



Negotiating nature, gender and power: An eco-feminist comparative study of selected novels of Mahasweta Devi and Namita Gokhale

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Abstract

Eco-feminism offers a significant theoretical framework for examining the interconnected relationships among gender, nature, power, exploitation and resistance. It challenges systems that dominate both women and the natural environment and draws attention to the ways in which patriarchal, capitalist, colonial and developmental structures produce ecological and social inequalities. Indian literature provides a particularly rich field for such an investigation because questions of environmental exploitation are frequently connected with caste, class, tribal identity, displacement, poverty and women's marginalization. The present research paper comparatively examines the representation of nature, gender and power in selected works of Mahasweta Devi and Namita Gokhale. The primary texts selected for the study are Mahasweta Devi's *The Right to the Forest* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, and Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows* and *Things to Leave Behind*. Although the two writers differ considerably in narrative style, geographical setting and literary concerns, their works reveal the complex ways in which women and marginalized communities negotiate structures of power. Devi's fiction foregrounds tribal communities, land alienation, forest rights, state intervention and resistance, while Gokhale explores women's bodies, memory, gendered violence, social conventions, identity and the relationship between individual existence and cultural landscapes. The paper argues that an eco-feminist reading of these works reveals nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active cultural, political and ethical presence. The study further demonstrates that women's oppression and ecological exploitation frequently emerge from similar structures of control, while resistance becomes a process of reclaiming land, identity, memory, bodily autonomy and community. The comparative analysis establishes that Devi and Gokhale contribute to a broader Indian eco-feminist discourse in which ecological justice and gender justice are deeply interconnected.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, nature, gender, power, resistance, Mahasweta Devi, Namita Gokhale, tribal identity, ecological justice, Indian Literature

Introduction

The relationship between humans and the natural world has become one of the most important questions of contemporary literary and cultural studies. Environmental degradation, deforestation, industrialization, displacement, climate change and the commodification of natural resources have raised new questions about the relationship between development and ecological sustainability. At the same time feminist criticism has shown that women experience social, economic and political forms of domination in different ways than men. When these two fields of inquiry meet, eco-feminism is a way of seeing how the abuse of nature is related to the oppression of women in the first place. Eco-feminism is based on knowing that domination is based on hierarchical structures that are not necessarily separate. Nature is often presented as something to be controlled and exploited; women and other marginalized communities have also been positioned in the same way. So eco-feminist criticism asks how patriarchal, capitalist, colonial and developmental ideologies construct the relationships of domination between human beings and nature. It also explores the possibilities of resistance, care, sustainability and other forms of knowledge. The Indian context is particularly important for eco-feminist literary studies. Women's lives are deeply entangled with forests, rivers, agricultural land, animals, food production and household resources in many rural and tribal communities. Environmental displacement not only affects the physical

environment but social relationships, cultural memory and women's daily lives too. Questions of land and forests become questions of livelihood; questions of livelihood become questions of gender; questions of gender become questions of power and resistance. Mahasweta Devi is an important figure in this regard. Her fiction is deeply concerned with tribal communities, land rights, exploitation, political violence, and resistance. Her portrayal of marginalized communities is at odds with the dominant historical and developmental narratives. *The Right to the Forest* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* are particularly valuable for an eco-feminist analysis because they relate land, forest, community, colonial and postcolonial power, labour and resistance. Namita Gokhale also writes in a very different literary style but in an essay about gender, identity, social restrictions and cultural transformation. *The Book of Shadows* surveys women's experiences, memory, psychological space and patriarchal structures around female identity. *Things to Leave Behind*, set against the historical and geographical context of Kumaon, looks at social change, colonial modernity, caste, gender, community and individual agency. And nature and landscape in Gokhale's fiction are not only decorative; they are also the building blocks of memory, identity and belonging. The present study therefore brings Devi and Gokhale into dialogue with one another. The purpose is not to imply that the two writers are in the same eco-feminist position. Rather we look at how their literary style can help us to understand

the same issues of nature, gender and power and how each other is different. Devi is about collective struggle, tribal rights, and material relations to land and forests in nature, whereas Gokhale has a mind-set with regard to gender and power in relation to psychological, social and historical situations. In both works, we see that ecological and gendered relations are established by larger power structures.

Objectives of The Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of nature and environment in selected works of Mahasweta Devi and Namita Gokhale.
2. To analyse the relationship between gender and ecological exploitation.
3. To explore the role of patriarchy, colonialism, class and institutional power in shaping human relationships with nature.
4. To examine women's agency and different forms of resistance in the selected texts.
5. To investigate the relationship between tribal identity, land, community and ecological justice in Mahasweta Devi's fiction.
6. To analyse the relationship between gender, landscape, memory and identity in Namita Gokhale's fiction.
7. To establish points of convergence and divergence between the eco-feminist perspectives of the two writers.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative and comparative textual methodology. The primary texts are read closely through an eco-feminist framework, supported by concepts from feminist literary criticism, environmental criticism, indigenous studies, subaltern studies and environmental justice.

The selected primary texts are

- Mahasweta Devi's *The Right to the Forest*
- Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*
- Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows*
- Namita Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind*

A significant methodological point is that Mahasweta Devi originally wrote in Bengali, and the works used in this study are available in English translation. Therefore, the study examines the English translations as literary texts while remaining attentive to their Bengali and regional cultural contexts.

The research focuses on recurring themes such as land, forest, displacement, women's bodies, gender discrimination, tribal identity, memory, colonialism, patriarchy, resistance, community and ecological justice.

Eco-Feminism: Theoretical Framework

Eco-feminism emerged from ecological and feminist movements. It is the intersection of two issues that had been tackled separately: environmental exploitation and women's oppression. Thinkers such as Françoise d'Eaubonne, Carolyn Merchant, Karen J. Warren, Val Plumwood, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva were key contributors to the development of eco-feminist thought. The central idea of

eco-feminism is that domination of women and nature can arise from similar hierarchical structures. Patriarchal systems have historically linked rationality, culture and authority to masculinity and have assigned women and nature to passivity, reproduction and materiality. Eco-feminist critique challenges these binary oppositions. But eco-feminism does not only claim that women are biologically closer to nature. In fact, that kind of claim can perpetuate stereotypes. It looks at the social and material reasons for women's particular relationship with natural resources. Rural and indigenous women may acquire extensive ecological knowledge because in their daily lives they depend on forests, water, agriculture, food and medicinal plants. Power is therefore at the heart of this work. It is not just whether women are represented as close to nature, but who has power over land, forests, bodies and resources. Who has the authority to decide how natural resources should be used? Whose knowledge is recognized and who benefits from development? Who suffers displacement? These questions are just that and so that an eco-feminist reading can move beyond symbolic links between women and nature. Environmental justice also serves as a way to reinforce that environmental damage isn't always shared equally by everyone. Marginalized communities are often the ones who experience the most social and economic impact from ecological exploitation and have the least political and economic power. This is especially the case when we read Mahasweta Devi's books and her fiction is really about tribal marginalization and land and forest control. It is also useful to read Namita Gokhale, whose fiction tackles the ways women's bodies, desires, identities and social spaces are controlled by patriarchal institutions.

Mahasweta Devi: Land, Forest and Tribal Resistance

Mahasweta Devi's literary works are distinguished by their continuous engagement with the marginalized community. The way she writes often contradicts dominant historical narratives by bringing tribal and subaltern experiences to the center of literary representation. The forest is more than a physical place in *The Right to the Forest*: It is a source of livelihood, cultural identity, community memory and autonomy. The fight for forest rights is also an ecological and political issue. Unlike in the case of a commercial relationship in which forests are mainly viewed as sources of timber or as economic resources, the relationship that tribal communities have with the forest is very different. For indigenous communities the forest can be a complete cultural and ecological system which provides them with food, shelter, medicine, materials and also with a spiritual dimension. If the forest is destroyed or taken over the whole social structure of the community is threatened. From an eco-feminist point of view this is even more the case since women are usually the ones who collect food, fuel and other forest products. When access to the forest is limited women have to work harder and suffer greater economic insecurity. Forest dispossession thus becomes gendered dispossession. Devi's fiction illustrates the violence of a system in which the state and economic institutions decide who has the right to access nature. The tribal community is generally seen as being backward and as being incapable of managing nature, while external authorities have the power to decide how the land is to be used. This is because eco-feminist criticism

sees domination as a general principle according to which those who hold institutional power regard both nature and marginalised communities as things that have to be managed.

Chotti Munda And His Arrow: Nature, Community and Resistance

The role of Chotti Munda and his arrow gives Devi's involvement in tribal life a new dimension. The way Chotti Munda relates to the land, to his community and to tradition provides a means of making historical change and resistance evident. However, the arrow in the novel is more than just a physical object; it stands for cultural memory, identity, skill and continuity as well. The connection between the individual and the community is closely linked to the relationship between the community and its environment. The novel covers a period of time and illustrates how the power structures in society have changed while exploitation has taken on different forms. Although colonial authorities, landlords, moneylenders, contractors and other institutional arrangements may differ in their methods, marginalised communities still suffer dispossession and remain economically vulnerable. From an eco-feminist point of view, it is also clear that this kind of exploitation has effects on both social and ecological relationships. When land becomes a commodity, so too do the relationships between the community and nature change. There are many ways in which women are marginalized in such situations; they are affected by poverty and social deprivation and also have to conform to patriarchal expectations within their own communities and in institutions outside them. Therefore, gender cannot be separated from class, tribal identity and economic power. Devi's contribution is particularly significant since she does not see tribal people as helpless victims but rather as resistant. Resistance is at the heart of her fiction. Cultural memory, collective action and attachment to the land take the form of resistance against systems which are trying to undermine community autonomy.

Gender and Ecological Injustice in Mahasweta Devi

The gender aspect of Devi's fiction is very clear in the situation where gender meets material survival. Women in disadvantaged communities are often in a contradictory position: although they are essential to the survival of their households and communities, their work is not recognized. Since formal economic and political systems are generally unaware of the contributions that women make in gathering resources, looking after their families, carrying out agricultural labour and preserving culture, the situation is worsened by ecological destruction. If the forests are cleared or there is a lack of land, women may have to go further in order to get what they need. When agricultural systems break down, the amount of unpaid work that women do goes up. In the case of displacement, they are not only deprived of economic security but also lose their cultural and social ties. Ecological exploitation thus becomes a gendered issue. Devi's women are therefore in both vulnerable and resistant situations: they are subjected to systems of exploitation, but at the same time their daily activities help to keep communities going. Their form of resistance does not always take the shape of political activism; it can simply be a matter of surviving, preserving memory, working,

showing collective solidarity and refusing total cultural erasure.

Namita Gokhale: Gender, Landscape and Identity

Namita Gokhale's world is quite unlike Devi's literary world. She is highly interested in women's sexuality, their psychological experiences, family arrangements, social restrictions and identity. Her stories also involve the historical and cultural settings of the Himalayan area. In the *Book of Shadows*, the female character and her social surroundings are at the heart of the novel. The book examines themes such as isolation, memory, trauma, the gendered experience and the psychological effects of social expectations. When applying an eco-feminist approach to the novel it is not necessary to treat nature as an environmental issue; instead the physical and social environments are important as sources of women's identity. The house, the landscape and the surrounding area can function as places of confinement, of memory and of resistance. This is significant since eco-feminism is not only about forests and rivers; it also looks at the way in which bodies and spaces are controlled by power structures. The way in which a woman moves through social and physical space can be regulated in a way similar to the control of land and natural resources. The female body thus becomes a site of social regulation. Women's desires, choices and identities are generally subject to cultural expectations. The eco-feminist approach enables the researcher to investigate the relationship between the control of the female body and the cultural ideas of ownership and authority.

Leave Behind: Landscape, History and Women's Agency

Things to Leave Behind is one of the best works for a comparative eco-feminist study since it relates to the Kumaon region, historical change and the lives of women. The landscape is closely tied to identity, mountains, forests, villages and cultural areas being more than just geographical locations since they contain history and social significance. The novel deals with the transformation of society under the influence of colonialism and modernization. Issues of caste, gender, education, class and cultural change are all linked together. From an eco-feminist point of view, the entire geographical landscape becomes a place where various kinds of power come together. Colonial power alters the administrative and economic relationships, while patriarchal power sets out the social roles of women. Modernity creates room for new possibilities as well as for new types of inequality. The women in the novel cope with these structures in different ways. Their experiences show that female agency is not always demonstrated through open rebellion; education, movement, emotional independence, professional ambition and the rejection of the strict social order are all forms of resistance. The landscape itself is a source of memory; losing one's connection with a place involves not only the loss of geographical identity but also that of cultural identity. This is a key point of connection with Devi. In Devi's fiction, the land and the forest are associated with the collective tribal identity. In Gokhale's fiction, the landscape is frequently connected with personal and cultural memory. In both instances, place becomes essential to identity.

Nature–Gender Relations: A Comparative Perspective

The different but complementary ways of dealing with the relationship between nature and gender are shown in the works of Devi and Gokhale. For Devi nature is closely linked with material survival since the land and forests have an effect on livelihood, food, cultural identity and community autonomy. As a result, ecological exploitation becomes a political issue. For Gokhale nature and the landscape frequently operate via memory, identity and psychological experience; the place shapes the women's consciousness and plays a part in their dealings with tradition and modernity. Even though there are these differences, both authors question the notion that power functions solely via formal political institutions; power also functions by controlling space, bodies, resources, traditions and knowledge.

Patriarchy, Colonialism and Power

It is very important to consider power when carrying out a comparative analysis. In Devi's fiction, colonialism and the ongoing effects of this colonialism are connected with the taking over of land, economic exploitation and the marginalization of tribal communities. When outside authorities reorganize the land in accordance with economic and administrative interests, the relationship between community and land is disrupted. Gokhale's fiction examines power in terms of gender and social structures; women are limited by their family, their community, tradition and cultural norms. Although colonial and postcolonial changes may have a deep impact on social structures, they do not automatically eliminate patriarchy. Eco-feminist criticism combines all these aspects by investigating how different forms of domination support one another. Although the control of land and women's bodies may at first appear to be separate issues, both can involve notions of ownership, authority and regulation. A patriarchal society can also define what an appropriate behaviour is for women in a way that is similar to how an economic system decides what constitutes a good use of land. This does not mean that nature and women are equal; it only means that the logic of domination can be applied to various social and ecological relationships.

Resistance and Female Agency

Both writers have to contend with resistance and this is one of the main points of comparison. In Devi's works, resistance is frequently collective; tribal communities oppose the taking over of their land, economic exploitation and cultural marginalisation. The act of preserving community memory is in itself a political act. In Gokhale's works, on the other hand, resistance is generally linked to women's own agency; women resist strict expectations by means of education, self-expression, emotional independence and by developing other identities. These two forms of resistance are not necessarily identical; collective resistance serves to protect community resources and cultural identity, while individual resistance undermines the social structures which restrict individuals' freedom. An eco-feminist interpretation therefore broadens the meaning of resistance. Resistance may include: • protecting land and forests; • defending community rights; • preserving cultural memory;

Both writers demonstrate that resistance begins when marginalized subjects refuse to accept the identities and conditions imposed upon them.

Indigenous Knowledge and Ecological Consciousness

A major area in which the two viewpoints agree is concerning knowledge. While the prevailing systems tend to give precedence to formal, institutional and scientific knowledge and regard local or indigenous knowledge as primitive, eco-feminism opposes this hierarchy by acknowledging that experiential knowledge is worthwhile. The tribal communities in Devi's area have a great deal of knowledge about their environment since they have maintained a long-term relationship with the forests and a shared cultural memory. The forest is also viewed as a social and ecological system and not merely as an economic resource. Devi's work is especially significant in the present discussion on environmental justice because development policies which disregard local knowledge will lead to ecological disasters and social displacement. As Gokhale states, cultural landscapes are the result of memory and regional knowledge. In *Things to Leave Behind* cultural identity is connected to the historical landscape of Kumaon. Since society is changing, questions arise as to what will be preserved and what will be altered. The two authors thus cause readers to reconsider the idea of progress since modernization does not have to result in the loss of cultural memory or ecological connections.

Beyond the Binary: Nature and Culture

Western thinking has frequently set up pairs of opposites such as nature and culture, woman and man, body and mind, emotion and reason, and primitive and modern as well as local and global. Eco-feminist criticism casts doubt on these strict binaries. Both Devi and Gokhale demonstrate that human identity consists of the relationships we have with nature, community and culture. Nature is not something that lies outside of society; rather, social relations influence the way in which nature is understood and used. In the same way, women are not merely passive victims of their environment; they negotiate their position, resist it and reinterpret it. Devi's tribal communities undermine the division between nature and culture since their cultural identity is closely tied to the forest and the land. Gokhale's landscapes also serve to remind us that a place is connected to memory and identity. The environment thus becomes part of the cultural self. Hence, an eco-feminist approach is in line with a relational view of identity in which humans exist within a network of ecological, social and cultural relationships.

Comparative Findings

The comparison leads to a number of significant conclusions. Firstly, nature has a political dimension. In the works of both writers, nature is connected with issues of power. Land, forests and landscapes are areas which are in dispute, not merely neutral ones. Secondly, ecological exploitation is socially uneven. Those who are marginalized suffer greater environmental disruption since their means of livelihood and their identities are closely connected with their local environments. Thirdly, gender increases vulnerability. Women can suffer ecological and economic setbacks as a result of having to do more work, facing

insecurity, being displaced and coming under social restrictions. Fourthly, women also play a role in resisting change. None of the texts selected deal with women merely as victims; instead they show various forms of agency such as survival, the preservation of culture, self-expression, political resistance and the rejection of restrictive social identities. Fifthly, identity is tied to place. For Devi, the land and the forest contribute to the collective identity of her tribe. For Gokhale, the landscape forms part of a personal, cultural and historical identity. Sixthly, development should be questioned. Both writers oppose the ideas of progress which ignore the human costs, ecological sustainability and local knowledge. Seventhly, ecological justice and gender justice are interrelated. Environmental problems are no simpler than social ones: class, caste, tribal identity, gender and economic power all play a part.

Significance of The Comparative Study

Mahasweta Devi and Namita Gokhale are quite different writers and together their work can contribute to the literature of eco-feminism in India since it incorporates both aspects. The fiction of Devi is based on the real material conditions of the most disadvantaged communities; in her descriptions of forests, land and tribal resistance it is shown that ecological exploitation is a source of political power, while Gokhale is a cultural analyst who is highly concerned with the psychological and cultural dimensions of women's lives. Her interest in landscape, memory, identity and social change extends eco-feminist work beyond the simple destruction of the earth. The comparison of the two demonstrates that eco-feminism functions at several levels: at the material level, that of land, forests, means of livelihood and resources; at the social level, concerning caste, class, gender and community; at the political level, regarding state power, colonialism and development; at the cultural level, in relation to tradition, memory and identity; and at the psychological level, with regard to the body, trauma, desire and selfhood. It is because of this multi-dimensional understanding that eco-feminist criticism is also useful for the study of Indian literature.

Conclusion

The study is entitled "Negotiating Nature, Gender and Power: An Ecofeminist Comparative Study of Selected Novels of Mahasweta Devi and Namita Gokhale" and examines the interdisciplinary connections between ecological space, gender identity and power structures. In *The Right to the Forest* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta Devi makes it clear the relationship between tribal people and the land, their forests and their culture. Devi's fiction is linked to the land, to identity and to political struggle in terms of nature: it concerns livelihood, identity and a sense of belonging. Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows* and *Things to Leave Behind*, for example, approaches the subject of gender and the environment in a different manner. By focusing on women's identity, memory, social restrictions and cultural landscapes, she sheds light on the way in which physical and social spaces influence female subjectivity. Her female characters deal with patriarchal structures through various kinds of agency and resistance. The comparison demonstrates that nature, gender and power cannot be seen as separate categories; they are connected to one another via social organisations.

Both the land and the rules used to control women's lives can be seen as arising from wider forms of authority, ownership and control. At the same time, resistance against these structures can include the recovery of land, memory, identity, bodily autonomy and community. The study also stresses that eco-feminism is not about assuming that women are more closely connected to nature; to do so would reinforce gender stereotypes. The eco-feminist perspective taken here is to consider the historical and material conditions which contribute to women's relationships with natural resources and social spaces. Devi's tribal communities and Gokhale's female characters show that the most marginalised women have knowledge, memory and agency which dominant systems tend to ignore. It is therefore the case that their experiences challenge development models which prioritise economic growth over ecological sustainability and social justice. The work of Mahasweta Devi and Namita Gokhale in particular indicates that real resistance involves a rethinking of the relationship between human beings, nature and power. Ecological sustainability cannot be separated from social justice, and gender equality cannot be achieved without challenging the structures that justify domination. Thus, their fiction becomes part of a broader Indian literary debate in which land, body, identity, memory and resistance are all connected in the struggle. This is what gives the works their eco-feminist character; they urge readers to move from domination to dialogue, from exploitation to sustainability and from marginalisation to recognition. Devi and Gokhale prove that literature can serve as a space in which we can imagine more just relations between women, communities, cultures and the natural world.

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