcolonial environmentalism. At the “Jani Parab” festival, the tribal protagonist of this story hunts (or performs the hunting ritual) the capitalist broker who had been deforesting their land. This hunting alters several metanarratives regarding colonizer/colonized, hunter/prey, civilized/uncivilized, male/female. The story’s protagonist, an illegitimate, tribal woman, becomes “other” in every possible way. By hunting, she moves from being the “other” and becomes the hybrid subject. She becomes oppressor and oppressed, hunter and prey, nature and culture at the same time. She is the voice talking back from the jungle. This paper will focus on cultural and environmental issues, ecological and sociological aspects of tribal communities in modern India, and how they are structurally dehumanized altogether by the Caste system, capitalism, government corruption and colonial legacy. It brings together colonial inheritance, environmental issues, caste issues and capitalism – all the concerns of postcolonial ecocriticism very clearly.

Keywords: Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Hybrid Identity, Tribal Rituals, Indian Environmentalism, Caste Identity.



[Climate Action, Life on Land](#)

Introduction

Performance and ecology are both terms that are thought to be exclusive entities, but they are both, in fact, something that is entangled in every aspect of life, iterated and reiterated again and

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again. In "The Hunt", these two ideas are explored. This paper highlights how the indigenous people's performance of their ritual restores the ecological balance. Donna Haraway (2022) mentioned in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, in the Navajo worldview, "hózhó" is an important concept that means beauty, harmony and balance. The most significant source of disorder is greed. Greed destroys "hózhó" (p. 90-91). Similarly, in this context, Tehsilder brought greed into the community and destroyed harmony. The protagonist hunted the Tehsildar and restored balance. Apparently, it is a revenge story, resulting in the murder of an oppressor. By hunting, the protagonist reverses several systems of "otherness" imposed upon her – the otherness of being tribal, beastly (associated with nature), uncivilized, oppressed, and woman. By hunting, she moves from being the "other" and becomes the hybrid subject. She becomes oppressor and oppressed, hunter and prey, nature and culture at the same time.

Before discussing the argument, some background information is necessary. This story is written by Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016). She was an Indian writer in Bengali language and an activist. She writes mainly about *Adivasi* (which means indigenous), Dalit and marginalized citizens with a focus on their women, the *Mahajanas* and upper-class corruption and injustice. "The Hunt" was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and published in *Imaginary Maps* (1995). It is a collection of three short stories – "The Hunt", "Douloti – The Bountiful", and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha". Among these three stories, "The Hunt" is studied in detail in this paper. This narrative focuses on tribal deforestation by the city businessmen.

The Tribal People's Understanding of Nature and Ecology

The Government of India does not officially consider any specific section of its population as "indigenous" people as the United Nations generally understand it; however, for administrative purposes, the Indian Government uses the term "Scheduled Tribe" for specific constitutional privileges, protection and benefits for a specific section of people who are historically considered disadvantaged and backward (Bijoy et al., 2010). According to Indian Constitution Article 342, the President of India may specify a community as a Scheduled Tribe, and the Parliament of India may by law include or exclude a community from the list of Scheduled Tribes. By and large, the Scheduled Tribe is understood to be the indigenous group in India. There is no official definition by which the identity of tribe or indigenousness is defined. Moreover, more often than not, caste identity and tribal identity get mixed. Indigenous and scheduled tribes are not coterminous. In this paper, indigenous and tribe will be used interchangeably.

This idea of fetish regarding one particular landscape and being motivated to preserve it as "nature" preservation is opposed by Timothy Morton (2007). According to him, the idea of "nature" as something by humans, pastoral piece of land has to go. The idea of "nature" that is out there somewhere and is getting polluted, and we collectively must go and save it from getting destroyed, is what we call eco-consciousness. This idea needs to be corrected at several levels. It creates an exclusivist version of nature preservation. This creates more hindrances in the way of proper environmental well-being than helps it (p. 125). In most nature writings, such as William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, or John Muir, we see the narrators being amazed by forests untouched by humans. However, in "The Hunt", the tribal people coexist with nature without fetishizing it. In the text, people from tribal backgrounds do not wonder at the site of pristine

nature; they find it part of everyday life. However, they do wonder at the site of the train – "It is an experience to watch the train move on the hilltop from distant villages. The villagers see this every day, yet their amazement never ends." (Devi, 1995, p. 2). They heavily bank upon the primordial power for their support and sustenance. Land and forest are very dear to them. They are not merely the symbols of material possession but are manifestations of their linkages with their ancestors and are the sources of physical and spiritual sustenance. In the conversation between the translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the author Mahasweta Devi, she mentions, "just like the Native Americans, the tribal people also believed that the land and river and forest belonged to everyone ... They understood ecology and environment in a way that we cannot imagine... the Sobors (the hunting tribes) will beg forgiveness if they are forced to fell a tree" (Devi, 1995, p. x). It was very often said in Western academia that India collectively is too poor to be eco-conscious as they are primarily focused on meeting bare minimum requirements of living. But here in *Imaginary Maps*, we see, for the tribal people, their own type of eco-consciousness.

Murray Bookchin (2007) introduced the idea of the social ecology movement. In his book *Social Ecology and Communalism*, he firmly states that man's domination of nature stems from humans' domination of humans. Social ecology claims that the environmental crisis results from the hierarchical organization of power and the authoritarian mentality rooted in the structures of our society. According to Bookchin (2007), apart from natural catastrophes, other essential aspects, such as economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most severe ecological dislocations (p. 19). The Western ideology of dominating the natural world arises from these social relationships. The alternative is a society based on ecological principles, an organic unity in diversity, free of hierarchy and based on mutual respect for the interrelationship of all aspects of life. If we change human society, our relationship with the rest of nature will transform. Donna Haraway (2016) gives a nearly similar idea in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. To critique the concept of anthropocentrism, she introduces a new term – capitalocene. According to her, the human species per se is not creating many problems. The capitalist worldview is the cause of damage (p. 47). Anthropocene and Capitalocene are concepts infested by cynicism, defeatism, and negativity. Haraway instead proposes to use Chthulucene. Chthulucene is a third space that collects up multispecies stories and biotic and abiotic powers of this earth; it entangles myriad temporalities, spatialities, and interactive entities in assemblage (p. 55).

"The Hunt" in *Imaginary Maps* reflects the era of the capitalocene very clearly. It shows that the forest, which is the source of livelihood and existence of the Oraon (indigenous) people, is being destroyed by people from the city who also utilize cheap labour. The indigenous people comply because they need to survive. As long as the tribal people had the forest, they did not suffer much. But after their hold on the forest had gone, they suffered in distress. To draw raw materials for their industrial needs, the rulers started exploiting the forests, which were the 'shelters' of the Adivasis, and this is how the exploitation of these people started. As a result of this injustice done to them, the Adivasis resisted and revolted against the subjugation of their lands. However, as per the policy of 'Divide and Rule', the colonial rulers divided the minor tribes of the Adivasis and tagged them as 'Criminal Tribes' in 1871. Certain tribes were tagged anti-social and anti-national by the Government for its selfish gains. After independence, the Government labelled them as 'De-Notified Tribes' in 1952. However, there was no change in the existing status quo.

The narrative shows that the Kuruda Village is a timber business area; the white colonists planted the timber. That area also has coal mines, and lower-grade coal is available almost at the surface level of the earth. So, the people have exploited the space above and below the earth equally for profit-making since the colonial era. Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, in their book *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (2012), reveal how colonial presence drastically changed India's land usage system. The European settlers and their plants, animals and diseases destroyed the original flora and fauna of the colonies. Nevertheless, this was primarily true for North and South America, Oceania, etc. Changing the entire ecosystem in dense tropical lands was not easy. So, they adapted to a different strategy. Instead of changing the ecosystem, the colonial masters changed the economy, land usage, forest usage and food production by coercing and seducing their subjects towards industrial agriculture and consumer culture. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Britain had emerged as the world leader in deforestation. After destroying their own forests, they focused on their colony's forests to supply timber, coal, and other resources for business and make railways and ships. Colonialism's most apparent outcome was its global control over resources. The white colonist's planting of giant sal (timber) in the Kuruda Village area (Devi, 1995) can be seen as imperial ecology or ecological invasion by imperialism. Guha and Gadgil (2022) mention Alfred Crosby's theories of "imperial ecology" (p. 116). According to him, European settlers brought or curated animals and plants according to their profits. Along with the animals and plants, they also brought fatal diseases. The colonialists changed the entire ecosystem of certain parts of the earth to make a profit. These parts of the earth still suffer from the changes made for economic benefits.

The Performance of Hunting

Performance is generally understood as something produced for an audience, significantly different from ordinary activities, such as theatre performances. Performance can also be seen as what we do as a day-to-day activity. Judith Butler (1990) has used the concept of performativity in gender studies to prove that gender identity is not an inherent essence but a performance that is acted regularly. Likewise, cultural identities are also performed and established through iteration and reiteration. In "The Hunt", several identities are presented and each clashes with the other. In this narrative, the colonial masters are gone, leaving several legacies behind them, one being the story's protagonist, Mary Oraon. Mary is the illegitimate daughter of Dixon, the white colonist and a tribal woman working in his bungalow. The Sal forest and coal mine area was rich and valuable for economic profits, so the colonial masters brought the railway track into the dense forest and hill areas. That is the only "developmental" act done by the masters. With the train came the moneylenders, brokers, landowners and businessmen from the city to fell the Sal forest and make a profit, exploiting the women of that area. Dixon, the Australian White man in the story, benefits from the timber business in the forests of Kuruda, land previously used by the tribal community. He then sells his house, his forests and everything before leaving her and heading back to Australia.

Then comes the domestic exploiter, Tehsildar, who tries to do the same with the Sal forest and Mary Oraon. Tehsildar enters the forest and decides - "I'll buy. One two three. This is still a virgin area, and I'll take the tree felling monopoly" (Devi, 1995, p. 7). Then, he sees Mary and values her

only as an object of desire: "Wow! What a dish! In these woods?" (Devi, 1995, p. 9). This situation demonstrates how white colonisers can access the tribes' resources and take advantage of them. Tehsildar makes sexual advances at Mary Oraon and gets rejected (Devi, 1995, p. 11), and then he attempts to rape her (Devi, 1995, p. 13). Mary somehow escapes the attempt and then asks him to meet her at Jani Prab – the hunting ritual.

The hunting ritual takes place in spring when the men in the tribe go out and kill the animals. In every twelfth year, the woman goes hunting instead of the men. They do not know why they hunt. The men know. They have been playing the hunt for "a thousand million moons on this day". They do as their ancestors have been doing. They practice their beliefs. In earlier times, plenty of animals were in the forest, and the hunting ritual held meaning. However, gradually the forest is receding and with it the animals. The forest is empty, and the hunting ritual also lost its value. Still, it is performed as a ritual. Now, hunting is directly the opposite of environmental consciousness. It could be seen as a hyper-masculine exercise of domination over untamed animals. Nevertheless, tribal people's hunting is a different kind of hunting. Unlike the aristocrats, outsiders, capitalists and colonisers, tribal people do not hunt for fame, domination, economic profit, or personal gain. It has been their way of life for centuries. They coexist in between forests and have a different kind of eco-consciousness. They lived in a forest, and nature is known to be red in tooth and claw. Tribal people hunt sometimes for survival, sometimes for their rituals.

Preventing ecological crisis, if at all possible at this point, requires understanding and accepting the realities of human-induced climate calamities, realizing the dangers of the carbon economy as well as ecological limits of capitalistic society and developing non-anthropocentric worldviews to find out the possibilities of the common planetary futures (Okpadah 2021, Okpadah 2022). The current climate crisis proves the non-functionality of Western modernity and Enlightenment ideas, predominantly anthropocentric and rooted in the Platonic and Judeo-Christian metaphysical traditions. The need for an alternative all-encompassing worldview of nature where humans are not a be-all and end-all but a part of greater planetary consciousness is essential. Indian Tribal people have their sense of eco-consciousness, which quickly gets disregarded in the European version of eco-consciousness. Western philosophies about Nature and Environmentalism show too little awareness of the extent to which its distinction between humanity and nature is reflected. There are also biased views of ethnic "uncivilised" cultures and favour Eurocentric civilisation. It was thought that poor countries and people are "too poor to be green" and that ecological preservation is exclusively a concern of the privileged society of rich countries. Poor people are too much engaged in their own concerns of survival, so they have nothing to gain from environmental movements. So, bringing in the Indian versions of environmentalism is essential here. Mary kills Tehsildar at Jani Parab as she thought of him as an animal –

"There's fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? Now? Yes, becomes an animal" (Devi, 1995, p. 16).

Mary hunts the person who was going to destroy her and her land. By killing, she reverses the narrative of coloniser/colonised, hunter/prey, civilised/uncivilised, male/female.

"The Hunt" is a narrative involving heightened incoherence and contradictions between indigenous ritual and civil/moral codes. Apparently, it is a revenge story, resulting in the murder

of an oppressor, but in reality, it is much more than that. By hunting, the protagonist reverses several systems of "otherness" imposed upon her – the otherness of being tribal, beastly (associated with nature), uncivilised, oppressed, and woman. There is a symbolic association between tribal people and nature. Since they are closer to nature and live in primordial ways of living, they are identified with nature.

Neo-colonization and the Hybrid Subject

Homi Bhaba's (1994) ideas of hybridity come from constructing cultural identity within the conditions of colonial antagonism and inequality. The hybrid subject emerges from the third space that includes elements of the colonizer and colonized, challenging the validity of essentialism. The hybrid subject is privileged with the advantages of in-between-ness, the straddling of the cultures and a consequent ability to negotiate the difference. Bhaba claims that,

"Liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white... that this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy". (Bhaba, 1994, p. 4).

By hunting the "biggest beast" Tehsilder, Mary Oraon becomes the hybrid subject. She was the victim all along, a subaltern character, an illegitimate, tribal, woman who becomes "othered" in every possible way. By hunting, she transits from the "other" into the hybrid subject. She becomes oppressor and oppressed, hunter and prey, nature and culture at the same time. She is the voice talking back from the jungle. In the preface of *Imaginary Maps*, which "The Hunt" is part of, the translator Spivak marks the protagonist, Mary Oraon, as the organic intellectual. According to her, "When the subaltern "speaks" to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible (responding and being responded to) resistance, he or she is or is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual." (Devi, 1995, p. xxvi) Mary becomes such a character.

Mary's hunting brings together the position of humans in nature and the position of tribes in the South Asian postcolonial context. There is a symbolic association between tribe and nature. Tribes, being the disempowered group, just as same as nature, have been exploited by the more privileged groups. As Lawrence Buell (1995) puts it: "The natural environment as empirical reality has been made to subserve human interests, and one of these interests has been to make it serve as a symbolic reinforcement of the subservience of disempowered groups: non-whites, women, and children" (Buell, 1995, p. 21). The ambiguous ties between tribal identity and nature solidify in how Mary Oraon mediates between the domination of and identification with the environment, neither of which she can fully endorse. Her liberation depends on her ability to hunt; she must use brute force to secure her immediate survival. To become free in her context, there is no option other than following her oppressor's dominant patterns of brutality. To be free, she becomes the oppressor through hunting. That puts her in the marginalized class, who are still in the hunter-gatherer economy, as well as the centre position that dominates and controls the weaker ones. Hunting is an essentially hyper-masculine action. Mary, a female, becomes the hunter and Tehsilder, a man, becomes the prey. In other instances, the protagonist, Mary, is the illegitimate

daughter of a white master and a tribal mother, is not accepted entirely in either of the societies but is lusted after by everyone. She makes the biggest hunt, which will help her be accepted in society more than she is. She kills to formulate alternative codes of ethics that destabilize the power of the oppressor's moral and legal system.

The timeline of "The Hunt" is in the post-independence era in India; still, the colonial legacy clearly exists. Despite the end of British colonization in 1947, neo-colonialism emerged as a new form of exploitation. This new form of colonialism is operated by Western as well as indigenous capitalists and elites. In theory, neo-colonialism does not refer to the use of military force to rule, control and exploit the colonized. Instead, it is described as using economic and political power to seek benefits from less powerful or poor countries. The global ruling class, or the transnational capitalist class, with political and economic power derived from neo-colonialism, exploits both the human and natural resources of targeted nations. The poor are the primary group victimized by this activity. In addition to economic exploitation by the globalized ruling class, Indian indigenous people have also suffered domestic neo-colonialism; that is, an influential group dominates and exploits the tribal communities. More often than not, the government has a higher contribution to exploiting the people. This group from mainstream society is associated with the power of neo-colonialism, especially concerning the British, who freed India but left a legacy of their colonialism in the form of power inherited by this group. Then, they used the power to exploit the less powerful group. So here, the tribal people are being exploited by the colonial masters (legacy), global neo-colonists, and domestic masters following the same footprints of global neo-colonists and then, moreover, the caste system, which sacrileges the violation done on them as something evident in the religious hierarchy. This caste aspect will be discussed later in more detail.

The exploitation of resources within less powerful countries by more powerful countries is a critical issue in the age of neo-colonialism. Claiming that poor countries need development and help, the powerful countries enter those nations, offering help in various forms. However, the hidden agenda of this help is to exploit resources in poor countries under the concept of development ideology. The relationship between First World countries and Third World countries well describes this concept. According to the concept of neo-colonialism, development ideology is usually employed to seek benefits from poor countries. That is while claiming to develop the poor countries, the countries that offer help intend to take advantage of their resources. The development ideology of neo-colonialism appears as a war against poverty. However, according to Huggan and Tiffin, it "effectively turned poor people into 'objects of knowledge and management', and poor nations into targets for social and political intervention by privileged countries" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 39). Similar kinds of strategies filter down towards the tribal people. In India, foreign as well as Indian capitalists pry into the tribal communities with a development ideology initiated by the Indian government. As the tribes are viewed as poor and uncivilized, the government claims that development is imperative for improving their quality of life. Tribal people have to cope with the conflict between the First and the Third Worlds and, at the same time, conflicts between the mainstream and the tribes. The exploitation of the tribal communities works in the same way as in the First World and the Third World. The poor are still poor there, and, more terribly, they suffer from ecological deterioration as a result of developmental activities brought onto them. They have become poor because the megaprojects of development have interfered with their traditional ways of life. The building of roads, dams,

and bridges invade their space and defile and destroy their ecology. "Development" awards them with 'metal roads' and bridges that, rather than being helpful to them, facilitate the entry of the moneylenders who walk away with their harvests, customers who buy out their children, and labour- -contractors who make the Adivasis their bond- slaves.

John Bellamy Foster (2000), in his book *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, says that the European poor people traditionally had the right to collect dead wood from the forest, but later, they were denied of that right and accused of stealing, poaching and other criminal activities. They were then made the proletariat by the capitalistic economy. Similarly, in "The Hunt," the people are denied their rights to forest and hunt. Their age-old traditional rights to forest produce are denied. They use the tribals' desperate conditions to turn them into cheap labour and then lend money at high interest rates to turn them into bonded labourers. In post-independence India, the situation had not changed much.

The Indian government officially started environmental protection acts to preserve animal, bird, and plant species by passing The Wildlife Act (Protection) 1972. It was inspired by the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. The Wildlife Act of 1972 was a very beneficial and needed act to save the balance of the ecosystem, but it had some side effects. It considered only the wildlife and the people living with the wildlife for centuries, i.e. the tribal people were excluded. Much later, in 2006, through The Forest Rights Act 2006, the government gave the tribal people their rights on their land, which had been taken from them. But the gap between passing and implementing laws still needs to be solved. In "The Hunt", Prasadji, the then-owner of Dixon's Bungalow, mentions that no one follows the land ceiling rules. Tehsilder complains about the loss he was facing because the white people left. He can no longer use the elephants from the forest department (Devi, 1995, p. 7). By hunting, the protagonist changes every narrative of alternative codes of ethics that destabilize the power structure.

Caste perspectives of "The Hunt"

Louis Dumont (1988), in his book *Homo Hierarchicus*, defines Caste as a division of a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished mainly by three characteristics – separation, labour division and hierarchy. The caste system or *Varna* developed in ancient Vedic Aryan Indian society that divides people belonging to the Hindu religion into four significant groups – Brahmins (priestly class), Kshatriya Class (ruling and warrior class), Vaishya (artisan, merchants, tradesmen and farmers), Shudra (servant and labourers). The fifth Caste is the untouchable Caste, also called "Dalit", who are involved in menial jobs and deal with detrital matters. Unlike the ancient European civilisations, slavery did not exist in India. Indian Aryan civilisation had a system of Caste that internally made it possible to do the laborious job of a group of people while the other group reaped the benefits. Slavery in Europe and later in America was done by economic coercion. However, in India, it was not done by coercion by a socio-religious Caste system. Caste sacralised the coerced slavery, indentured labour, and bonded labour. It made bonded slavery a part of religion and rationalised agrarian slavery. The logic of Caste heavily mediated such sacralisations and rationalisations. Rupa Vishwanath (2014), in her book *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India*, shows how bonded agricultural labour was the result of Hindu religious prejudice; the entire agrarian political-economic system was dependent on bonded

lower caste labour. She primarily focuses on South Indian Dalits in Madras' presidency, but her views are equally valid and applicable in tribal situations. In "The Hunt", it is a stratified society where work and position are presumed according to Caste.

Nicholas Dirks (2001), in his book *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, asserts that Caste is a colonial construct (p. 8) with definite political motivations. The entire ideology behind the Caste is not a colonial product, but the knowledge behind the concept of the caste system being fourfold and predetermined social position. Dirks mentions that when the Portuguese travellers arrived at the Indian coast in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, they found three strata of society – ruler class, priest class and the remaining others in one class (p. 19). Dirks (2001) points out that Jean Baptiste Tavernier, a French merchant who travelled to India, frequently mentioned the existence of seventy-two caste groups (p. 19). The highest caste hierarchy, i.e. Brahmins, will have the most respected social and economic position. This predetermination of social position and Caste as a permanent/unchangeable idea is a colonial invention, as the hierarchy was created thousands of years ago, and social systems changed according to time. Nicholas Dirks shows that the caste identity of kings and their warriors' class was not settled; it was always shifting. One caste member assumed another higher caste identity with the help of their political affluence. Socially, a higher caste may have a higher position than the lower Caste, but that was purely customary and did not guarantee much economic benefits. However, political affluence and connection guaranteed many socio-economic benefits even if the member belonged to a lower caste. Regional communities, kinship groups, political affiliations, and other categories sometimes superseded caste as a rubric for identity and reconstituted how caste was organised (p. 19).

Opposed to Dirks, B R Ambedkar says that caste is not only a political construct but also a social construct that has existed for centuries. Ambedkar's anthropological emphasis on socio-cultural relations challenges caste's political understanding (i.e. postcolonial understanding). Caste emerged from the continued endogamy of class-based society. Religion gave the system stronger hold on maintaining the differentiation (Raj, 2022). Ambedkar agrees with Dirks that the caste system is not a static social phenomenon nor a relic of traditional India that survived to modernity. However, he disagrees with Dirks by arguing that caste survived through the continuous incorporation of changes and challenges while producing and reproducing a social ideology that legitimises the hierarchies that are inherent characteristics of the caste system. This reproduction of the caste system could be linked to Ambedkar's argument that dominant social practices in India, such as endogamy and ex-communication of those who break caste/endogamy rules (Raj, 2022).

In "The Hunt", it could be seen repeatedly that the caste system rationalises the exploitation. The people belonging to the lower Caste are meant to suffer; revolting is meant as heresy. In this context, it must be mentioned that tribal and lower Caste are different. Lower Caste, however low, falls under the religious system of the Hindu religious system, but tribal people have their own religion and social systems. But in these stories, there is rarely any difference between lower-caste Hindu and tribal people. Oraon in "The Hunt" are the tribes in the Eastern Indian Plateau (Jharkhand and Chotanagpur tribal area). However, they are seen to be following their upper caste/class masters' logic of caste hierarchy. The Oraon people, being a tribe, are not bound to maintain the caste rules. Still, they maintain it because their master maintained it, and the caste

hierarchy laws stratify their thought process across generations. The line between lower Caste and tribal identity often gets blurred, and one identity prevails – the forest dwellers who became agricultural labourers or bond labourers due to the destruction of the forest.

The question of ecological conservation is also questioned in "The Hunt". The events that took place in Kuruda village clearly cannot be understood by most Western arguments of environmentalism. According to Kate Soper, the purpose of preserving nature is, firstly, aesthetic purpose, which says nature, like art, should be preserved for its own sake. Secondly, the utility argument says we need the resources and benefits of nature, so we must protect it. Thirdly, the intrinsic worth argument which says nature's value goes beyond the "need" it serves (Soper 2015). The American school of environmentalism takes its support from the aesthetic argument, and Deep Ecologists takes its support from the intrinsic worth argument. Other than this Western argument of environmental preservation, there is a different school of thought, which is called "poor people's environmentalism" or the environmentalism of the global South. This was made famous by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier (1997) in their book *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*. They question the generalising, universalising aspect of Western environmentalism but again become blind towards the caste discrimination happening in India.

In the 3rd chapter, named "Caste and Conservation" of the book *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (2012) say that the caste system was a cultural adaptation that helped to maintain ecological balance by restricting access of resources. The caste system created specialised hereditary professions. So, the people of a caste group did not interfere with other caste groups' resources. The caste system is strictly endogamous, so even if a person wanted to cross the caste boundary, they cannot have access to other Caste's resources. It contained the competition over limited resources.

The Dalit (oppressed Caste) and the mainstream environmentalists have a centre and periphery relationship. The Dalit or the caste issues are either invisible or set aside in the question of environmental issues. Integration of Dalits happens in environmentalist movements in mainly two ways – firstly, they should perform their "duty" according to their Caste and stay in their traditional positions in the hierarchy of the caste system. Secondly, their usefulness justifies their position in the hierarchy. Environmentalism denotes the "conservation" of composite systems of humans and plants, animals, culture and religion to a particular position in Social Ecology, Socio-Cultural Ecology. Ramchandra Guha questions the dominance of the Northern Hemisphere in Environmentalism yet justifies the caste system as it is functional and works well with Ecological adaptation.

Mukul Sharma's (2018) *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics* highlights the interconnectedness and problems of India's caste system and environmental politics. He writes that Caste and nature are intimately connected, and Dalit experiences of the environment are ridden with metaphors of pollution, impurity, and dirt. The author opposes the religious body's presence in environmental issues and treats it as a problem. The viewpoint of Caste very often gets lost in mainstream environmental movements, and "Indian" is treated as one uniform group of people's collective presence. The caste system in India remains the world's longest-surviving socio-economic hierarchy and is also one of the significant sources of human rights violations.

The water source, forest, agricultural lands, river, and food may seem like non-living things uninfluenced by the socially constructed caste system. However, in reality, Caste heavily controls and shapes these things. Solutions to ecological problems given without considering these complex networks of caste-identity-experience-location may lead to more inequality. "The Hunt" brings the situation of deforestation, colonial oppression, and capitalist invasion all together. They are the marginalised tribes suffering from ecological detrition, but the environmentalism of the global North cannot be applied here, nor can the global South's logic. This requires a whole new set of logic to understand the tribal/lower caste's position in environmentalism.

Conclusion

This study has examined Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt" in the context of the indigenous people in Eastern India and the role of their own tribal rituals, caste identity, and postcolonial context in the understanding of nature. This paper tries to understand the tragic inheritance of colonialism and neo-colonialism, which paved the way for particular groups of people to inherit colonial power and use this power for the same purpose. Added to capitalism against nature comes the caste hierarchy against the tribal people. This paper also tries to read about the ritual of hunting, which opposes the metanarrative of colonizer and colonized, and how the performance of tribal ritual by Mary Oraon becomes the hybrid subject possessing qualities of both – the oppressor and the oppressed. By the performance of hunting the biggest beast, thereby restoring the balance, she becomes the voice talking back from the jungle.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

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