



Exploring Deep Ecology in Mahasweta Devi's "The Book of The Hunter": An Eco-Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

Deep ecology, a burgeoning field within ecocritical studies, was coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess with the aim of fostering ecological consciousness and fostering a shared identity between humanity and the environment. The human species is not the supreme creature in nature, according to studies in deep ecology; our assumption that we are essentially distinct is quickly causing the environment to become depleted due to human activity. Mahasweta Devi, a renowned writer and social reformer, cares deeply about the state of the ecosystem and how crucial it is to the survival of the human race. As a result, a large portion of her writing is suitable reading for eco-critical analysis. The Book of The Hunter, the book under consideration, has key elements of the Deep Ecology approach. As a result, the current study evaluates the book from an ecological standpoint while also talking about the author's attempts to raise readers' awareness of environmental issues. The novel follows the lives of two couples: the youthful pair Kalya and Phuli, and the medieval poet Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti and his spouse. While the author aims to capture the various socio-cultural norms of rural society in the 16th century (an influence acknowledged through Devi's reference to Mukundaram's 1544 epic poem "Abhayamangal"), she also offers significant insights into the inherent, altruistic perspective of the forest-dwelling Shabar community in Odisha and West Bengal regarding ecological preservation. Additionally, the narrative sheds light on the consequences of burgeoning populations from neighboring communities encroaching upon the forest.

Keywords: Deep Ecology, Ecocide, Ecocritical Theory, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism.

Introduction

Scholars are increasingly focusing on ecocritical theory, which explores the relationship between the natural world and literature. Cheryll Glotfelty introduced the concept of

Article History: Received: 1 July 2025. Revised: 03 July 2025. Accepted: 13 July 2025. First published: 1st August 2025.

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Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Kundu, Madhumita. (2025). Exploring Deep Ecology in Mahasweta Devi's "The Book of The Hunter": An Eco-Critical Analysis. *New Literaria: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 6:2. <https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2025.v06i2.010>

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ecocriticism, a multidisciplinary approach that analyzes literary works by authors such as novelists and poets within the context of nature and environmental concerns. This theory suggests that nature holds significant importance in literature, serving as the backdrop where language constructs fictional narratives. Consequently, literary works can and should be examined from this theoretical perspective. Ecocriticism, also known as Environmental Literary Criticism, Green Studies, and Ecopoetics, is a broad concept gaining traction among critics. One of its primary objectives is to raise awareness about the critical role that a healthy biosphere will play in humanity's future.

Ecocritical studies encompass a diverse array of strands and sub-fields, including disciplines like Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, and Ecocide. From Francoise d'Eaunne's 1974 coinage, ecofeminism explores the relationship between women and the natural environment and the effects of patriarchal dominance on both. Arthur Galston's introduction of Ecocide in 1950 highlights the devastation wrought upon the environment by human actions, such as nuclear warfare, chemical pollution, and unsustainable resource extraction. The term "Deep Ecology" was first used by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in his landmark book "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary." Deep Ecology views humans, plants, animals, and the Earth as inherently interconnected entities from ecological, intellectual, and spiritual perspectives.

Deep ecology advocates for a shift from an anthropocentric viewpoint to a biocentric perspective within the environmental movement. Anthropocentrism places humans at the center of importance in nature, considering them superior to all other living beings, and viewing animals, plants, and minerals solely as resources for human exploitation. Many religious texts portray humans as the pinnacle of creation, intended to exploit the resources provided by a supreme being. Conversely, biocentrism asserts that all elements of creation hold equal value. Rather than prioritizing human desires and needs, biocentrism emphasizes the importance of all living beings and natural elements. By promoting environmental preservation for the inherent value of the environment as much as for human benefit, it challenges anthropocentrism.

Deep Ecology presents a revolutionary perspective, challenging the notion that humans are the ultimate standard by which all things should be judged. It posits that attempts to manipulate the global ecosystem are ultimately detrimental to ourselves. George Sessions, Bill Devall and Arne Naess are prominent figures within the Deep Ecological Movement, advocating for an ecological awareness that emphasizes the interconnectedness of animals, plants, humans and the Earth. It serves as both a philosophical doctrine and a grassroots movement in environmental ethics. Philosophically, its aim is to foster a more harmonious relationship between nature and humanity.

Mahasweta Devi, a well-known author, social activist, has garnered numerous prestigious awards such as the Jnanpith and Sahitya Akademi accolades. Her body of work consistently reflects a deep-seated regard for nature and its intrinsic connection to human existence. In many of her writings, nature serves as both a backdrop and a central character, highlighting her unwavering concern for ecological issues. Notable works like "Aranyer Adhikar" (Rights Over the Forest, 1977) and "Chotti Munda and His Arrow" (1980) exemplify her enduring commitment to environmental preservation, advocating for tribal stewardship of ecosystems as a model for ethical conduct and respectful interaction with the natural world.

Hence, many of the environmental challenges we associate with real-world depletion are depicted in Devi's literature. However, considering that her novels are products of creative imagination, how accurately do they mirror reality? To what degree do they shape readers' perceptions of actual ecological issues and prompt a call to action? I argue that Devi's fictional realm, including its characters and events, mirrors the collective understanding of environmental shifts, allowing assessments of their authenticity. Thus, the assertions within her narratives hold truthfulness insofar as they align with factual knowledge about the environment.

The novelist's perspective on the ecosystem is evident in her acclaimed 1994 book "The Book of the Hunter," originally titled "Byadhkhanda" in Bengali and later translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta. Ostensibly, the primary aim is to raise awareness about the history of the Shabar tribal community, renowned for their hunting prowess and deep affinity for nature. The narrative portrays their rustic lifestyle intricately intertwined with the forest they inhabit, emphasizing their profound reverence for the natural world and their harmonious relationship with it.

The Shabar community, residing deep within the forest periphery, sustains themselves through hunting and gathering. They trade meat, skins, wood, fruits, and roots procured from the forest for essential provisions, acquiring only what is necessary for survival. Despite their hunting activities, they do not perceive it as an act of violence against fellow living beings. The narrative provides insight into potential contradictions within the Shabar mindset, particularly when the character Mukunda questions the inherent violence of hunting. However, Kalya counters Mukunda's arguments with religious beliefs, asserting that hunting is a divine duty bestowed upon them by the forest goddess Abhayachandi. According to Kalya, the Shabars, as children of the jungle, rely on hunting for their livelihood, viewing it as a sacred obligation. Importantly, the narrative emphasizes their environmentally conscious approach, adhering to the goddess's rules and ensuring minimal harm to the jungle and its inhabitants. As a result, the ecosystem remains undisturbed and unharmed. This theme is highlighted through various incidents within the narrative. For instance, during the hunting expedition for the King Elephant, Danko, a revered elder within the community, instructs Kalya and his companions not to harm the elephant if it approaches the fortress of Abhayachandi. According to Danko, they must perceive the elephant's presence near the goddess's sanctuary as a divine sign, and therefore refrain from killing it. This guidance from Danko underscores the religious principles guiding the Shabar community, which prioritize the preservation of the ecosystem. Their core belief is centered on hunting solely for sustenance, adhering to the principle of "Live and let live."

Old Danko emerges as a remarkable figure, akin to an ecological guardian or steward. He possesses an intimate understanding of and dutifully upholds the religious principles essential for environmental preservation. Residing deep within the forest in a wooden hut, Danko coexists with neighbors such as an aged python inhabiting a hollow tree. He nurtures a symbiotic relationship with the python, diligently creating reservoirs to collect water from forest streams, ensuring sustenance for all creatures. Additionally, the character Mukunda reinforces the notion of the equal importance of non-human beings. During his travels, Mukunda encounters a young Brahmin grieving over the loss of Kamli, his deceased cow whom he raised as a cherished companion. "I raised Kamli from the time that she was a tiny little thing.... How can I live without her?" (Devi, 49). The Brahmin's profound sorrow reflects his deep emotional bond with Kamli, highlighting the significance of non-human life forms and also challenging anthropocentric perspectives and highlighting the interconnectedness of all beings.

At every turn, the narrative advocates for the eco-centric ideals espoused by Deep Ecology. As demonstrated in the aforementioned examples, Devi seamlessly integrates Deep Ecology principles into her narrative, employing subtly persuasive scenarios to engage the reader. Another illustration is the Shabars' conscientious management of a dwindling resource: water. The Shilai River, flowing through Abhayachandi's forest, is divided into five streams, with the Shabars utilizing only one stream while reserving the remaining four for other forest inhabitants. Their approach signifies a commitment to sustainable usage, ensuring the preservation of the environment. This mirrors the overarching theme that every action undertaken by the Shabars aligns harmoniously with nature, exemplified in the scene where Kalya and Phuli skin a leopard they have hunted, utilizing only the necessary body parts. Upon completion, Kalya respectfully places the leftover carcass in the bushes, allowing scavengers like dogs and jackals to feed—a gesture emblematic of their reverence for the

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interconnectedness of all living beings.

Throughout the narrative, there is a subtle yet consistent promotion of the idea of restraining human exploitation of the environment. This aligns with the perspective articulated by Arne Naess, who has emphasized the importance of limiting human impact on the environment. He remarked,

Diversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms. And the so-called struggle of life, and survival of the fittest, should be interpreted in the sense of ability to coexist and cooperate in complex relationships, rather than ability to kill, exploit, and suppress. "Live and let live" is a more powerful ecological principle than either you or me. (96)

Devi's portrayal of the Shabars unequivocally reflects their adherence to this principle. Despite facing numerous challenges, the Shabars lead contented lives within the constraints of their environment. They view their modest lifestyle as ordained by the goddess, accepting their lack of excessive wealth as their predetermined destiny. In this context, Kalya characterizes the Shabars as a community living in a pre-modern era:

Look Thakur, you pass time with books and manuscripts and you know a different community. The Shabars are residents of the forest; they live at the edge of town! They don't know what money is, nor do they see much of it. How else do you think Kalketu could have lost his kingdom? We don't understand money. A cowrie or a dhebua or damri - copper or iron coin is as far as we go. (Devi 117)

The Shabars sustain themselves on simple fare, primarily consisting of rice seasoned with salt and pepper. During the hot summer and rainy seasons, when urban dwellers refrain from purchasing meat from them, the Shabars rely on foraging in the forest for sustenance, gathering wild fruits, leaves, vines, snakes, and snails. Their living conditions are modest, with small huts serving as their homes, and during winter, they lack proper quilts to shield themselves from the cold, resorting instead to wrapping their bodies with burlap. Nevertheless, the forest remains their nurturing provider, akin to a maternal figure meeting all their needs. This sentiment is expressed by the character Tejota:

Some call her Abhayachandi and others call her a desolate forest. The forest itself is our mother, what do you say? She gives us fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, wood, honey, medicine herbs, leaves and roots, even animals to hunt. She gives us everything, keeps us alive, doesn't that make her our mother? (Devi73)

Through Tejota's words, Devi echoes a fundamental belief of Deep Ecology: the interconnectedness of all life forms. Using this character as a conduit, Devi subtly urges readers to reconsider human exploitation of the biosphere and to cultivate a symbiotic relationship with it. Moreover, there is an implicit endorsement of safeguarding non-industrial cultures, which serve as models of responsible stewardship of the biosphere, from the encroachment of industrial greed. This is exemplified by the encroachment of city walls, constructed from furnace-burnt bricks, onto pristine forest lands. Bemo Shabar, the community's leader, proposes to the king to halt the production of bricks using furnaces, as the resulting fire inflicts suffering upon the earth and, by extension, distresses Mother Earth. Instead, he suggests the construction of packed mud walls without furnace usage.

Bemo Shabar's dispute with the king underscores the Shabars' detachment from the political apparatus shaped by urban, consumer-driven economies. Instead, as devotees of the goddess Abhayachandi, they adhere to religious mandates that prioritize the welfare of nature. Bemo Shabar's deep empathy for Mother Earth reflects his belief in the interconnectedness of all beings, asserting that there are no distinct boundaries between humans and the rest of creation; rather, the world is inherently unified. He essentially contends that opposition to the destruction of the natural world should not stem solely from its monetary value, but from its intrinsic connection to humanity. Its degradation represents our own diminishment. As Fox articulates,

... there are no ontological divides in the field of existence. In other words, the world is simply not divided up into independent subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and non-human realms. Rather, all realities are constituted by their relationships. To the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness. (194)

Throughout the novel, the Shabars exhibit a form of empathy toward the natural world, often referred to as “bio-empathy,” with numerous instances underscoring this concept. For instance, when a trader seeks to procure a hundred male deer skins for a religious ceremony on behalf of the king of Dhalbhum, offering silver coins in exchange, Kalya declines the offer. He explains that it is the mating season for the deer, and killing them at this time would incur the wrath of the goddess Abhaya. Another example involves Megha Shabar, Kalya’s father, who unintentionally (or perhaps intentionally) killed a pregnant deer—a deed considered a grave sin, resulting in him being deprived of significant knowledge and leadership within the community by his own father-in-law. Additionally, Danko Shabar, the former community leader, decreed that during weddings, the bride’s father could only offer five deer skins and one or two wild boars as dowry. This decision was made to reduce the impact on the forest, as larger hunts would deplete the ecosystem. Thus, Danko advocated for the limited hunting of animals to maintain ecological balance. To persuade the family to agree to the reduced quantity, Danko emphasizes: “Your daughter’s wedding is under the protection of Abhaya—what sense is there in risking the goddess’s curse by excessively hunting deer, tigers, or boars?” (Devi 78).

The narrative implies that the Shabars’ self-regulation proves more effective than externally imposed regulations found in legal codes. Self-regulation entails a collective mindset and consensus among the Shabars that prioritizes the preservation of the ecosystem. They view entities in nonhuman forms as deserving of rights, akin to human beings. For instance, the Sal tree marries the Mohul tree during the month of Phalgun, prompting the Shabars to celebrate by dancing and singing around the trees throughout the night. The trees themselves are anthropomorphized; when Mukunda observes Kalya and Phuli walking together with Phuli’s arm around Kalya’s waist, he perceives it as an act lacking in propriety, akin to the behavior of a wild vine that shamelessly wraps itself around a Sal tree in the forest. Mukunda reflects on the absence of shame in both the tree and the vine, drawing parallels with the behavior of Kalya and Phuli, who, as descendants of the forest, seem to lack a sense of shame.

Additionally, on the night preceding the wedding, each young man symbolically weds a mango tree. The tree represents vitality, protection, and sustenance, mirroring the qualities that the boys themselves are expected to embody. Just as trees are believed to regenerate and triumph over mortality, so too are the young men encouraged to procreate and defy death.

On the eve of the wedding, all the girls walked around a mahua tree seven times and every boy ‘married’ a mango tree. Why this ‘tree wedding’? So, you could become givers of life, shelter and nourishment like the trees. So, you could be victorious over death, like a tree. A tree creates new trees through its seeds, and lives on through them.

The same way, you lived on through your progeny. (Devi, 131)

Similar to other creatures in nature, both male and female Shabars enjoy equal rights. They have the freedom to choose their partners, and during disputes, husbands and wives are permitted to physically retaliate against each other. Divorce and remarriage are also permissible, with the community deriving its norms from observing the natural world. Tejota, serving as the community leader, utilizes her knowledge of forest herbs and plants to prepare medicines. She reflects on the contentment displayed by various animals despite the limited resources available in their environment, noting the absence of unnecessary violence or destruction. Unlike agricultural practices, the Shabars do not engage in farming or tilling the soil. Instead, they rely on selling items such as meat, skins, bird feathers, resin, and honey to urban dwellers in exchange for rice. It is only the women who are allowed to engage in this trade, as men are prohibited from selling these goods. Additionally, the use of metal jewelry is forbidden among the Shabar men, who are restricted to adorning themselves with natural

materials only.

As urban civilizations expand and thrive, they compel humans to exploit nature excessively. The rise of industrialization, pollution, and deforestation often leads to a disregard for the rights of non-human entities, reducing them to mere resources for human use. This anthropocentric mindset grants sole rights to humans, neglecting the intrinsic value of other beings. Unfortunately, the increasing interaction with urban dwellers begins to alter the traditional lifestyle of the Shabars. They transform their simple huts into houses with polished mud walls adorned with painted images and roofs made of hay. This newfound prosperity allows them to indulge in luxuries such as rice, oil, ointments, and metal jewelry, which were previously forbidden. Tejota recognizes that this infiltration of urban culture threatens the natural simplicity of Shabar life. As the town of Ararha encroaches further into the forest, the Shabars are compelled to leave their ancestral lands. Tejota expresses her concern, acknowledging that Shabars are inherently tied to the jungle and are corrupted by proximity to urban areas. She fears the city's influence on their community, noting the rapid expansion of new neighborhoods. With many species facing extinction, Tejota worries that the Shabars may meet the same fate. Some Shabars, enticed by the allure of city life, opt to settle there, abandoning their traditional way of life.

Mahasweta Devi adeptly integrates numerous Deep Ecology principles and concepts into this novel. Through detailed descriptions of Shabar life, she aims to cultivate ecological awareness among readers. The narrative serves to highlight the grave threats posed by relentless urbanization. In the preface, the author articulates her concerns, noting the encroachment of towns and non-indigenous peoples onto Shabar territory, the displacement of indigenous communities, the widespread destruction of forests, and the mainstream society's profound ignorance of indigenous culture. "The Book of the Hunter" posits that a bountiful nature can fulfill all human needs without the influence of urban greed, offering the possibility of a contented existence. However, this new vision of human life can only flourish if non-human entities are granted the rights and respect traditionally reserved for humans.

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