

Contextualising Commodification of Water and Human Existence: Violence, Resistance and Agency in Mahasweta Devi's *Water*

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Abstract:

This paper contextualises the political existence of marginalised people represented in Mahasweta Devi's *Water*, who live under an economic commodity of water. By narrating these political-economic narratives in the context of commodification as resource politics, the play represents how it has transformed human existence and their social relationships. By giving a close textual reading, the paper traces how the people of marginalised communities are affected by the commodification of water and how its consequences, like scarcity of water, restructure power, exclusion and resistance, revealing inequalities among the communities and their division based on caste and class controlled by economic forces and politically motivated people. This paper contextualises exploitative systems of water as a material resource, making water the centre of power that excludes and builds a circle of resistance among marginalised communities. The study reveals the powerful literary intervention that challenges the commercialisation of essential resources and calls for a more humane and equitable approach to environmental governance. In the end, the study shows how Devi's tragic story turns the problem of water commercialisation into a broader analysis of survival, existence, and social justice in modern society.

Keywords: Existence politics, Commercialisation, Commodification, Ecocriticism, Social inequality, Survival politics

Introduction

Water is an important resource for human civilisation, essential to survival and the development of any society. Peter H. Gleick argues that "access to a basic water requirement is a fundamental human right"(487). A lot of literary texts focus on the vitality of water because "water is part of the commons, a public trust and a fundamental human right" (Barlow 9). Without it, there is no community formation, and throughout history, it has served as a vital common resource for all. However, the minds of capitalists are driven towards economic benefits and the development of new concepts like neoliberal development, which has reduced water to a commodity, as W.H. Auden reminds us that

“thousands have lived without love, not one without water” (38). There are numerous policies to control water for profit. This change has sparked a lot of debate among environmentalists who strive for justice, and they want water to be equally distributed among everyone in communities by implementing rationing systems. The commodification of water has become a concern of present-day politics. However, it is a serious issue in developing nations where water distribution remains uneven today. Water in India is regarded as a serious environmental concern, and is interconnected with the interface of class, caste and power. These reflect that there are inequalities prevailing in society, and they are the factors determining who should receive resources and who should be denied, revealing the powers of political and economic systems.

Many writers examine these issues of inequality. In India, Mahasweta Devi takes a focal point, describing the lives of communities belonging to tribal and marginalised groups. Through her play *Water*, she represents a society in which water is not a common resource for all; it is commodified by power and controlled by a few capitalists. This play reveals the experiences of the selected people and how they are excluded from the mainstream and controlled by an exploitative system. She narrates the transformation of water, a natural object, into an economic commodity whose distribution is not based on human needs but is restricted by the power structure. Governed not by human need but by structures of power.

This paper contextualises the existence of marginalised people represented in Mahasweta Devi's *Water*, who live under an economic commodity of water. People's survival depends on the availability of water and on their ability to control it by working hard to secure it. When water is denied, it shows how they are treated in society without dignity and how they are marginalised based on their agency and lack of social participation. This paper analyses the commodification of water in the play *Water* through the positioning of the political environment under the two concepts of Marxist theories: i) Commodification, and ii) Subaltern Studies. It underlines the importance of water and how it functions as a tool of economic exploitation and political control. She explores these issues extensively in the play and explains how people try to resist collective struggle and find solutions to social exclusion.

Literature Review

Most of Mahasweta Devi's literary works have focused on themes such as resistance, marginalisation, subalternity, and environmental exploitation. Her works traverse and engage with the ideas of Marxists and feminists. They fit within frameworks of subalternity to highlight how these frameworks change power structures, reshaping the lives of oppressed communities. Several scholars have examined her representation, focusing on social inequality in her narrative. However, little work has been done, particularly on the commodification of water and its implications for existence against the backdrop of resource politics.

Critical studies on her commitment towards the representation and portrayal of her communities state that those who have been excluded from historical and political narratives. Spivak remarks in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* that her voice and narration mostly focus on subalterns and their experiences. Her narration exposes exploitation of the same by demonstrating the agency of marginalised groups (Spivak 308–12). This viewpoint provides a foundation for understanding how her play *Water* presents deprivation not simply as material suffering but as a condition shaped by unequal power relations.

Scholars from Subaltern Studies have likewise examined how direct access to social and economic resources, such as water, becomes a focal point in the production of inequality. Guha and Spivak insisted that governing institutions often silence marginalised communities and take complete control of the conditions under which they exist (35–41). Their arguments about the play *Water* clearly state that common resources become inseparable from the questioning of social identity, survival, and dignity. Through Environmental and ecocritical approaches, one can understand Devi's treatment of water and how it acts as a political resource. To consider how environmental degradation affects vulnerable populations, Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" suggests that the degradation creates an impact that remains difficult to recognise because of its gradual nature. (Nixon 2–6). Sathikulameen et al. contend that ecological imperialism operates through forms of slow violence that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. It is relevant to the play where scarcity of water and deprivation emerge through social and institutional processes rather than sudden environmental devastation. The play describes how water is restricted to the use of a few, how that affects social relationships, and how it intensifies marginalisation.

Research scholars and critics in the field of Political ecology seek the relationship between environmental resources and systems of governance. Robbins indicates that environmental inequalities are produced by economic and political arrangements rather than by ecological conditions alone (13–18). This kind of approach enables a deeper understanding of how water scarcity in Devi's *Water* reflects structures of ownership and authority. There is considerable focus in environmental and development studies on the commodification of water in marginalised communities. While writing on the privatisation of water, Vandana Shiva argues that water as a commodity transforms from a collective right into a profit-making business (*Water Wars* 20–25). Her thoughts and narratives are similar and connected with Mahasweta Devi's representation of water, which narrates it as a system of exclusion and domination. Similarly, Selvaraj et al. argue that "food serves as a powerful emblem of cultural identity and represents more than mere sustenance" (526). Harvey's remarks on neoliberal economic practices show how common resources like water are driven into systems of accumulation and control under authoritative control (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 159–65). While the studies mentioned provide vital theoretical insights into environmental exploitation and social inequality, relatively few scholars have directly

examined Water through the lens of commodification and resource politics. Therefore, this paper addresses this gap by analysing how Mahasweta Devi takes Water and transforms it into a literary and political symbol that reflects broader concerns of survival, existence, peace and social justice.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the relationship between environmental resources and social power, Political ecology can serve as the theoretical framework for analysis, examining how economic and political forces restrict full access to natural resources such as water in this context and how this affects environmental outcomes. Instead of focusing on eco-related problems as purely ecological phenomena, the framework emphasises the systems of institutions, power relations, and economic structures as a whole. In the context of water as a resource, this framework helps explain how scarcity is socially produced and how it dominates the minds of marginalised people. With reference to the issue of water scarcity in the play, it does not arise entirely from conditions of the environment; it results from responsibilities of ownership and exclusion that regulate access to common resources. Because the unequal distribution of water mirrors broader patterns ingrained in social and political processes, inequality is clearly visible. The framework also emphasises the relationship between environmental injustice and social marginalisation. Communities that have little political or economic clout frequently bear the brunt of environmental degradation. The play by Devi clearly portrays how these marginalised groups illustrate this dynamic, revealing how resource inequality becomes a mechanism of social control.

Commodification of Water and Human Existence

The play *Water* presents water as a commodity that determines the conditions of human existence. In traditional understanding, water is a natural resource available for the collective use of any society. The writer challenges this claim by demonstrating how economic and political interests shape access to water. The complete transformation of water into a commodity basically changes the relationship between every individual and their environment. Water is an important shared resource that confers ownership and privilege, resulting in exclusion. The commodification of water creates a situation in which survival instincts themselves become conditional upon access to controlled resources. Communities in any region that seek ownership or authority over water sources experience core insecurity and vulnerability. In the play, the village women sing to describe the physical decay of human existence due to the artificial scarcity created by the landowner who exploited the commodity: Life wrinkles up, with all the water held captive by Santosh like a pack of whores. There's none to care for us, for our hearts bleeding. Give us water! Water, water, water!. (Devi 4)

The play *Water* explains that the denial of water is not merely a denial of a physical necessity but also a denial of social existence itself. Every situation of inability to access water disturbs every aspect of daily life, including health, labour, mobility, peace and social participation. Portrayal of water by the writer as a symbol of life, whose commodification

represents the commercialisation of existence itself. It is evident from the following lament from Phulmani, who shares the existence threat: We die without water, our little ones go thirsty, our women dig at the sands of the river for a cupful of water. Who'd play such a cruel game with the water that we need to quench our thirst? (Devi 10)

Phulmani's lament highlights how the governmental exploitation of this vital resource drives people into excruciating, desperate efforts merely to survive, illustrating the existential threat posed by water monopolisation. Water becomes economically controlled when it is necessary for survival, and human life is reduced to a question of market relations. Every person becomes reliant on others with the authority to control access. Such reliance reduces the ability of marginalised groups to assert their rights collectively and strengthens existing dominant structures. The play also focuses on the psychological consequences of resource deprivation. The communities' constant anxiety about accessing water creates fear and uncertainty among them. The internal and external fights for survival consume the energy of marginalised communities, restricting their full ability to challenge powerful oppressive systems. Through this portrayal, she demonstrates that the commodification of resources affects not only people's material conditions but also their emotional and social well-being.

Furthermore, it completely reshapes social relationships. The traditional ways of support and collective resource sharing are replaced by competitive structures governed by scarcity and control. Individuals, families and communities are compelled to negotiate access within unequal systems of power, which they can only fully accept and submit to. Consequently, water becomes a determining factor in the organisation of social life, influencing relationships among individuals, families, and communities. Through this play, the writer reveals how economic processes enter profoundly into everyday existence. Water no longer serves only as a natural resource; it instead serves as a means of perpetuating social injustices. Her portrayal highlights the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues, implying that questions of justice and human dignity continue to revolve around access to resources.

Caste, Class and Exclusion

The play *Water* highlights the significance of water, how it is used, and how it interacts with caste and class structures, as well as the politics of exclusion around a shared resource. In general, hierarchical institutions that govern social interactions and control access to particular opportunities and shared resources have traditionally defined and impacted Indian society. The author situates the water problem in this context, demonstrating how resource distribution often reflects broader social inequality. The communities from disadvantaged sects in this play face social and economic poverty. Their social, economic, and political exclusion from water resources is a component of a broader discriminatory system rather than an isolated occurrence. The following quotes by Dhura expose the deep hypocrisy and systemic humiliation inherent in caste-based exclusion. According to Suhel

and Sathikulameen, Jonathan Franzen's narrative reflects the tensions between individual agency and systemic economic imperatives (132). It highlights the contradiction that the wealthy, upper-caste landowner, Santosh Pujari, relies entirely on the specialised skill and labour of Maghai, an "untouchable" Dome, to survive and locate water: But why? Why does father have to act the water-diviner for Santosh whenever he asks him to? And for him, the shadow of a Dome pollutes his pitcher, and he throws away the water. That's how he treats us. (Devi 14)

It becomes an indicator of social status, rewarding distinctions between dominant and subordinate groups. Those who possess economic and political power enjoy privileged access with free will, while marginalised communities remain unfree and compromised. There is always a deep-rooted historical connection between water and caste. While local communities access water bodies such as wells, ponds, streams, falls, and other sources, these sources have been regulated according to caste hierarchies. The following quote demonstrates how the upper classes actively utilise their social status to gatekeep essential government resources, which are common for all: I'm one of the Dome caste. We have been told that there's no untouchability in our subdivision, and yet Santosh-Babu, you, your caste brothers and your relations won't let us draw water from any well. (Devi 10)

These actions are reflected in her narrative, and she focuses on reality by explaining how the control of resources by one or more powerful authorities leads to social exclusion and its consequences. The powerful groups deny the dominant groups, who maintain it and reinforce existing hierarchies. These divisions are further intensified by the inequalities happening in the play. Economic power enables certain groups to exploit resource monopolies and benefit from systems of ownership. The poor financial circumstances of marginalised communities limit their access to stable water. As a result, economic inequality becomes intertwined with environmental deprivation. The play illustrates the various ways in which this exclusion functions in this setting. Not only is social engagement restricted to the centre, but physical access to water is also severely restricted. Communities that lack basic resources, such as water, are excluded from larger development and decision-making processes. Their wants and concerns remain secondary to the objectives of powerful actors. Through this picture of water commercialisation, she exposes mechanisms that re-normalise inequality and justify exclusion. It exposes the clear methods via which social hierarchies are perpetuated and reproduced. The play illustrates how access to water cannot be understood in isolation from broader issues of social justice, linking environmental concerns to caste and class dynamics.

Structural Violence of Water Scarcity

The drama effectively conveys the gravity of water scarcity by presenting it as the result of external influences rather than a purely natural occurrence. Rather, the play suggests that systems of ownership, exclusion, and unequal distribution are the means by which scarcity is socially formed. This viewpoint aligns with the concept of structural violence,

which also refers to forms of harm embedded within the limits of social, political, and economic institutions. The impact of structural violence is evident throughout the play, and one can experience its heat. Consequently, environmental violence becomes inseparable from questions of memory, survival, and resistance (Noormohamed and Sathikulameen 84). The following quote highlights the bureaucratic erasure of their suffering, which is a core component of structural violence: If you go by the government records, there's no oppression of harijans in West Bengal. This is no Madras. (Devi 3)

Because the state machinery officially denies the existence of caste-based oppression in their region, it provides legal and administrative cover for landowners like Santosh to continue depriving the lower castes of water without consequence. In another incident, Dhura expresses this deep frustration to his father, Maghai, highlighting the exploitative nature of their local caste structure in the following way:

What a shame, we burn our hearts to cinders to divine water, then to raise it from the bowels of the earth, and then they refuse us a drop of water, not a drop for the Domes and Chandals. (Devi 4)

In the play, incidents reveal that the lack of water impacts health, productivity, and quality of life. Communities must dedicate significant time and effort to securing access to resources necessary for survival. These burdens disproportionately affect those already experiencing social and economic disadvantages in the communities. Her story highlights the intimate relationship between scarcity, authority, and power. Conditions that sustain dependency among marginalised communities benefit those in positions of power. Scarcity becomes a political weapon that constrains opportunities for opposition and upholds established hierarchies. The idea of structural violence can be used to emphasise how oppression is invisible. Loss frequently seems normal because it is ingrained in organisations and habits, but it is real. Dhura's intense dissatisfaction with his father is expressed in the following quotation, which also emphasises how exploitative their local caste system is:

What a shame, we burn our hearts to cinders to divine water, then to raise it from the bowels of the earth, and then they refuse us a drop of water, not a drop for the Domes and Chandals. (Devi 4)

Devi counters this notion by uncovering the political and economic reasons responsible for the resource inequality at play. The play challenges readers to acknowledge that scarcity is not just a result of environmental necessity but also of human choices and actions. Devi takes the conversation beyond environmental issues by depicting water scarcity as structural violence. The matter turns into one of human rights, ethics, and government. It becomes clear that social justice and meaningful engagement in society depend on having access to water.

Politics of Resistance and Agency

The drama *Water* is not just a story of victimisation, but also offers a potent critique of exploitation and hardship. The ability of marginalised communities to oppose repressive regimes is also highlighted in the drama. In the face of dominance, resistance arises as a reaction to exclusion and a way to restore agency. The play's conflict over water turns into a group fight for justice. People understand that their experiences of deprivation are symptoms of larger systems of inequality rather than isolated occurrences. People in the community become more united as a result of this awareness, which also opens the door to group action. There are several types of resistance throughout the play. It entails contesting authority, contesting the validity of resource monopolisation, and claiming the right to get necessary resources. The power dynamics that uphold systems of exclusion are upset by these actions. Marginalised groups become active change agents instead of passive victims by refusing to accept hardship as inevitable. When Santosh's armed police unit arrives to demolish the villagers' newly constructed dam, Maghai Dome yells this battle cry. In the following ways, this symbolises the play's ultimate resistance climax: No-o-o-o. Forward, everyone! We hold the Great Mother's pole in our hands, we'll crush the bastards with this pole. (Devi 50)

The concept of expressing unified resistance towards authority also demonstrates the necessity of community. Resistance promotes collaboration and mutual support, whereas commodification tends to break up social ties. For collective identity and political action, shared experiences of hardship become the basis. The writer's portrayal of resistance aligns with actions that focus on the principles of the field, namely subaltern studies, which foreground the authority of marginalised sects. This choral response from the villagers, spoken "all together" as they physically construct a boulder dam to capture the river's water, marks a profound shift from passive suffering to organised, collective agency. Instead of begging the landlord or the government for drought relief, the community bands together to solve their own crisis:

We're building a dam... But you're not going to touch this water... You didn't give us water. We won't let you bring labourers from outside. We'll harvest your paddy. We'll take daily wages and we'll have a snack. (Devi 41)

The play presents oppressed communities as powerless and helpless. The writer presents these conditions clearly in the play. She tries to focus on the flip side by testing their ability to challenge governing structures and to conceive of alternative forms of social organisation. The police fatally wounded Maghai Dome during their attack on the dam. This quote signifies the tragic irony of Maghai's life and the ultimate betrayal by the ruling class, which is evident in the following quote: Give me the Mother's pole. I'll die, but not before I've killed. Come, come, come to me. (Vomits blood.) Santosh! After all the water I divined for you, you had to get me killed! (Devi 146)

They decide that resistance is the final resort they must practice and accept; it also serves as a review of systems that prioritise profit or gain over human welfare and material importance. By demanding equitable access to water, marginalised communities challenge the commodification of essential resources and advocate a more just model of resource governance.

Conclusion

As a result, the study has provided a thorough examination of the connections between social power, environmental resources, and human existence. The play focuses on water as a commodity and a vital resource, and on how it alters political and economic systems through resource politics. Water is viewed as a location of resistance, power, and exclusion in addition to being a material resource. This study has examined how social interactions and survival conditions are significantly altered by the commodification of water. Water is treated as an economic commodity and governed by a system of ownership that produces societal disparities that disproportionately affect underprivileged populations.

Scarcity thereby reinforces systems based on caste and class, sustaining forms of dependence and exclusion. Additionally, the analysis has demonstrated how the play's water scarcity constitutes a form of structural violence. Social and political structures that limit chances for involvement and access to resources lead to destitution. These circumstances demonstrate the connection between socioeconomic inequality and environmental injustice. In a similar vein, Water highlights the agency of marginalised communities and their collective fights for access to necessities like water, which oppose exploitative institutions' conformity and uphold the fundamental right to survival and dignity. The author envisions fairer forms of social and environmental governance through these acts of resistance.

The problem of water access is thus reduced to a simple matter of existence, with little chance of survival due to resource politics. They have been fighting for life, justice, and dignity, and the play describes their fight for water as a basis. Through this study of the impacts of water commodities, it is evident that Mahasweta Devi provides a powerful literary contribution advocating for the rights of marginalised communities, which is relevant in today's world concerning social equality, resource politics, and environmental justice.

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