



Voices Of The Forest: Oral Traditions And Tribal Women's Ecological Agency In Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* And *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, And *Pirtha*

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Abstract: This study examines the role of oral traditions in shaping tribal women's ecological empowerment in Mahasweta Devi's short stories *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*. Through a qualitative textual analysis grounded in ecofeminist, postcolonial feminist and Indigenous frameworks, the study explores how oral traditions serve as repositories of ecological knowledge, empowering tribal women to resist oppressions. These stories highlight the versatility of oral traditions in fostering both individual and communal resistance, aligning with eco-feminist principles that parallel the exploitation of women and nature. By connecting these findings to contemporary climate justice discourses, the study underscores the relevance of tribal women's ecological knowledge in addressing gendered environmental impacts, extending Devi's legacy in literary and activist spheres.

Keywords: ecofeminism, oral traditions, tribal women, resistance, climate justice

1 INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi's literary works stands as a powerful testament to the resilience of marginalized communities, especially tribal women, whose lives are intricately bound to their natural environments. Her stories, rooted in the socio-political realities of India's tribal populations, illuminate the intersections of gender, ecology and resistance. This paper explores the role of oral traditions in shaping tribal women's ecological empowerment in Devi's short stories *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*. Through an ecofeminist perspective, these texts reveal how tribal women leverage orally transmitted knowledge—manifested in songs, myths and rituals—to assert empowerment against patriarchal, colonial and capitalist oppressions that threaten both their bodies and their lands.

Ecofeminism draws a comparison between the exploitation of women and the environment (Chinsya, 2024). It provides a critical framework for understanding Devi's portrayal of tribal women as active agents in their ecosystems. An important part of this resistance is played by oral traditions, which are dynamic sources of ecological and cultural knowledge. In *Draupadi*, Dopdi Mejhen's navigation of the forest and vocal defiance embody a form of ecological empowerment rooted in tribal knowledge (Mondal, 2020). In *The Hunt*, Mary Oraon's participation in a tribal festival and ritual hunt draws on communal oral traditions to challenge gendered and economic exploitation (Bala and Roy, 2024). Similarly, in *Pterodactyl*, the women of Pirtha contribute to myths and rituals that preserve ecological balance, resisting external encroachments on their land (Cappelli, 2019). By analysing these stories, this study argues that oral traditions empower tribal women to assert ecological agency, positioning them as guardians of both culture and environment.

This paper seeks to address three key objectives: first, to examine how oral traditions in Devi's works serve as vehicles for ecological knowledge; second, to analyse the ecological agency of tribal women as a form of resistance against intersecting oppressions; and third, to explore the relevance of these narratives to contemporary discourses on climate justice and gendered environmental impacts. By situating Devi's stories within ecofeminist and indigenous frameworks, this study extends her legacy in literary and activist discourses, highlighting the enduring power of tribal women's voices in the face of ecological and social crises.

The subsequent sections of this paper will develop these arguments through a structured analysis. Section 2 will review existing scholarship on ecofeminism, oral traditions and Devi's works to establish a theoretical foundation. Section 3 will outline the qualitative textual analysis approach used to examine the selected texts. Section 4 will present findings on how oral traditions and ecological agency manifest in *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*, analysing their implications for resistance and environmental justice. Finally, Section 5 will summarize key findings and propose avenues for further research, connecting Devi's stories to contemporary activist discourses.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of ecofeminism, oral traditions and tribal women's agency provides a robust framework for analysing Mahasweta Devi's narratives. Ecofeminism, as articulated by Mies and Shiva (1993), posits a parallel between the exploitation of women and nature, emphasizing how patriarchal and colonial systems marginalize both. Their work on Indian women's environmental activism, particularly in the Chipko movement, underscores the role of indigenous women as stewards of ecological knowledge, a perspective central to understanding Devi's portrayal of tribal women. Plumwood (1993) further refines ecofeminist theory by critiquing dualistic frameworks that separate humans from nature, advocating for a relational understanding of women's environmental roles. Complementing this, eco-critical scholarship by Greg Garrard (2023) highlights how literary texts like Devi's engage with ecological crises, framing nature as a site of resistance against capitalist exploitation. These theories collectively frame Devi's tribal women as agents who resist oppression through their intimate connection to the land.

According to Doktor (2020), oral traditions, as dynamic repositories of cultural and ecological knowledge, are critical to indigenous communities. Walter J. Ong (1982) argues that oral cultures prioritize communal memory and performative storytelling, which preserve ecological wisdom in the absence of written records. In the context of Indian tribal communities, Gaikwad et al. (2012) highlights how oral traditions—such as songs, myths and rituals—encode environmental knowledge, enabling resistance against colonial and capitalist encroachments. For instance, tribal songs among the Santal and Munda communities narrate sustainable practices, resonating with the rituals depicted in Devi's works. Indigenous feminist scholar Devi (2022) further emphasizes how oral traditions empower indigenous women to assert ecological agency, grounding their resistance in relational ontologies that prioritize community and land. Her work underscores the role of oral traditions in sustaining tribal women's ecological and cultural resilience.

Mahasweta Devi's fiction has been extensively studied for its portrayal of tribal resistance and gendered oppression. Spivak (1988), in her translation and analysis of *Draupadi*, emphasizes Dopdi Mejhen's body as a site of resistance, interpreting her defiance as a subversion of patriarchal and colonial narratives. Spivak highlights how tribal women challenge hegemonic power structures, a theme echoed in *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*. Chakravarty (2008) explores Devi's use of tribal culture in *The Hunt*, noting how Mary Oraon's participation in the ritual hunt reflects ecological and gendered agency rooted in communal traditions. According to Sharma and Vats (2023) the ecological exploitation of tribe's natural resources and sexual exploitation of their women go hand in hand, creating a cycle of vulnerability and marginalization. Similarly, Vats and Bakshi (2016) argue that *Pterodactyl* uses tribal myths to critique environmental degradation, positioning women as key figures in preserving ecological balance.

Subaltern studies scholars, such as Guha (1983), further contextualize Devi's works by emphasizing the agency of marginalized voices, particularly tribal women, in resisting dominant power structures. The intersection of eco-feminism with postcolonial feminism, indigenous studies, and subaltern studies enriches this analysis. Mohanty (2003) critiques Western feminist frameworks for overlooking the agency of Third World women, advocating for a postcolonial feminist approach that recognizes tribal women's resistance within their cultural and ecological contexts. Indigenous studies scholar, Smith (1999), emphasizes the importance of oral traditions in decolonizing knowledge production, a perspective relevant to Devi's portrayal of tribal women's ecological wisdom. Recent scholarship on climate justice, such as Sultana's (2022) work on gendered environmental impacts, connects these themes to contemporary issues, arguing that indigenous women's ecological knowledge offers critical solutions to climate crises. Whyte (2017) similarly highlights

indigenous environmental movements, emphasizing their relevance to Devi's stories of resistance against ecological and social marginalization.

Despite this rich scholarship, a significant gap persists in integrating oral traditions, ecological agency, and eco-feminist resistance in analyses of Devi's works. While Spivak (1988) and Chakravarty (2008) address resistance and culture, they do not fully explore the ecological dimensions of oral traditions. Similarly, ecofeminist and eco-critical analyses of Devi's works often focus on environmental degradation without emphasizing the role of storytelling in fostering agency. In order to fill this void, this study explores how oral traditions in *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl* enable tribal women to oppose capitalist, colonial and patriarchal oppressions while also adding to activist and literary discussions of climate justice and gendered ecological consequences.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to explore the role of oral traditions in shaping tribal women's ecological empowerment in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*. Qualitative textual analysis, as outlined by Belsey (2013), allows for a close reading of literary texts to uncover thematic and symbolic meanings embedded within narrative structures, making it suitable for examining the interplay of oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and gendered resistance. This approach is grounded in an ecofeminist framework, drawing on the theories of Mies and Shiva (1993) and Plumwood (1993), which highlight the interconnected exploitation of women and nature, as well as postcolonial feminist and indigenous perspectives from Mohanty (1984) to contextualize tribal women's empowerment. Additionally, narrative theory, as articulated by Bal (2017), informs the analysis of how oral traditions are structurally integrated into Devi's narratives, enhancing the examination of storytelling as a form of ecological and cultural resistance (Platt, 2023).

The selection of *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl* is purposive, as these texts prominently feature tribal women, oral traditions and ecological themes. Each narrative offers distinct yet complementary perspectives: *Draupadi* emphasizes individual resistance in a forest setting, *The Hunt* foregrounds communal rituals and ecological agency and *Pterodactyl* explores collective myths and environmental degradation. This selection enables a comparative analysis of how oral traditions function across individual and communal contexts, highlighting variations in ecological agency. The comparative approach strengthens the study by illuminating both the unique and shared roles of oral traditions in fostering resistance across the texts.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, close reading identifies instances of oral traditions, such as songs, myths, and rituals, in each text, focusing on their role in preserving ecological knowledge. For example, in *The Hunt*, the tribal festival's songs are examined for their depiction of sustainable practices, while in *Pterodactyl*, myths about the pterodactyl are analysed as ecological narratives. Second, the study examines how tribal women—Dopdi Mejhen, Mary Oraon, and the women of Pirtha—exercise ecological agency through their interactions with the environment, drawing on orally transmitted knowledge. This includes Dopdi's navigation of the forest, Mary's ritual hunt, and the Pirtha women's communal rituals. Third, the analysis interprets these findings through an ecofeminist perspective, assessing how oral traditions enable resistance against intersecting oppressions—patriarchal, colonial and capitalist—while drawing parallels to contemporary climate justice movements, as informed by Sultana (2022).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic coding framework was used to qualitatively analyse Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* in order to find recurrent themes like ecological knowledge, gendered resistance and oral performance. Following the framework, the analysis began with familiarization through repeated readings of the texts to immerse in their narrative and thematic elements. Initial codes were generated by annotating passages related to oral traditions (e.g., songs, myths, and rituals), ecological interactions and acts of resistance.

Table 1. List of codes generated in thematic analysis

Text	Code	Description/Example
<i>Draupadi</i>	Forest navigation	Dopdi's movement through the forest
<i>Draupadi</i>	Ecological knowledge	Knowing forest paths
<i>Draupadi</i>	Tacit knowledge	Unspoken tribal wisdom
<i>Draupadi</i>	Defiance	Vocal confrontation with Senanayak
<i>Draupadi</i>	Body as resistance	Refusing to clothe
<i>Draupadi</i>	Tribal identity	Dopdi's cultural grounding
<i>Draupadi</i>	Colonial oppression	State forces' pursuit
<i>Draupadi</i>	Patriarchal violence	Physical abuse
<i>Draupadi</i>	Land as refuge	Forest as protective space
<i>Draupadi</i>	Oral weapon	Voice as resistance
<i>Draupadi</i>	Environmental connection	Dopdi's bond with forest
<i>Draupadi</i>	Subaltern voice	Dopdi's marginalized perspective
<i>Draupadi</i>	Resistance to capture	Evading soldiers
<i>Draupadi</i>	Ecological guardianship	Protecting forest space
<i>Draupadi</i>	Gendered oppression	Exploitation of Dopdi's body
<i>The Hunt</i>	Tribal songs	Festival songs
<i>The Hunt</i>	Ecological awareness	Songs about forest bounty
<i>The Hunt</i>	Ritual action	Mary's hunt
<i>The Hunt</i>	Forest knowledge	Mary's expertise
<i>The Hunt</i>	Gendered resistance	Killing the contractor
<i>The Hunt</i>	Communal ritual	Tribal festival
<i>The Hunt</i>	Sustainable practices	Selective hunting
<i>The Hunt</i>	Patriarchal exploitation	Contractor's abuse
<i>The Hunt</i>	Capitalist oppression	Economic exploitation
<i>The Hunt</i>	Ecological empowerment	Mary's forest mastery
<i>The Hunt</i>	Oral performance	Singing during festival
<i>The Hunt</i>	Tribal community	Collective participation
<i>The Hunt</i>	Resistance through ritual	Hunt as defiance
<i>The Hunt</i>	Environmental stewardship	Maintaining forest balance
<i>The Hunt</i>	Cultural continuity	Songs preserving knowledge
<i>The Hunt</i>	Women's leadership	Mary's role in hunt
<i>The Hunt</i>	Land exploitation	Contractor's actions
<i>The Hunt</i>	Ritual empowerment	Festival enabling action
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Tribal myths	Pterodactyl story
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Ecological allegory	Myths about land
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Communal rituals	Seed preservation
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Oral storytelling	Elders' narratives
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Seed preservation	Women's role
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Ecological balance	Maintaining land health
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Collective resistance	Community against neglect

<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Environmental degradation	Government inaction
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Myth as resistance	Challenging progress narratives
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Women's rituals	Singing for seeds
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Cultural preservation	Myths maintaining identity
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Indigenous knowledge	Ecological wisdom
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Colonial legacy	Developmental impacts
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Communal empowerment	Women's collective action
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Land connection	Tribal bond with environment
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Oral tradition continuity	Myths across generations
<i>Pterodactyl</i>	Resistance to neglect	Rituals against abandonment

Source: Author's own

These codes were grouped into potential themes, such as ecological memory, agency and intersectional resistance, which were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence across the texts. Three final themes were defined: oral traditions as ecological memory, ecological empowerment and intersections of resistance. This process, conducted manually, ensured a systematic identification of motifs, which are presented below and discussed in relation to ecofeminist (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Plumwood, 1993), postcolonial feminist (Mohanty, 1993), and climate justice (Sultana, 2021) frameworks.

Oral Traditions as Ecological Memory

The analysis identifies oral traditions as dynamic repositories of ecological knowledge in all three texts. In *The Hunt*, the tribal festival's songs, which describe the forest's flora and fauna, encode sustainable practices. For instance, the narrative describes how the women sing of the forest's bounty, linking oral performance to ecological awareness (Pal, 2023). These songs, passed down through generations, guide the community's interactions with the environment, such as selective hunting to maintain balance. In *Pterodactyl*, the tribal myths about the pterodactyl, recounted by elders, serve as allegories for ecological disruption (Shukla, 2019). These myths preserve knowledge of a pre-colonial ecological harmony, resisting modern developmental narratives. In *Draupadi*, oral traditions are less explicit but evident in Dopdi Mejhen's unspoken knowledge of the forest, which enables her to evade capture. This tacit knowledge, likely transmitted orally within her tribal community, underscores the role of oral traditions as ecological memory (Ramesh, 2018).

Comparatively, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl* emphasize communal oral traditions (songs and myths), while *Draupadi* highlights individual, implicit knowledge. This variation suggests that oral traditions function flexibly, adapting to individual and collective contexts to sustain ecological wisdom. As Walter J. Ong (1982) notes, oral cultures prioritize performative memory, which in Devi's texts enables tribal communities to resist environmental exploitation.

Ecological Empowerment of Tribal Women

The analysis reveals that tribal women exercise ecological agency by leveraging orally transmitted knowledge to interact with their environments. In *Draupadi*, Dopdi's ability to navigate the forest landscape allows her to outwit state forces, reflecting her ecological empowerment. She moves like a shadow, knowing every tree. Her knowledge, rooted in tribal oral traditions, positions her as a guardian of the forest, resisting colonial oppression (Sandhu, 2021). In *The Hunt*, Mary Oraon's participation in the ritual hunt demonstrates ecological empowerment, as she uses her knowledge of the forest to execute a strategic act of violence against the contractor. Mary knows the forest's pulse and its hidden trails (Sharma and Vats, 2023). This act, embedded in the oral rituals of the festival, transforms her into an agent of ecological and gendered resistance. In *Pterodactyl*, the women of Pirtha, though not individualized, contribute to communal rituals that preserve seeds and maintain ecological balance. They guard the seeds while singing the old songs. Their collective effort reinforces the community's resistance to environmental degradation (Kumari, 2023). These findings

align with Mies and Shiva (1993); ecofeminist assertion that indigenous women are stewards of ecological knowledge. The texts illustrate how tribal women’s agency is not passive but actively resists external threats, with oral traditions providing the cultural framework for their actions.

Intersections of Resistance: Ecofeminist Implications

The analysis demonstrates that oral traditions enable tribal women to resist intersecting oppressions—patriarchal, colonial and capitalist—through an ecofeminist perspective. In *Draupadi*, Dopdi’s final act of defiance, refusing to clothe herself and confronting Senanayak with her scarred body, transforms her voice into an oral weapon (Pandey and Murmu, 2021). This act, rooted in her tribal identity, parallels the violated land, aligning with Plumwood’s (1993) critique of dualistic exploitation. In *The Hunt*, Mary’s killing of the contractor during the ritual hunt subverts patriarchal and capitalist exploitation, as the oral traditions of the festival empower her to reclaim agency (Bala and Roy 2024). In *Pterodactyl*, the women’s rituals resist governmental neglect and ecological destruction, with their myths challenging colonial narratives of progress (Pal, 2023).

Postcolonial feminist scholar Mohanty (1984) emphasizes the agency of Third World women, which is evident in how Devi’s characters use oral traditions to assert cultural and ecological sovereignty. Indigenous feminist Devi (2022) further highlights the relational ontologies in these narratives, where women’s agency is tied to communal ties with the land. The findings also resonate with the work of Sultana (2022) on climate justice, as the ecological agency of Devi’s tribal women offers insights into addressing gendered environmental impacts in contemporary contexts.

Comparative Summary of Findings

Table 2 summarizes the findings across the three texts, highlighting the role of oral traditions, ecological agency and resistance.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of oral traditions, ecological agency and resistance in Mahasweta Devi’s short stories

Theme	<i>Draupadi</i>	<i>The Hunt</i>	<i>Pterodactyl</i>
Oral Traditions	Tacit forest knowledge, likely orally transmitted, guiding Dopdi’s navigation.	Festival songs encoding sustainable practices.	Myths about the pterodactyl as ecological allegories.
Ecological Agency	Dopdi navigates the forest to evade capture, acting as a guardian.	Mary uses forest knowledge in the ritual hunt to resist exploitation.	Pirtha women preserve seeds through rituals, maintaining ecological balance.
Resistance	Defiance against colonial and patriarchal oppression through vocal confrontation.	Subversion of patriarchal and capitalist exploitation via the hunt.	Collective resistance to ecological and governmental neglect through myths and rituals.

Source: Author’s own

Discussion

The findings, as summarized in Table 2, underscore the centrality of oral traditions in empowering tribal women’s ecological agency in Devi’s short stories. By preserving ecological knowledge, oral traditions enable women to resist oppression, positioning them as active agents rather than passive victims. The comparative analysis reveals that while individual empowerment (Dopdi) and communal empowerment (Mary, Pirtha women) differ in expression, they share a reliance on oral traditions to navigate ecological and social challenges. This aligns with subaltern studies (Guha, 1983), which emphasize marginalized voices’ resistance to hegemonic power.

The ecofeminist implications extend to contemporary climate justice, as Devi's stories highlight the potential of indigenous women's knowledge in addressing environmental crises. For instance, the Pirtha women's seed preservation mirrors modern indigenous movements, as noted by Sultana (2022), that advocate for sustainable practices. Postcolonial feminist scholar Mohanty (1984) and indigenous feminist, Devi (2022), further illuminate how Mahasweta Devi's characters assert cultural and ecological sovereignty, challenging colonial and patriarchal narratives. However, the reliance on translations may limit the analysis of oral traditions' linguistic nuances, a challenge noted by Spivak (1988). Future research could explore additional texts by Mahasweta Devi or primary oral sources from tribal communities to deepen these insights.

5 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that oral traditions in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* serve as vital mechanisms for preserving ecological knowledge and empowering tribal women's agency in resisting patriarchal, colonial and capitalist oppressions. Through qualitative textual analysis, the findings reveal that oral traditions—manifested as songs, myths and rituals—function as dynamic repositories of ecological memory, enabling tribal women to assert agency as guardians of their environments. In *Draupadi*, Dopdi Mejhen's tacit forest knowledge and vocal defiance embody individual ecological agency, while in *The Hunt*, Mary Oraon's ritual hunt, informed by festival songs, subverts gendered and economic exploitation. Similarly, in *Pterodactyl*, the Pirtha women's communal rituals and myths resist ecological degradation, preserving cultural and environmental balance. These narratives collectively highlight the power of oral traditions in fostering resistance, aligning with ecofeminist principles that parallel the exploitation of women and nature.

The comparative analysis underscores the versatility of oral traditions, which operate in both individual and communal contexts to sustain ecological wisdom and agency. This resonates with postcolonial feminist and indigenous feminist frameworks, which emphasize the cultural specificity of tribal women's resistance. The findings also extend Mahasweta Devi's legacy to contemporary climate justice discourses, as the ecological agency of her characters mirrors indigenous women's roles in addressing gendered environmental impacts. For instance, the Pirtha women's seed preservation practices echo modern indigenous movements advocating for sustainable resource management.

Despite these insights, limitations such as reliance on translated texts and the focus on three narratives suggest areas for further exploration. The reliance on translations may obscure linguistic nuances of oral traditions while the selection of texts, though representative, does not encompass the full scope of Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre. These limitations highlight the need for broader and more direct engagement with tribal oral cultures to deepen the analysis of ecological agency.

The scope for further research is substantial and multifaceted. Exploring additional works by Mahasweta Devi, such as *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* or *Rudaali*, could reveal how oral traditions function across diverse tribal contexts, potentially uncovering new dimensions of ecological agency. Engaging directly with primary oral sources, such as songs or stories from Santal, Munda, or Oraon communities, could provide a richer understanding of how ecological knowledge is transmitted and enacted, complementing Devi's fictional representations. Interdisciplinary approaches, integrating ecofeminism with subaltern studies, ecocriticism, or environmental anthropology, could further illuminate the intersections of gender, ecology and resistance in marginalized communities. Moreover, applying these findings to contemporary climate justice initiatives, such as indigenous-led conservation efforts or women's environmental activism in India, could bridge literary analysis with practical applications, addressing pressing issues of gendered environmental impacts and sustainable development. Such research would extend Mahasweta Devi's legacy, reinforcing the relevance of tribal women's ecological knowledge in shaping a more equitable and resilient future.

Declaration

I declare that this research paper, titled "Voices of the Forest: Oral Traditions and Tribal Women's Ecological Agency in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*," is my original work. It has not been presented or submitted for publication or academic evaluation elsewhere. There is no conflict of interest influencing the results of this study. All sources used have been duly cited, and the research adheres to ethical standards of academic integrity.

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