

# Ecological Vision and Environmental Justice in the Works of Mahaswetha Devi

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## ABSTRACT

**Ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it, and affected by it. Eco-criticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. Eco-criticism examines how place contributes to the identity of characters, influencing their actions, thoughts, and development. It considers how connections to specific places or disconnections from them (due to displacement, migration, or environmental degradation) affect personal and collective identities. Eco-critical perspectives in the works of Mahasweta Devi are deeply rooted in her commitment to social justice, tribal rights, and the preservation of indigenous ecology. While her writings are often classified under subaltern studies, activism, and Dalit literature, they also reveal a profound ecological consciousness, particularly through her portrayal of forests, tribal lands, rivers, and animals as living entities under siege from capitalist, colonial, and state powers. Mahasweta Devi's works present a radical ecological vision in which land, forest, water, animals, and people are all part of an interconnected cosmos. Her eco-criticism is activist, indigenous, feminist, and subaltern-focused, making her one of India's most important voices in environmental justice literature.**

**Keywords: Environmental Justice, Eco-Feminism, Ecological Vision**

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## INTRODUCTION

Ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it, and affected by it. Eco-criticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. Eco-criticism is a critical approach to literature and culture that focuses on the relationships between human beings and the natural world. It emerged in the 1990s as a response to growing concerns about environmental degradation and the impact of human activity on the planet (Glotfelty and Fromm 2). Eco-criticism has been influential in a variety of fields, including literature, cultural studies, and environmental studies. It has been used to analyze a wide range of literary works, from classic literature to contemporary eco-fiction, and has been applied to other cultural forms, such as film and art.

In “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Eco-criticism,” published in the mid 2000s, Ursula Heise traces the history of eco-critical approaches to texts, noting that individual scholars have been taking this approach at least since the 1970s, but that they often worked in isolation until Eco-criticism began to receive more institutional attention in the 1990s. Under the influence of mostly French philosophies of language, literary critics during this period took a fresh look at questions of representation, textuality, narrative, identity, subjectivity, and historical discourse from a fundamentally skeptical perspective that emphasized the multiple disjunctures between forms of representation and the realities they purported to refer to.

Environmentalism and Eco-criticism aim their critique of modernity at its presumption to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labeled “progress.” This domination strips nature of any value other than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis for subsistence. Such domination empties human life of the significance it had derived from living in and with nature and alienates individuals and communities from their rootedness in place. One popular area of eco-critical inquiry is the notion of *place*. Eco-criticism addresses the importance of place in literature by considering how specific locations—wilderness, rural, suburban, or urban environments—shape narratives, characters, themes, and the reader’s understanding of the text. Eco-criticism examines how place contributes to the identity of characters, influencing their actions, thoughts, and

development. It considers how connections to specific places or disconnections from them (due to displacement, migration, or environmental degradation) affect personal and collective identities.

Moreover, this perspective involves analyzing how literature reflects the cultural and historical significances of particular places. Eco-criticism looks at how narratives are embedded in the historical exploitation, conservation, or reverence of certain landscapes, and how these places hold the memories and histories of communities. It also explores the emotional bonds between people and places, known as place attachment, and how literature articulates these relationships. It investigates the sense of place—a deep understanding and appreciation of the unique characteristics of a place—that can foster a strong connection to the environment and influence behavior towards it. Literature can raise awareness about environmental issues specific to a place, such as pollution, deforestation, urban sprawl, or climate change impacts. It examines how texts bring attention to these issues, advocate for environmental justice, and promote a deeper understanding of and empathy for affected places. Eco-criticism also looks at how power dynamics are played out in the control and ownership of places, including issues related to colonization, industrialization, and environmental policy. It investigates how literature critiques or upholds these dynamics and explores alternative ways of interacting with the environment.

Myths and indigenous beliefs deeply influence the way Indian English literature engages with the environment. These traditional worldviews shape a distinct ecological consciousness—one that views nature not as a passive resource but as sacred, sentient, and interconnected with human life. In Indian literary texts, especially those with rural, tribal, or religious settings, such beliefs challenge dominant industrial or capitalist views of nature. Many Indian myths and indigenous belief systems deify natural elements. Rivers like the Ganga, mountains like the Himalayas, and trees like the Peepal are considered sacred. For instance, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* subtly invokes the sacredness of rivers and landscapes, even as they are degraded by modern development. Similarly, in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* draws upon myths around the Narmada River, presenting it as both a geographical and spiritual force. Another aspect is the Indigenous communities often practice animism, the belief that all natural entities—trees, animals, rivers—possess a spirit or consciousness. This belief fosters respect and a deep ecological ethic. For instance, Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* explores how tribal people view the forest as a living entity, not merely as timber or land. The pterodactyl becomes a symbol of ancient, sacred knowledge lost in modern times.

Myths often become tools of resistance when communities use them to challenge developmental projects that exploit natural resources. In many Indian novels and short stories, indigenous characters invoke myths or spirits of the forest to protest mining, dam construction, or deforestation. Myths related to goddesses (like Prithvi, Ganga, or Aranyani) often merge ecological and feminist concerns, showing how exploitation of nature parallels the exploitation of women. For instance, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, the river goddess *Bon Bibi*, revered by both Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans, represents harmony between humans and nature. Another aspect is the integration of Folklore and Oral Traditions. Indian literature frequently integrates folk tales and oral traditions that encode ecological wisdom such as the importance of biodiversity, rain cycles, and seasonal rhythms. Ruskin Bond's short stories reflect Pahari and local oral traditions that celebrate harmony with nature and highlight human responsibility in preserving it. Moreover, unlike linear Western views of time and progress, Indian myths often represent cyclical time, reinforcing ideas of regeneration, sustainability, and balance. In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, echoes of mythic pasts and fading traditions contrast with modern loss and environmental decay.

Indigenous and myth-based perspectives tie identity to geography. Land is not a commodity, but a living memory—thus loss of land is loss of culture. In many postcolonial Indian novels, displacement of tribals is shown not only as economic trauma but as spiritual and ecological loss. Myths and indigenous beliefs in Indian literature embed ecological ethics within cultural and spiritual narratives, offer alternative, sustainable models of coexistence with nature and resist destructive ideologies of modernity and development. They help construct a distinctly Indian ecological consciousness rooted in tradition

Eco-critical perspectives in the works of Mahasweta Devi are deeply rooted in her commitment to social justice, tribal rights, and the preservation of indigenous ecology. While her writings are often classified under subaltern studies, activism, and Dalit literature, they also reveal a profound ecological consciousness, particularly through her portrayal of forests, tribal lands, rivers, and animals as living entities under siege from capitalist, colonial, and state powers.

Mahasweta Devi's ecology is not just about nature—it is about the symbiotic relationship between tribal people and their environment, and the violent disruption of this relationship by developmentalism, industrialization, and state oppression. In many of her stories, forests are sacred spaces—the habitat, culture, and soul of tribal communities. When the forest is encroached upon or destroyed, it is not just environmental degradation but the erasure of an entire way of life. For instance in *"Aranyer Adhikar" (Rights to the Forest)*, based on the life of Birsa Munda, the novel presents the forest as the central

site of tribal identity and spirituality. The story critiques how colonial laws criminalized the tribals' access to the forest, forcing them into bonded labor and destitution. For the author, forest is a political and cultural ecosystem; deforestation is equivalent to cultural genocide.

Mahasweta Devi often critiques how development projects—mining, dams, deforestation, plantations—displace indigenous populations and plunder the natural world for profit. For instance, in "*Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*", the story blends reality with magical realism, where a prehistoric pterodactyl appears in a starving village, symbolizing the death of ancient ecological harmony. It critiques state apathy, development-induced famine, and the extinction of tribal memory. For the author, the pterodactyl is a metaphor for lost ecological consciousness, and the story portrays nature as deeply wounded.

Mahasweta often uses animal imagery to reflect the shared suffering of nature and marginalized humans. For instance, in her work "*Douloti the Bountiful*", the female body, like the earth, is portrayed as colonized, violated, and commodified. The protagonist's body becomes a symbol of both ecological and gendered exploitation. Her representation of use of oxen, snakes, and birds often aligns with traditional tribal symbolism, where animals are kin, not resources. For the author, animal suffering reflects the violent disconnection between humans and the natural world under modern systems.

Mahasweta Devi forefronts indigenous knowledge and eco-spirituality in her works. Her tribal characters are not only guardians of the forest but also carriers of traditional ecological knowledge—understanding seasons, animals, soil, and water cycles. This contrasts with the exploitative "developmental" knowledge of outsiders. For instance, in "*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*", Chotti Munda's relationship with nature is portrayed through rituals, hunting, and oral traditions. The novel explores how these ecological traditions are threatened by the intrusion of market economies and politics. For the author, Indigenous people embody eco-centric worldviews, not anthropocentric ones. Another feature of her works is the critique of the state, the propaganda of development and the bureaucracy. Her eco-critical voice often merges with political resistance. The state and its institutions (forestry departments, mining corporations, police) are depicted as agents of ecological destruction and tribal oppression. Bureaucracy is shown as completely disconnected from local ecosystems, often enforcing laws that destroy both land and people. For the author, environmental degradation is not natural—it is a political act facilitated by institutional violence.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi's works present a radical ecological vision in which land, forest, water, animals, and people are all part of an interconnected cosmos. Her eco-criticism is activist, indigenous, feminist, and subaltern-focused, making her one of India's most important voices in environmental justice literature.

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