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Research Article:

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## Resisting Mainstream Male Gaze in Mahasweta Devi's Short Story "The Hunt"

*Anjani Sharma*

Deoghar College, SKM University, Jharkhand, India

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The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines "gaze" as a long steady look at somebody/something either because you are very interested or surprised. Therefore, the word "gaze" in itself has a positive association and connotes a sense of curiosity, wonder and/ or awe. For example, one can gaze across the ocean, gaze at the stars in the sky or gaze into the lover's eyes. However, within the contexts of Postcolonialism and Feminism, which are the theoretical backbone of this paper, the term gaze is pejorative. In this construct gaze is more akin to voyeurism, where the subject of the gaze is often unknowingly or unwillingly the victim of the viewer's stare. Inherent in this gaze is the power hierarchy between the predatorial gazer and the prey-like object of the gaze. This gaze encompasses perspective and power and when feminism characterizes "the male gaze" certain motifs are almost sure to appear: voyeurism, objectification, fetishism, scopophilia, woman as the object of male pleasure etc.

Postcolonial gaze refers to the aftermath of colonization for both the Colonizer and the Colonized in terms of how they view each other after the Colonizers leave. In this case, gaze is multidirectional in that both the former Colonizers and the former Colonized are simultaneously viewer and viewed, as the power hierarchy dissipates in the Postcolonial period. Conversely, the mainstream gaze and male gaze are unidirectional gazes where the mainstream stares at the subaltern and their land and males stare at the females, with the power to define their subjects. In Laura Mulvey's words, man is the bearer of the gaze, women its object.

Also important to the discussion is the concept of distance and stereotype. Distance leads to dehumanization and objectification through the employment of the gaze and the result of this is the creation of stereotypes. Stereotypes are created

when the distant, or unfamiliar, is caricatured based on a fixed set of generalizations used as a means of classification. A “stereotype” is defined in the *American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* as “a generalization, usually exaggerated or oversimplified [...] that is used to describe or distinguish a group.” To distinguish is to set aside or distance, and this process of setting aside or distancing oneself from the stereotyped subject is necessary to the very process of stereotyping.

This paper attempts to analyze the interplay between stereotype, distance and gaze as the plot of “The Hunt” unfolds. Mahasweta Devi manipulates the mainstream male gaze as a narrative trope to deconstruct its effect on Mary Oraon and the village of Kuruda. Mary Oraon, herself a child of colonial exploitation becomes a victim of postcolonial mainstream intervention into the margins. The stereotyping of tribals as criminals and sub-human creatures has led to their vulnerability within the postcolonial system of hierarchy. The mainstream is able to yield power over the tribals through the practice of their gaze which signifies dominance and suppression, due to the fact that they are members of the dominant society. The mainstream gaze extends over their land which is to be usurped, their possessions to be looted, who can with impunity be laughed at and pushed aside. Their women are looked down upon because they enjoy certain amount of freedom which is a threat to mainstream morality. They are raped in order to force them into subjugation, fear and shame. Stereotyping and branding of the tribals led to hatred, contempt and distancing.

In “The Hunt” it is Bhikni who becomes the first victim of male gaze. The Dixons who had huge timber plantation in Kuruda left after independence. Bhikni, an Oraon tribal, used to look after the Dixon’s bungalow and household. When Dixon’s son came some twelve years later, he sold his property and paid Bhikni her wages. She became an object for Dixon’s son who exercising his power put Mary in her womb before leaving. Dixon’s son found an unresisting and available victim in the form of Bhikni. Her bodily exploitation seemed normal as nobody comes to her aid.

Mary Oraon is the product of this colonial exploitation, an illegitimate offspring of Bhikni and her Australian master. Proma Tagore in her book *Shapes of Silence* says that “Mary’s representation as half-white, half-tribal, and the embodiment of an imperialistic rape locates her at the intersecting axes of colonial, nationalist, gendered and sexualized power/ violence, and as an individual whose subjectivity exposes the fault lines of institutionalized systems of identity and community authorized by these lineaments of power” (132). In this short story

Mahasweta Devi fictionalizes a true story which she comes to know through a tribal song. In an interview she said, "I know that area like the palm of my hand. I have seen the person I have called Mary Oraon.... I see her in Tohri market, bargaining for fruit and other produce, chewing *pan* [spiced betel-leaf], smoking *biri* [tobacco-leaf cigarettes], arguing and always getting the upper hand. Such a personality" (*Imaginary Maps*, "The Author in Conversation" xi).

In "The Hunt" Mahasweta Devi clearly designates looking as a crucial component of the story. At the outset the readers are forced to view Mary, the main female character, through another's eyes. "You wouldn't call her a tribal at first sight" (2). The passengers of the train "look at her" and she is described as a girl of eighteen, "tall, flat-featured 'with' light copper skin". Readers participate in this gaze in a complicated manner, as we are not initially sure that the passengers gazing at her are male or female. The lack of established gender of the passengers renders it impossible for readers to designate this gaze as male gaze. However, the question of physicality comes in as the subject of the gaze is attempting to understand its object on the level not more than skin deep. "At a distance she looks most seductive" (2). She becomes conscious of herself as the object of the gaze and "you see a strong message of rejection in her glance" (2).

Distance also plays an important role in the story. A binary-oppositional dichotomic relationship is presented which makes "The Hunt" a Postcolonial story. Characters in power actively engage in perpetuating the various types of distance. Distance is an affirmation and a manifestation of that power and serves as a tool used by those in power to exercise more control over their subordinates. These individuals, communities and nations are often depicted as powerless in nearly every aspect with their role in the power relationship having been forced upon them. Mary, the most capable cowherd, pastures Prasadji's cattle. She sells custard apple and guava and bargains with the whole sale fruit seller. We are told that the Dixons had twelve ayahs-servants-sweepers. But now it is Mary who alone dexterously keeps Prasadji's huge house clean in return for board and lodging, cloth and sundries and without any wage. Mrs. Prasad's apprehensions of losing such an able-bodied worker come to the fore when she suggests Bhikni to marry her gardener's son to Mary. This would help her to maintain the already established distance between the mainstream and the subaltern. Despite the fact that Mrs. Prasad enjoys no equal status with the male members of her family, she uses the only tool available to her in order to gain and exercise power over Bhikni and Mary and that is via her relationship with Prasadji. With her power, she tries not only to retain Mary but also

perpetuate power hierarchy leaving no scope for her social and economic improvement.

Bhikni who had seen and experienced the pains of starvation and bodily exploitation was ecstatically happy but Mary could easily analyze the hidden motive behind such a proposal. She clearly understood that her "Mistress Mother's" proposal was by no means an act of philanthropy. Contrarily, it was a step taken to keep her workers captive. Mary did not want to live the life of her mother or of her villagers. She resented a life without soap or oil or clean clothes. But that doesn't mean that she would like to become a mistress of Mrs. Prasad's brother. She wanted to live her life with dignity and that is why she curtly replies to Mrs. Prasad, "The Muslim says he'll marry. Your brother wanted only to keep me" (4).

Actually Mary's birth makes her both an insider and an outsider within the Oraon society. Though economically and socially well entrenched in her surroundings, she nevertheless, lives with an awareness of being 'different'. This sense of being different helps her manoeuvre a space where she can be herself and can make her own decisions without being encumbered by mores of the community. Nobody objects to her decision of marrying Jalim, a Muslim boy. A distance between her and her society at once sets in. This autonomy not only estranges her community from her at a cultural level but also renders her emotionally vacuous:

She sits at any Oraon house in the village, fries wheat cakes on a clay stove, eats with everyone. Just as she knows she 'll marry Jalim, she also knows that if she had resembled any Oraon girl- if her father had been Somra or Budhna or Mangla Oraon- the Oraons would not have let this marriage happen.

Because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father the Oraons don't think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her.

She would have rebelled if they did. She is unhappy that they don't. In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons. (5)

Mary's existence thus gets spatialized in a very complex way. Her 'outside status' within gendered enclosures of Oraons, in turn, makes her vulnerable to the gaze of the outsiders specially Tehsildar who symbolizes exploitative capitalist-feudal mainstream.

Mary Oraon appears formidable with her tall stature, her words and with her machete. She is strong, powerful, intelligent, humorous, generous, outspoken and respected. All these factors have given her physical appearance a certain power

which not only disproves the idea of domination of the male gaze, but it also clearly acquiesces to the idea that the woman who serves as the object of the gaze has the power-specifically power over the male gaze:

Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smoke from the other marketers, drinks tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one. (2)

And then we come to know that many “men had wanted to be her lover” (3). All the time Mary is aware of the gaze and this awareness of the male gaze fulfils the main objective of the gaze as Uttara Asha Coorlawala writes, “the gaze is situated somewhere between the eye and what is seen. Looking involves not simply the act of seeing, but also translating, interpreting, and an awareness that one is being seen” (19). Many a times Mary had reacted to these “outsiders” by lifting her machete for who “can tell that they wouldn’t leave her, like Bhikni was left with a baby in her belly?” (3) A deep sense of distrust pervades the mind of Mary. She doesn’t even trust Jalim who had saved her from Ratan Singh, a truck driver who in a drunken state had tried to carry her off.

The second part of “The Hunt” describes how Mary’s idyllic world is violated by the appearance of Tehsildar, a broker, who represents the ‘mainstream’. He was the fruit of Banwari’s labour. He had come to Kuruda to exploit the tribal communities and the forests in which they lived to make a profit. Ecological violence and the subsequent displacement of Adivasis register in the story as the destruction of the Sal forests and the profound loss of life and knowledge that this entails for subaltern communities. “Once there were animals in the forest,” the narrator says, “life was wild, the hunt game had meaning. Now the forest is empty, life wasted and drained, the hunt game meaningless. Only the day’s joy is real”(12). The character of Tehsildar Singh is depicted as a rapist not only for the ways in which he ravages the land- which he refers to as “virgin area” (7) – but also for the way in which he “hunts” and attempts to seduce Mary who he thinks can make his stay at Kuruda profitable.

If the land of Kuruda is surely “virgin” then Mary is a delicious “dish” in the eyes of Tehsildar Singh. Annette Kolodny in her book, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1985) stresses the predominant gendering of the land as female, by traditional male writers. They stress a parallel between the domination and subjugation of women and the exploitation and spoliation of land. The devastation of natural scene is often figured as the rape of a

virgin. In such a patriarchal thought, women are linked closer to nature and men are identified as being closer to culture. Nature and women, then are, both seen inferior to culture and men. Similarly, when the master/slave dualism is applied to colonizer/colonized, hierarchically the other in the dualism (nature, female, colonized) is constructed as inferior. The impact of such dualistic thinking, where hierarchies are set up between dominance and submission, is that "the inferiorized group...must internalize this inferiorization in its identity and collude in this low valuation, honouring the values of the centre, which form the dominant social values." (Plumwood 12) Therefore, the categories of culture, men, colonizer claim for themselves reason, rationality and universal humanity, and nature, female and colonized inherit for themselves primitivism, emotionality and animality.

Tehsildar is shown as possessing money and holding power. In this short story he represents a facet of a national body of a new elite class, which is complicit with older and wilder lineages of violent imperial exchanges, as epitomized earlier by Dixon. In "The Author in Conversation," Mahasweta Devi describes the real life Tehsildar in such words, "And that man was just like a Lakra, a wolf [...] the entire administration is behind him" (xii). When Tehsildar's gaze falls on timber plants grown in fifty acres of Prasadji's land his greed knows no bounds. "Why buy only Prasadji's trees? He'll buy all the trees of the area" (7). He considered the entire venture of felling trees highly profitable and made plans to buy trees every five year when some trees will be ready and decided to take the tree felling monopoly. He knows perfectly well how to get his work done.

"The local political worthies, local police, local administration is bribed. The railways cooperate by carrying this illegally felled timber" ("Preface" xii). The train now stops at Murhai and if needed the train will stop at Kuruda too. He gave Banwari a transistor and a rupee per tree in secret. He also gives box of sweets to Prasadji in order to keep him happy. But he would pay only twelve annas and eight annas to tribal men and women for trimming branches and carrying the pieces of timber to the truck. The exploitation of the tribal people and the land would leave him with a wide margin of profit. Tehsildar is able to yield power over the marginalized through the practice of gaze. His gaze signifies dominance and suppression due to the fact that he is the member of the dominant society. His money grants him the power to gaze and in turn control the marginalized.

Tehsildar's gaze also extends over Mary when she brings a cup of tea for him and his instant utterance, "Wow! What a dish? In these woods?" (8) hints at the trouble that is about to come in the life of Mary Oraon. In fact a close association could be

drawn between Mary Oraon and timber plants. Just as Mary is the product of the seed planted by Dixon in the womb of Bhikni, timber is the produce of Kuruda land planted by Dixons long back. And when Tehsildar's exploitative gaze falls on both, a threat to their existence is inevitable.

Mary devises different ways to resist the mainstream vandalization of her space and eroticization of her body. Initially she seeks to fight the erotic gaze of Tehsildar Singh by revealing the predatory economics of his brokering deal to Prasadji and the villagers. At night she tells Prasadji that the "bastard tricked" him and that he "took all the profit. Everyone from Tohri to Chhipador is laughing" (8). She even tells the Kuruda elders that the wages offered by Tehsildar is nothing. This she could say with great command because she was the regular contact and bridge between the outside world of Tohri and Kuruda.

Tehsildar trains his gaze to track and stalk Mary. He approaches her with a preconceived notion. She becomes extremely conscious of the voyeur who keeps watching her. Instead of clinging to male power for protection she returns the gaze. In many cultures the power of evil eye is warded off with the representation of an eye that stares back, performing the same apotropaic function of intimidating the "Evil Spirit." Such defiance is surely unsettling, disturbing the pleasure the male subject takes in gazing and the hierarchical relations by which he asserts his dominance. Through Mary, the text paradoxically inscribes the dynamics involved in the gaze and articulates the psychological fact that when a woman looks back she asserts her existence as a subject, her place outside the position of object to which the male gaze relegates her by which it defines her as "woman."

At first she attempts to repel his advances with verbal rebuff and threat. But this does not work with Tehsildar who is physically and economically powerful than her. Her verbal rebuffs were seen as a mere posturing by Tehsildar. In order to nip the impending bodily violence that lurks behind his advances, she even swapped her professional duty with her mother. But the grazing grounds in the forest instead of insulating her from him, makes her accessible to his passions. After being hunted, stalked and continually assaulted by Tehsildar's approaches, Mary turns Tehsildar's own narrative back on itself, and instead hunts him. She finally exploits the cultural resources at hand to counter the animalistic appropriation of her body by the mainstream exploitative agency. Very strategically she exploits the ancient tribal ritual of *Jani Parab*, into an act of contemporary resistance to outwit and kill her potential rapist. She seduces Tehsildar, invites him to meet her in secret and through this encounter, stages his murder and death. In the last episode Mary's murder of

Tehsildar is narrated through highly sexualized imagery. Mahasweta Devi describes the event thus:

Mary caresses Tehsildar's face, gives him love bites on the lips. There's fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? Now? Yes, becomes an animal. [...] Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Tehsildar is laughing, Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers. (16)

The almost incantatory description of the act of killing a beast/demon sanctifies the violence inherent in it into a legitimate act of purification. The act not only empowers by tapping the latent feminine energy/*shakti*, it also restores the order.

What Mahasweta Devi tries to emphasize is Mary's agency, including her sexual agency, through this scene. The machete that Mary lifts and lowers, and that she deploys in the murder, is earlier described not so much as an external tool but as an integral part of her body, an entity that is "hers by right." Similarly, the calculation, precision and strength with which Mary conducts the murder is foreshadowed by earlier descriptions of the agency Mary exerts through her body: she has a "hard perfect frame" and a "razor sharp mind" that incites fear in those who know her (4).

This characterization of the half tribal girl runs counter to patriarchal, colonial and nationalist notions of women's modesty, respectability, passivity and sentimentality. Her actions challenge precisely those values that are either idealized, enacted or embodied by femininity and sexuality. Like many of Mahasweta Devi's subaltern women characters—Dopdi, Dhowli, Sanichari—Mary refuses to be appropriated by, assimilated into or fixed within normative ideas about Third World and tribal women's shame, embarrassment, fear or victimization.

Mary's murder of Tehsildar, and her transformation from the hunted to the one who hunts, or from the object of the gaze to the subject takes place in the context of the Festival of Justice which is being celebrated by the Oraon women. Mahasweta Devi explains the significance of this festival and the ritual in the preface: "The tribals have this animal hunting festival in Bihar. It used to be the Festival of Justice. After the hunt, the elders would bring offenders to justice. They would not go to the police. In the Santali language it was the Law-Bir. Law is the Law, and *bir* is forest" (xi). In the story, Mary deliberately arranges to meet with Tehsildar on the day of the hunt and stages her conflict with him in terms of many different, though related, sets of struggles: the struggle over the erosion of the forest, the exploitation of the land and of the tribal people, the loss of food, lives and knowledge that this has

entailed, the gendered and sexualized dimensions of such loss and exploitation, and her own particular experiences of violence, assault, and threat in the midst of these forces.

Mary re-appropriates the very languages, meanings and significances of the hunt, especially as these have been eroded through centuries of imperial violence and onslaught. In doing so she launches a significant resistance to, and marks the failure of, imperialism's project, by claiming these as her own to interpret and direct. Mary stands for the variously gendered and sexualized silences and denials upon which imperialist violence is built. She also stands for those who exert pressure on imperialism's seams and whose subjectivities it cannot fully assimilate or co-opt.

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## AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Anjani Sharma, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Deoghar College, SKM University, Jharkhand, India. She has contributed articles in a number of national and international journals.