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ECOLOGY OF CASTE AND THIRST: HEGEMONY, IDENTITY,  
AND DALIT RESISTANCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S WATER

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*Dalit, Caste, Hierarchy, Oppression, Ecology, Hegemony, Resistance, Water, River, Thirst, Identity, Marginalised, Socio-Politics, And Discourse.*

**Abstract**

This research paper examines the ways in which Water (*Jal*) is an effective critique of entrenched caste hierarchies and resource monopolisation in rural India in the play written by Mahasweta Devi. In this paper, water access is theorised as a weapon through the political ecology lens, that is, as an “ecology of thirst”, and used as a main tool for upper-caste structural violence and hegemony. The study unpacks the ecological deprivation of the marginalised Dome community and of the central protagonist, Maghai, and how socio-political disenfranchisement is inextricably linked with ecological deprivation. Moreover, the paper explores the nature of Dalit identity and subaltern resistance in the text, and how the local fight for a basic natural resource emerges not just as a struggle for survival but as a radical claim to human dignity and political agency. In conclusion, this research would suggest that Devi's work is anticipating the contemporary ecocritical discourse because environmental justice is basically impossible unless the whole system of caste oppression is removed.



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## Introduction

The natural environment is not usually considered a neutral space in the discourse of postcolonial and subaltern studies. Ecology and natural resources are often represented as "contested places" that continue to come undone through the ongoing processes of power, capitalism, and entrenched social hierarchies. In the Indian context the systemic exploitation of nature goes hand-in-hand with the marginalisation of indigenous tribes (*Adivasis*) and the lower castes (Dalits). Today's environmental degradation, stemming from neo-colonial resource exploitation and feudalism of the past, is disproportionately affecting nature-dependent communities (Panthoi and Khurajam 5713). This is structural violence not just in the sense of being deprived of land, but in the sense of being deprived of water as the most basic need of life.

SamikBandyopadhyay's English translation of *Water (Bengali Jal)*, which appeared in *Five Plays*, a major anthology of plays by Indian women, uncovers a powerful interrogation of water's biopolitics of distribution (xii). A crusader for the people who are marginalised in Indian society, widely, Devi has broken the barriers of the traditional literary genre to describe the multi-layered bio-degradation and social stratification that threaten human life (Karthika 281). Her works discuss the use of natural scarcity, like seasonal droughts, to maintain the upper caste's socio-economic dominance and strengthen the violent caste subjugation of the untouchable castes.

It would be a misreading of the text to reduce the Water conflict to an agriculture-environmental struggle. The play is a strong condemnation of the artificial droughts that the Hindu caste structure inflicts on the people, known as "ecoprecarity," which is a creation of nature for social exclusion (Rathna 118). The basic narrative of the Domes, an untouchable caste, who live in the fictionalised rural space of *Charsa*, represents a Dalit perspective that seeks identity, equal rights and emancipation from the spatial and spiritual segregation caused by Brahmanical hegemony. Here, water is not simply a biological necessity but the highest form of currency for human dignity.

## Theoretical Parameters: Dalit Aesthetics and Subaltern Subjectivities

Mahasweta Devi's methodological approach to literature requires a conscious move away from the traditional approach to literary criticism. To fully appreciate the Dalit perspective contained in *Water*, it is necessary to situate the text in the ideological frameworks that have been developed by Dalit literary critics, most notably, SharankumarLimbale's critical manifesto, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Traditional evaluation criteria based on classical Indian (Brahmanical) aesthetics, or Western literary canons, are, according to Limbale, "a rather coarse tool for assessing Dalit literature" (121). The critics from the upper castes often argue that literature should be based on "eternal values" or aesthetic universal enjoyment, thus rendering the political power of the text innocuous (Mukherjee 125).



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But Limbale and other contemporaries such as Omprakash Valmiki argue that the Dalit experience is comprised of intergenerational trauma, exclusion and systemic denial of humanization. Dalit literature, therefore, should embody its own aesthetic, its own sensibility, its own vision, one which does not indulge in the use of Hindu icons, the pastoral imagery, but with a raw realism, a sensibility to rural reality, the changed value system, and the unflinching account of pain and revolt (Valmiki 132). Devi's Water is a representative of this subaltern aesthetic. Born into a privileged social class, Devi was an "activist-writer," who rescued and recorded subaltern histories (Lahiri 150). Her plays and short stories are marked by a counter-canonical style that places a greater emphasis on the unsentimental revelation of socio-political facts over poetic embellishment (Devi 45).

GayatriChakravortySpivak, who revived Devi's work for the world's postcolonial academy, describes Devi's characters as the archetypal subalterns who "struggle against both state and local feudal lords" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? 283). For Spivak, Devi's work is a subversive act against the hegemonic history of the post-colonial Indian nation-state which deals meticulously with the "fourth world" of indigenous and Dalit people (Spivak, "Literary Representation" 242). In Water, Devi exposes the fissures in the idea of a united, democratic India, with the uprising of the Domes.

Moreover, Devi exhibits a myth-making tendency that challenges the nationalist efforts of "brahmanising" the narrative traditions (Goswami 115). In Water, Devi brings the myth of the river, usually the sacred Ganges and purification of spirit, to the material, earthy reality of the *Charsa* river. The mythology is reversed: instead of washing away sins, the river is used as a means to inflict sins upon the bodies of the lower castes, the brutal enactment of the upper caste sins.

### **The Geography of Caste: Engineered Scarcity and "Hidden Apartheid"**

To understand the water crisis portrayed in Water, a historical and sociological background needs to be studied to understand the details of water access in India. In the context of the traditional Hindu faith, water has a high spiritual value and is a symbol of cleanliness, health and a sacred purity that can wash away impurities. But this "theology of purity" is bound up with a "sociology of pollution. This "hidden apartheid" (Rathna 119) (Rao 40) is reflected in the extreme residential segregation of the upper castes, who believe that Dalit contact or even shadow of the Dalit contaminates the water source that renders it unfit for the upper echelon of society (Anand 26). This phenomenon is exemplified by the extreme residential segregation of upper castes who believe that the shadow and contact of Dalits with water source makes it unfit for them. As Sukhadeo Thorat's research thoroughly documented in *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in modern India* is clear, segregation among the rural population of India is not unusual (Thorat and Newman 215).

There is clear caste segregation in basic services, such as drinking water, provided within the household. This divide-and-rule is personified in Devi's Water as Santosh Pujari, a ruthless local landlord and the head of the Panchayat. Santosh becomes the "government's son-in-law", and hides



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relief materials (rice, seeds, paddy and fertiliser) from the villagers who are suffering from a drought, then sells them for his personal benefit. The untouchables of Charsa cannot use the public wells, but Santosh proudly owns "five big wells and three small ones" which he uses only for his family and cows (Devi 159).

Santosh's caste prejudice is so much a personal sensibility that he can easily use the bureaucratic machinery to obscure his prejudice and justify it to the village young men: "I don't know how it is possible this year, my good men, there was an earlier application from Harchand Thakur for a well. Moreover, he uses religion to excuse the environmental catastrophe by assuring the villagers that the devastating drought is a punishment for their sins of neglecting the ritualistic observance of their religious beliefs by the lower castes (Devi 105). The drought is portrayed as God's punishment and not environmental problems as a result of resource hoarding, rendering the villagers incapable of political agitation and thus perpetuating the issue of water as a luxury for the privileged and a daily struggle for the marginalised.

### **Hydrological Hegemony and the Shadows of Mahad(*Mahar*)**

The theoretical foundation of the Dalit struggle for water, which Devi so vividly captures, can be traced back to one of the most seminal moments in modern Indian history: the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927. Orchestrated by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the Mahad Satyagraha was the first organised movement where Dalits collectively asserted their civil rights by marching to the public Chavdar Tank in Mahad to drink water. In his authoritative text, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt*, Anand Teltumbde clarifies that this movement was not merely a fight for physical access to hydration; it was an epochal moment symbolising a broader demand for Dalit dignity, equality, and human rights (Teltumbde 18). Dr Ambedkar explicitly stated that the Dalits were not going to the Chavdar lake merely to quench their thirst, but to establish the norm of equality and assert their humanity in the face of structural erasure.

Anupama Rao, in *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, further analyses the Mahad Satyagraha, noting how the movement exposed the contradictions between mainstream Indian nationalism and Dalit conceptions of civic rights (Rao 77). Rao points out that Dalit demands for social inclusion and natural justice were frequently recast by the courts and uppercaste elites as trespassing on private property (Rao 77). The orthodox Hindu reaction was visceral, with claims that Dalit access to water violated scriptural injunctions.

Devi's play operates as a dramatic continuation of the *Mahad* legacy. The characters in water do not just suffer from a physiological thirst; they suffer from the epistemic violence of being declared biologically and socially inferior. Just as Ambedkar recognised that water was the ultimate battleground for civic equality, Devi's characters ultimately learn that breaking the monopoly on



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water is the first necessary step in dismantling the entire feudal-capitalist architecture of the village. The struggle over the Charsa river is the struggle over the right to exist in the Indian republic.

### **The Paradox of Maghai Dome: Tradition, Karma, and Internalised Violence**

Maghai Dome is a traditional water-diviner, part of the untouchable Dome community, at the centre of Water. The paradox of Dalit condition in Maghai's life is that he has the knowledge and intuition which he uses to find underground water sources, and he is the one who physically excavates the wells for the upper caste to use, but is strictly forbidden to draw water from the well he digs himself (Ranjith and Rajesh 78). Through Maghai, Mahasweta Devi delves into the psychology of the subaltern mind. In spite of the obvious exploitation he faces, at times he has to work under Santosh Pujari for no wages but because of the tradition, Maghai is more often than not a silent coward and gives in to the cruel violence of his profession (Ranjith and Rajesh 78). He lives in a condition of self-imprisonment assuming his deprivation as his karmic destiny. As he speaks to his radicalized son Dhura, Maghai is all too aware of their poverty, telling him "There is nothing so great as real hunger, son" (Devi 102). The barns that bulge with grain, "is not for us, son" (Devi 102), he notes to his son. Maghai's hesitation to revolution is a case in point of the subaltern agency. He is from a generation which has been brutally suppressed by the socio-religious machinery of caste so much so that mere survival takes the place of abstraction of rights. Who will foot the bills for my comings and goings to the city, as he goes on to say, "Who will pay for my going and coming back?" (Devi 107). Maghai isn't ignorance, but a very pragmatic (tragic) one of the structural violence that surrounds him. He is fully aware of the serious repercussions of challenging the rigid caste restrictions. He feels that his enslavement is more than a natural state of affairs, there appears to be no resistance to this enslavement.

### **Dhura and the Radicalisation of the Dalit Youth**

Maghai represents the tragic endurance of the older generation; his son, Dhura, embodies the fierce, awakening consciousness of the modern Dalit youth. Dhura is a deeply grounded revolutionary spirit who vehemently rejects karmic explanations for his community's suffering. He recognises that their poverty and thirst are not ordained by the gods but are systematically manufactured by men like Santosh Pujari.

The ideological clash between father and son forms the emotional core of the play. When Maghai resigns himself to their circumstances, Dhura angrily counters the fatalistic narrative of the earth, and then they refuse us a drop of water, not a drop for the Doms and chandals. I spit upon fate, if that's our fate" (Devi 146).

The shift in the story line marks a paradigm shift in Dalit resistance; Dhura's structural consciousness. He knows that the state apparatus, the police, the landlords' officials, the local administration, is the arm of the upper-caste landlords. At the railway station, boldly outwitting the



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Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) and Santosh, he pretends to be unaware of what is going on (Devi 101). In addition, he openly challenges the state's version of the Naxalite insurgency, a radical communist movement which historically enjoyed tremendous popularity among the landless peasantry in rural Bengal (Guha 14). Dhura perceptively notes, "The call of Naxal extremism is just to excuse the harassment upon us" and comes to understand as the government keeps invoking the slogan of left-wing extremism to give legitimacy to the brutal policing and suppression of any demand of lower-caste people for basic rights (Devi 99).

Devi uses the historical context of Naxalite movement as a means of highlighting the systemic deprivation of the marginalised and their tendency to resort to violent uprising against it (Chanda ix). The presence of escaping convicts in the play—referred to anonymously as "One" and "Two"—who murdered a tyrannical police officer underscores the simmering undercurrent of violent retribution in the region (Devi 96). Dhura's empathy for these rebels represents a clear shift from his father's passive acceptance. Systemic extraction of relief and water funds, "The bastard draws the relief, draws a lion's share out of it for himself... - and there is nothing for anybody else" (Devi 112). It is only to be set right through the actual means of its own physical destruction. He understands that no one will give him water freely, he must take it for himself.

### **Intersectional Ecofeminism and the Dalit Woman's Body**

While the caste dynamics of water deprivation are glaring, Mahasweta Devi adds a crucial layer of intersectionality by highlighting the profoundly gendered impact of this ecological crisis. In agrarian economies, the burden of water collection falls overwhelmingly on women, making them the primary victims of environmental scarcity. Through characters like Phulmani (Maghai's wife), Devi illustrates how the intersection of caste, class, gender, and ecology uniquely marginalises Dalit women, a dynamic rigorously analysed under the theoretical framework of intersectional ecofeminism (Agarwal 14).

Phulmani pays a heavy physical and emotional price for the village's water politics. When confronting Santosh about his corruption—boldly stating, "Men trade in paddy, you trade in relief" (Devi 103)—she exposes the physical toll of her daily labour.

Raising her palms to the landlord, she declares:

"These two hands of mine are full of sores, Santosh, all from scratching about the sands of the Charsha for water...." (Devi 138).

Her blistered hands serve as a visceral testament to the structural violence inflicted upon the Dalit female body. Unlike the upper-caste women who enjoy the luxury of drawn well-water, Phulmani must physically excavate the dry riverbeds just to keep her family alive. The Dalit woman's body becomes the literal site where the cruelty of the caste system and the violence of ecological deprivation are most legibly inscribed.



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This gendered suffering over water is profoundly echoed in the contemporary Dalit poetry of ChallapalliSwaroop Rani. In her celebrated Telugu poem "Water" (translated into English by Uma Bhrugubanda), Swaroop Rani notes that water is not merely a scientific compound; it is a historical witness to generations of trauma (Rani 12). Swaroop Rani illustrates that while water might be a multinational market commodity or a plastic bottle for the privileged urban elite, it represents a matter of life and death, public humiliation, and endless physical toil for the Dalit woman. The play captures the essence of Devi's play: water knows the persistence of untouchability; it has witnessed the bloody battles fought for basic rights, and it reflects the deep social divides in which one class experiences water as a luxury while another experiences it as an endless, bone-breaking struggle. By centering the somatic pain of subaltern women, both Devi and Swaroop Rani subvert traditional patriarchal narratives that overlook female agricultural labour (Chakravarty 88).

### **Charsa Dam: Collective Resistance and State Complicity**

A pivotal moment in the play is the shift from personal to collective, organised action. On the *Charsa* river, also known as "the Preserver of Life," Jiten Maitey intervenes, the heat of summer drying up the river to leave only sandbars where the untouchables scratch for a cup of muddy water (Devi 154). Jiten is an honest teacher in a school, a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and a freedom fighter who served some time in jail.

He informs Maghai and the villagers about the conservation of water, instructing them to build a boulder dam across the river during the monsoon floods to catch water for the hot summer season (Devi 143).

The dam building is a stunning achievement of Dalit agency, self-reliant technology and space reclamation. The Domes have been able to take advantage of the river, and avoid the caste segregated public wells altogether, meaning that Santosh's monopoly over the village's water supply is no longer as relevant. The dam isn't just an infrastructure project, it's a declaration of independence. But this claim to independence is unacceptable to the feudal regime. Santosh realises that when the lower castes have independent access to water, his economic control and absolute domination over them will be lost. When Santosh sees the untouchables constructing a dam without any outside help, he cannot take the sight and so he turns to political levers to help the untouchables connections to deploy the state police to demolish the structure (Wenzel128).

The ensuing violent confrontation is no surprise, a typical illustration of the state's enforcement of caste status. The police are using excessive force against the unarmed villagers, with one officer firing a gun at Jiten Maitey, causing him to collapse and lose consciousness, and Maghai being beaten until he starts bleeding. Overcome by anger, Dhura calls for a violent revolution: "Kill the bastards! Kill Santhosh! The bastard didn't like it that the Domes were building a dam without him! Kill! he had to set police on us! (Devi 148).



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The revolt is crushed, the dam is torn down and Maghai is finally swept away by the river. The dismantling of the dam is a very powerful metaphor for the government's role in the maintenance of caste hegemony. It is evidence that water denial is not a silent by-product of ancient custom, but a policy in practice, an economic policy violently imposed on Dalits. The state apparatus does not intervene to protect the marginalised from drought; it intervenes to protect the upper caste from the self-sufficiency of the marginalised.

### **Conclusion**

Water is a great success in postcolonial dramatic literature by Mahasweta Devi. It challenges the notion of a post-Independent 'equal' India, exposing a very divided society where ancient Brahmanical notions of purity/pollution are easily accommodated within a new modernist bureau or capitalist system. Devi carefully charts the landscape of subaltern pain in the excruciating suffering of Maghai, the fiery rebellion of Dhura, and the gendered suffering of Phulmani. The text calls for a "political" attitude towards water as a space that is constantly "contested" and in which dignity is negotiated. In this tragedy is the ineludible rhythm of resistance, the consciousness of the subaltern, once roused to the mechanisms of its own oppression, the call to the basic right to exist.

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