

Tribal Culture in Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter*

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Abstract

*This paper discusses the Shabar's cultural values and progressive cultural deterioration in Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter*. It also focuses on the tribal community's socio-cultural traits. The *Book of the Hunter* focuses on the position and challenges of the Shabars tribal community in the sixteenth century. Mahasweta Devi attempts to illustrate tribal people's struggles in a patriarchal society and make them evident. Indigenous people are descendants of the previous inhabitants and occupants of a country or region. They exhibit a fair amount of diversity in culture, religion, and socioeconomic connection, both over time and historically. Tribals in India's Northeast region have remarkable cultural diversity, extending ancestral roots to distant regions. It is crucial to raise awareness about these indigenous civilizations. As an outcome, this research highlights the lifestyle, culture, and Relationships in an upbeat manner rather than perceiving the problem adversely.*

Keywords: Tribal Tradition, Forest, Mahasweta Devi, Hunting, Animals, Culture, Indigenous Culture.

Discussion

Devi acknowledges her debt to Kabikankan Mukundaram a sixteenth century Bengali poet whose epic-poem *Abhaymangal* and particularly the “Byadhkhanda” portion of this book is the source of this novel. Devi surveys the cultural values of the Shabars by recording the oral histories connected to them. In the honour of Kabikankan Mukundaram, She surveys the cultural values of the Shabars by recording the oral histories connected to them. In the honour of Kabikankan Mukundaram, Devi say, “Mukundaram somewhat lightened the burden of mainstream society's sins by writing his *Byadhkhanda*. He was Aryavrat, the king of elephants, whereas I am a tiny ant who has undertaken this task with my meager means. Whether I have done the right thing or wrong is for Jaladhar and the other Shabars to say” (*The Book of the Hunter*, ix). Devi highlights the socio cultural facets of the Tribal group through Mukundaram and his wife, and also through young Shabars, Phuli, and Kalya.

Mahasweta Devi highlights the plight of tribal groups, particularly the Shabars, who face threats to their survival as city dwellers tear down woods and intrude on their culture. She also highlights the shabars community's culture and traditions. Which are linked to the forest. The people of this tribe worship the goddess *Abhyachandi*,

the people also believe that, once they go against the laws of the goddess they will face the curse. Most of the events in the novel revolve around tribal culture or their way of life. They adhere to their Abhaya culture and worship the Abhayachandi Goddess. Their culture is more intellectual than ours, Their Religious rites, , do not harm the environment. They maintain equilibrium by killing animals within a set limit. For example, we have Danko, the leader The Shabars advocated for restricted animal killing during marriages. If every girl's father demanded, "Bring me this, bring me that," the forest would be exhausted. They are all Abhaya's creatures – do you want to kill them all in your desperate greed?" (The Book of the Hunter, 113). Danko further says, "So now I'm going to make a rule that only five deerskins may be taken. And one or two wild boars - no one will ever give more than that. You've got a daughter's wedding and she's under Abhaya's protection – what's the point of inviting Ma's curse by killing too many deer, tigers or boars?" (The Book of the Hunter, 66).

However, when killing animals, they are bound by the rules. They consider killing a pregnant deer or other animal during the breeding season is considered a major crime. That's why the king of Dhalhum requested 100 skins and Male deer for a ceremony. His traders came with a contract to pay for each skin of male deer a rupee coin of pure silver; Kalya drove the traders away as it was "The time for the deer to mate. Any Shabar who kills a deer during this Period would have Abhaya's curse upon him" (The Book of the Hunter, 81).

Another important aspect of their culture is their social norms, which value women's roles, allow widows to remarry, and allow for divorce. They have their customs for marrying, remarrying, or selecting a companion. Devi says, "when husband and wife leave each other, they can both remarry. A widow could remarry her late husband's younger brother, or any other man. That was what Abhaya laid down. Give them full liberty and they will honour it absolutely" (The Book of the Hunter, 120). They strictly stick to nature's principles, and they do not kill any animal during the mating season; nevertheless, the city's settlements brought many changes to their lives, as well as misfortune to their society. To avoid further intrusion, they all relocated to another forest. absolutely" (120). In an interview with Gabrielle Collu, Mahasweta Devi said, I respect the Tribals too much. I respect Indian tribals because they are much more civilized and sophisticated than we are. Their own social codes say widows can remarry, divorce is allowed, men and women can divorce, a woman's place is of honor, there is no one who becomes an orphan because she or she has lost their parents. The community rears them. There are many such laws prove that they were most civilized most sophisticated and they are the people all India has exploited like anything because they are black, because they don't speak the language (147-48).

The Shabars do not farm and aren't allowed to till the soil, thus in order to obtain rice, they must sell animals, skins, bird feathers, resin, and honey to the town dwellers. Shabar men are not allowed to sell these products, only women were allowed. They are not permitted to wear metal jewelry and must instead use natural items as jewelry. These Shabar people have no wish to live an extravagant life. These tribal people live in nature and enjoy basic pleasures such as eating, drinking, and socializing. They are not insane for participating in the race for hyper culture. These innocent tribes are not affected by negative emotions such as pride, jealousy, or envy. They are happy enough with a cloth to cover their body, rice to quench their hunger and a mate to pour their emotions on. Money is less valuable for tribals, "They don't know what money is, nor do they see much of it" (The Book of the Hunter, 102). Kalachanda says "They don't even know they are poor\ they are always happy. They have so many festivals and holidays - both men and women dance and play on little drums. They mind their own business and are perfectly content. The men and women both toil hard they have a fine life" (The Book of the Hunter, 49).

These tribal people always suffer from a muted identity we find the reassurance of Abhaya against all fears. She kept all her wild creatures, trees and forestchildren the Shabars safe in her lap, covered by her sari, but gradually they learnt that” “A town had sprung up outside the forest, and that a king had established his capital there”(58). And ultimately, the Shabars had to “hastily abandon this far edge of the town of Ararha, as they had done time and again with other settlements” seeking for “a place where there existed no city, no market, no king or any other caste or tribe, where there were only the forest, water and hills”(The Book of the Hunter, 134). Thus Mahasweta Devi says “Indian history did not recognize the tribal fights, tribal rebellions. Never recognized them, never wrote about them and never mentioned them” (The Book of the Hunter, 148).

The Shabar community relies on oral traditions and ancestral knowledge for survival, including medicinal plants, hunting techniques, and an understanding of forest ecology. For instance, Kalya’s hunting skills are not just about survival but also a reflection of the tribe’s accumulated wisdom over generations, which is at odds with the Brahminical idea of a structured, settled existence. And The Shabar community’s belief system is deeply rooted in nature worship, which is starkly different from the Brahmanical notion of deity-centered worship. Their animistic practices reflect a sustainable relationship with the environment. For instance The Shabar hunters have a ritualistic connection with the animals they hunt, acknowledging the life force they take rather than exploiting nature mindlessly. Mahasweta Devi, through *The Book of the Hunter*, foregrounds the Shabar tribe’s cultural resilience, ecological wisdom, and opposition to assimilation. The novel serves as both a historical narrative and a critique of caste oppression, making a case for recognizing and respecting indigenous cultures and their sustainable ways of life.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta Devi portrays the complexities of tribal culture through a nuanced exploration of identity, survival, and resistance. This Narrative offers a profound examination of how tribal communities, often marginalized and oppressed by both state and colonial powers, cling to their cultural heritage as a means of asserting their autonomy. Through vivid depictions of tribal rituals, customs, and traditional knowledge, Devi brings to the forefront the vibrancy and resilience of tribal culture in the face of relentless exploitation and cultural assimilation. Her portrayal of tribal life, deeply rooted in oral traditions, highlights the interconnectedness between language, culture, and resistance. The tribal communities’ language is not merely a communication tool but a vessel of their worldview, encoding their spiritual beliefs, historical experiences, and social structures. By centering tribal voices in their native languages, Devi challenges the hegemonic forces that seek to erase or devalue indigenous cultures. This is not only a narrative strategy but also a cultural reclamation, offering a space where tribal identities can exist and thrive outside the parameters defined by dominant power structures.

Furthermore, *The Book of the Hunter* is a testament to the socio-political consciousness that Devi instills in her tribal protagonists. They are not passive victims of exploitation but active agents of resistance, fighting to preserve their cultural and ecological heritage against the encroachment of corporate interests, state violence, and environmental destruction. In portraying the tribal community’s struggle for survival, Devi calls attention to the broader issues of environmental justice, economic exploitation, and political oppression, linking them to the preservation of tribal culture and land rights. Ultimately, *The Book of the Hunter* underscores Mahasweta Devi’s commitment to giving voice to the silenced and marginalized. Through her evocative portrayal of tribal culture, Devi does not simply depict their struggles but also their strengths, dreams, and enduring spirit. The work stands as a powerful reminder of the cultural resilience of tribal communities and the urgent need to recognize and protect their rights, heritage, and languages in the face of ongoing marginalization.

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