TREES, PLANTS AND MAHASWETA DEVI'S "THE ARMENIAN CHAMPA TREE"

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ABSTRACT

The Armenian Champa Tree was first published in Bengali as Armani Champar Gachh in the children's magazine 'Sandesh' in 1968. The book is translated in English by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee and published by Naveen Kishore. Through the story of a ten year Buno, Devi exposes the manner in which religion exploits superstition for its own end. The fake Sadhus use the rituals of religion as a ruse for exploiting the ignorant, illiterate people. The paper brings forth an ecological analysis taken into account the complexities and varieties of relationships that exists between external world and the human world. Such relation usually tends to constitute that part of the inexpressible language and gestures of desire and other motives and actions of humans which are deeply rooted with the land, with the non- human world. In other words, there lies the necessity of literature to address that part of the non- human world which tends to build the human world.

KEYWORDS: Tree , Ecology , Post-Coloniality, Archetype, Superstition

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INTRODUCTION

If trees represent imperialism, then why do many postcolonial societies deem trees as sacred signifiers of their struggle for freedom? Why do historians consider Gandhi's vegetarianism, nature cure and his eco- logically informed pro- village politics to be the moral force behind India's movement for independence? Is Deleuze and Guattari's binary of trees and plants analytically ineffective to illustrate the opposition between imperialism and post coloniality? Is their theory out of sync with history, and potentially useless in marshalling a politics of freedom and decolonization?

One may also ask: is there something missing from postcolonial politics of nationalism and Gandhian politics of "villageism" and vegetarianism? In what ways, if any, does Deleuze and Guattari's theory enable us to intervene into and refuel the conspicuously fallible and faltering movement of post coloniality? We have already seen the gains and promises of critiquing "post- colonial reason" from a subalternist position in Gayatri Spivak's works. Yet Spivak's critique and method [like other "human- centred" "postcolonial criticism" (Huggan 702)] remain essentially anthropocentric.

How would a critique of post coloniality rooted nationalism look from a non- anthropocentric point of view which engages not with the culture, the consciousness and the voice of the subalterns, but with their land and the issue of survival through, and co- existence, with trees and plants?

Mahasweta Devi's works enable us to wage this critique by at once exposing the colonialist identification of natives with wilderness and critiquing the nationalist exclusion and marginalization of indigenous population and

outcasts.

Trees cause the death of politics; plants make politics possible. Trees torture like oriental despots, or Western colonialists and imperialists; plants unleash an intense politics of decolonization. Devi's literary works are grounded on what can be termed as grass- roots activism. Her grass- roots activism resists colonialist depiction and displacement of natives as wild savages and their continuous internal colonization within a postcolonial society. Devi simultaneously reveals the suffering caused by tress and makes trees and plants witnesses of that suffering. In juxtaposing imperial or colonialist arborescence and anti- colonial grass- roots activism in which trees and plants function as agents, Devi lends a voice to the suffering of those heard by the Raj nor by the Brahmins. She imagines a politics of "arboreal articulation" or grass – roots activism in which trees and plants are at once the voice of indigenous or tribal suffering, the agents witnessing that suffering, and the house of refuge for those who suffer. The question for her is not to reconcile "the Northern environmentalisms of the rich and the Southern environmentalisms of the poor" (Huggan and Tiffin 2); more important is to question both post- colonial theory and eco- criticism from within. Devi's eco- political enunciations reveal what according to some theorists is the primary goal of all eco- criticism: to be able to "talk about how differently various human groups conceptualize and relate to their environments." (Mukherjee81).

In an interview with Spivak, Devi reveals that

"India belonged to [tribals] long before the incursion of the Aryan speaking people. The Ramayana ... seems to contain evidence of hoe they were oppressed, evicted from their homeland" (ix)

If The Ramayana contains the testimony of tribal oppression and destruction by the Aryan speaking people, then imperialism in India neither started with the arrival of the British nor did it end with their departure. If the epics are the measures of India's ongoing colonialism, they really reach epic proportion in their depiction of the bloodshed and cruelty inflicted upon non- Aryan tribals.

Forest is not only a means of tribal livelihood which provides them "with food, shelter, timber and hunting", it is a being to ask forgiveness of. The Sobors, Devi notes, "will beg forgiveness if they are forced to fell a tree: You are a friend. I do this because my wife doesn't have any food" (Devi and Spivak x). The tribals do not humanize a tree; rather they believe that a tree is worth more than a human being. Devi reports that once a tribal told her: "I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I'll do it unwillingly, but I will do it. Ask me to chop off a head, I 'll do it" (Devi and Spivak xviii- xix).

Devi's hierarchical "a humanism" puts trees before humans to unsettle ontology by articulating difference through the voice of the other. Devi's tribal conceptualizes Being not as univocity but as the voice of the other : the forest consisting of its trees, plants, flowers, roots, radicles , and rhizomes.

Theorizing about the voice of the other, Cathy Caruth recalls Tasso's Jerusalem Liberated in which, after killing his beloved Clorinda, Tancred wanders repentant into a strange, magical forest. When he slashes a tree with his sword, blood streams from the trunk and through the cut he hears Clorinda's voice, complaining that he has wounded her again. For Caruth , Tasso's tale reveals more than suffering's uncanny repetition. She believes that the story foregrounds "the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound" (Caruth, Cathy)

While moving beyond Freud's theory of the repetition compulsion by adding the dimension of the voice Caruth overlooks a key component: the wound of the victim is not only the origin of the voice, the wounded victim is also a tree.

What remains unclaimed, uncanny and unknowable in the testimony of the voice is that it comes from a tree. The articulation of Clorinda's suffering is made possible by the split or wound on the tree, a wound which at once divides and connects the tree and the victim. This "wounded" and split voice of the forest which allows and enables the tribes in Devi's works to express their suffering is what has been called arboreal articulation or grass – roots activism.

This becoming – tree- of-a-human-being represents an event of enunciation. Yet this event cannot be characterized as Eco linguistics. Describing the interdependence of language and environment, Edward Sapir asserts that the vocabulary of a language, together with its morphology and phonetic system, "clearly reflects the physical and social environment of its speakers" (228)

Devi's arboreal linguistic act, however, exceeds the limits of reflection, rhetoricity or metaphor city in as much as the articulation is a per formative event that seeks to blur the boundaries between a tree and a human being ; it is an event in which one's wounds give expression to the other's suffering.'

Devi's novella *The Armenian Champa Tree* takes us to 18th century colonial Calcutta ruled de facto by a crafty landlord and a corrupt kapalik. On the other side of this imperial triumvirate are the Bunos. The Bunos for the Raj are a tribe of decoits to be severely punished under the law; Janaki Singh, the landlord makes them easy target for his greed and guile. The ascetic kapaliks threaten the very existence of the tribe with various demands for animal and human sacrifice. As these autocratic authorities steady their unsparing political grip on the town, Devi follows a young Buno boy, Mato, who puts his own life at stake in order to save his pet goat, Arjun, from being sacrificed at the bidding of a kapalik. The juvenile protagonist and perspective enable Devi to contrast innocence and injustice and to demonstrate how absurd and inconsequential Mato's life, his affections, and the very existence of the Buno tribe might have looked to the figures of authority. At the outset of the story Devi notes:

"You have not read about these things anywhere. Not
Everything is written down in books. No book contains
The story of Mato of the Buno quarters, of his goat Arjun,
And of the old padri sahib of the church. Though not
Written down, it is all true?" This pundit does not believe
in anything that is not written in books or palm- leaf
manuscripts or inscribed on stone. (Devi, Mahasweta)

Devi's unearthing of narratives not heard before puts the Bunos back on the map of Calcutta, a map which is being drawn and redrawn by East India Company, the landlords and the Tantriks. The map, which reminds of Deleuze and Guattari's conflation of the Raj and the Brahmin, threatens to entirely erase the indigenous Bunos. Putting them back on the map would be impossible without the help of trees and plants. Not only that many areas of Calcutta back then were covered by "swamps, woodlands [and] marshy jingles" (2), but also that without the forest, the Bunos have no other means of survival.

Mato's mother (a deep black- skinned woman nick named Tigress) reminds her tribe that

"[t]his jungle is our savior , Mind you, it is this jungle which has sustained us through the endless famine"(9-10).

Mato is still breathing because a village “kabiraj” (apothecary) treated his congenital heart defect with herbal concoctions. Mato’s playmate, “an abandoned and vagabond goat”, (like the Bunos themselves in the power equations of 18th century colonial India), is named Arjun, character from *The Mahabharata* who spent thirteen years of exile in the forest. Arjun also is a herbal tree used in Ayurveda to treat cardiac ailments. Saving the goat for Mato equals to saving himself. Arjun, whose capering shenanigans provoke the wrath of a kapalik who demands the goat to be sacrificed, can be saved only by escaping to and through the forest. The culmination of Mato’s line of flight is the titular Armenian Champa Tree itself.

“Mato knows where he has to go now. The town of Behrampur
Is four miles away. There is an Armenian church there. In the
Garden of the Armenian Church, masses of tiny champa flowers
Bloom. Drawn by the champa blossoms, Mato has gone there
Countless times. Mato knows the priest of the church; he has seen
Him often, from a distance. If he could only enter the church
Compound, there would be nothing to fear. (23)

Devi equates trees to escape and refuge. The philosophers believe that only plants offer the multiple and rhizomatic entry- and exit- ways for escape; Devi documents an arboreal multiplicity irreducible to any structures and unbendable by any hierarchies. While trees directly assist Mato in hiding from his pursuers, the Armenian Champa functions as his kalpavriksha- a mythical tree capable of fulfilling one’s wishes. By locating the champa tree inside a church, Devi hints at the issue of conversion for the tribes. What draws Mato to the church is not necessarily Christianity, but the idea that the champa tree would be his kalpavriksha. While still fleeing from the villagers in a mad pursuit of him due to the fact that a successful capture of the fugitive will land a bounty worth one solid gold coin from Janaki Singh, Mato visualizes the “wondrous champa flowers”, and how he would walk on the “soft green grass” once he reaches the church (38). Mato’s flight goes exactly according to his plan, except that while escaping from his pursuers he was also running towards his own demise; in saving Arjun from being “butchered” by the kapalik, Mato would not be able to save his own life. When the town expanded, concludes Devi’s narrator, flowers continue to blossom in the champa tree. They blossom now as well. At times, on wintry nights, when the fog merges with the full moon to create a shadowy atmosphere, they say that the tree looks like a small boy. The boy kneels with folded hands [as if he still had Arjun in his embrace], his face raised upwards. At times the tree looks like an old padri. As if he is standing silently with his head bent, and his hand resting upon somebody’s head. (51-52) In this becoming – tree- of the child or becoming – child of the tree, Mato, like the Sobor, saves a tree at the cost of his own life.

Archetype of Armenian Champa Tree: The mythical stage of India’s eco-political activism has two main branches – the Vedic and Puranic narratives foregrounding the eminence of trees, plants and forest in the universe; and the scriptural sanctions on the division of ashramas of human life on the basis of one’s proximity to forest. Following this Vedic arborescence is the myth of the kalpavriksha - the wish – fulfilling tree, which emerged from the oceanic depths during a game of churning between gods and demons. This mythical tree fulfils one’s wishes; it enables one to have desires or wishes, and the nature of the tree is as mercurial and varied as people’s wishes. Though it was originally all golden, it may

take the form of a tree (vriksha) or a plant (taru) or a vine (lata) or the wood (drum), a shape- shifting arborescence which confounds any attempt to distinguish between trees and plants. The multifarious kalpavriksha represents the very articulation of desires and wishes; and as many poets and critics have noted, it also signifies the politics of false promises made by corrupt politicians. In a poem titled "kalpavriksha", Ramdaras Mishra lambastes the politicians who promise anything to voters during election without intending to fulfil any of their commitments. Mishra writes: "This is the capital [of India]/ Where you would not be denied even heaven" (qtd. In Yadav 161)

VICTIM OF SUPERSTITIONS

Superstitions make a human being lose his sense of self and provoke him to a sort of inferior action. They are the terrible age- old maladies. They can neither be explained by human reason nor physical laws. Everyday people are increasingly falling prey to these antiquated beliefs. They involve both satanic faith and God faith. Not only ignorant rural folk, even educated urban folk are becoming victims to those beliefs. About superstitions Paul W. Pruyser says:

"It has authoritarian trapping, It keeps man enslaved to his
circumstances by diverting his gaze earth to heaven. It promotes humility."

Most of Mahasweta Devi's works explore the terrifying effects of superstitions on innocent folk leading them to inhuman subjugation under social forces. The Armenian Champa Tree deals with the deception of a Tantrik Saint who takes advantage of the ignorance of the rural folk and bamboozles the people by telling them that there would be floods and to avert that, he must perform pujas and sacrifice a goat. Mato, the protagonist and his pet goat become victims. Mato struggles hard to safeguard his goat. The survival of goat brings defiance to the age- old superstitions like animal sacrifice and also evokes the saint's deceit.

The Armenian Champa Tree involve in superstitions of God faith. These superstitions plunge the people to negative interpretations and negative deeds like offering sacrifice to god or goddess, performance of irrelevant rituals and performance of pujas, fearing of God's curse, fasting during festivals, sacrificing animals to Gods to make some desires fulfilled and performing rituals like 'yajnas' for the welfare of individuals or welfare of a state. These are practiced since ancient times and are followed even today. In the novel the Kapalika tells Janakinath that :

"There are great sinners among you. All of you are great sinners.
If you want to survive the crisis, let there be a yajna here for three
Days and nights beginning with the new moon day. Then I will
Do a puja complete with animal sacrifice" (15-16)

Mahasweta Devi in her works touches a few such absurd superstitious practices of the people, in order to bring awareness and a change.

The Armenian Champa Tree is based on exploitation of faith. A tantric saint deceives the gullible people in the name of devotion and faith. The fallacious tantric saint creates trepidation in the minds of the village folk that a great danger is ahead, the entire village would drown in flood and this grievance is due to sins committed by them. His appearance,

“Sitting with a human skull in his hand, lost in deep thought.

His back bent to one side” (44)

Brings belief in them as he uses considerable guile.

Kapalik later wants to perform a ritual to beguile the people saying that Goddess Kali has appeared in his dream and ordered him to perform the said rituals. He alarms all saying:

In recent famine, so many people died. Now the flood is coming:

This time it will annihilate you all. (49)

He creates a terror in them, taking their credulity as their frailty. Arjun, Mato's pet goat meant for sacrifice becomes a cynosure of the village as it has to avert the calamity by sacrifice. Mato is annoyed by this. He loves Arjun very much. Everyone is convinced that Arjun has brought misfortune to the village and with its sacrifice, the village will be set in peace. Even Mato's mother is under the impression that Mato's inactivity and moodiness is due to this inauspicious animal. She confirms it when Janakinath, the money lender fears her saying, `

“that inauspicious goat has been living in your house, and it's turned your head too.

You 've grown obstinate” (50)

Mato refuses to believe all this and asks his mother,

“Could such a tiny little goat actually cause floods in the village? Was it possible?(51)

Though the people are ignorant and believe false superstition, Mato looks to be out of that group in his logical thinking. Mahasweta brings such small children to defy the whole insane system. Mato is consoled by his mother. To convince him, she says,

“Such things do happen. There was an inauspicious cow in the Acharya's house hold. As long as it was alive, their family was beset with trouble. After it died, everything was all right again. If you let this goat go, you 'll get ten more” (52)

Chibbilas, his brother also tries to convince him saying,

“During famine, the people had died all over like cats and dogs”. (53)

Having seen so much death, people no longer feel kind or pity to leave this goat free, without averting the calamity by its sacrifice. Mato is not convinced. His love for Arjun dominates all superstitions. When everyone is asleep, he escapes with Arjun into the forest. His aim is to safeguard it from sacrifice by reaching Armenian church at Behrampur. He struggles hard to escape from the clutches of many superstitious people. He feels for himself:

“Arjun was going to be butchered for a puja. Why? Ma knows how he brought up Arjun, how he fed him with milk. Even his mother has joined them, that wicked sanyasi and his gang. And hats off to Mother Kali also. Why did she have to mention Arjun in the dream” (54)

Mahasweta Devi through Mato's feelings defies the fallacy of such devotion and faith. Soon after his escape, an announcement is given in all the surrounding villages:

"There is a boy Mato. I'm warning all of you that he has run away with a goat promised by the village as a sacrifice to the deity. It is no ordinary goat. It has to be ritually sacrificed to prevent the great flooding of Padma River. Or else, not a single paddy field or village will remain in this entire area. Everything will be submerged and Mother Ganga astride, her maker will swallow up everyone. Janaki singh has promised to give a gold, mohur to whoever captures the boy." (55)

People are alerted. Some people fear of the flood and want to avert it by catching the boy and a few want to get a gold coin and strive for that. Though hungry and thirsty, Mato runs to safeguard the goat. He faces a lot of problems to escape from the people. Once he jumps into the river to save himself and Arjun but, he frowns. He then feels "It was better to drown. Then there would be no need to run any further. No need to worry about how far the church was." But, he is survived by the root of a tree and reaches the bank. Later, he escapes all the people including Janakinath, Kapalik, Chhibilas and reaches the church, where he and Arjun are safeguarded by the father.`

Here, Mato, a small boy undergoes a lot of humiliation, under the clutches of all people. The boy protects the animal out of love for it and defies the whole village society by venturing his life. Mato in fact teaches everyone to love people or animals in the same way he has loved Arjun and not to victimise them in the name of sacrifice or in the name of superstitions and false faith.

These instances give us the account of the superstitions that affect the mind of the people terrifying them that some evil or harm may befall on them. It is that fear that makes them senseless in their acts. Mahasweta Devi brings an awareness and defiance against these superstitions which abase the people to a sub- human level. Mato defies all the superstitious beliefs by surviving the goat and exhibits the beguilty of the Kapalik when no flood occurs. Mahasweta Devi through the father of the church logically brings defiance to superstitious, sayings,

"Once a beast is inside the church it no longer remains fit for sacrifice to your Mother Goddess. It's you who say so." (71)

And through Udhav she brings out the deception of Kapaliksaying :

He (Kapalik) is longing to eat the tender flesh of Arjun!

Arjun ate up his cluster of bananas. Butted him in the tummy.

So, he's furious of Arjun.(72)

About this novel, NirmalKanthBhattacharjeesays :

"Mahasweta Devi exposes the manner in which religion exploits superstition for its own ends" (73)

This reveals how Kapalik exploits superstition for his self-interest and beguiles people in the name of devotion. Mahasweta Devi exposes the realities and brings defiance to the age old superstitious beliefs and constraints. She projects how people are habituated to antiquated beliefs in supernatural gods, demons, religious gurus, astrologers and clairvoyants. Her aim is to bring awareness to the people, by making them know how dangerous and ignorant these beliefs are and how they are encashed by the privileged and made as a tool to victimize the innocent. All the victims are the real examples from the society. She lays defiance against these false beliefs and also against the monstrous feudal lords who deceive the people by these beliefs and reduce them further to lower- level and ignorance. She doesn't merely write, but also, fights against these practices by creating awareness in them. She pleads with the government for the introduction of a law against the

superstitions like witch hunting, just as the one against the dowry system. She pleads the government to educate the rural people about these beliefs through teachers and doctors, who generally confront them. These works reveal her agony for the innocent who are victimized every day. Moreover, by blurring the ontological boundary between humans and plants, and by making her subjects speak to, for and with plants and trees, Devi proposes an eco- politics of arboreal articulation through which she critiques postcolonial nationalism and anthropocentric “subalternism” in order to envision strategies of survival for indigenous people and their worlds.

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