

Relational Ecologies of Extraction: Land, Body, and Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's “*The Hunt*” and “*Douloti the Bountiful*”

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Abstract

This article examines Mahasweta Devi's short fiction “*The Hunt*” and “*Douloti the Bountiful*” through the lens of ecological relationality, arguing that Devi's narratives operate simultaneously as diagnosis and prescription. As diagnosis, the stories expose how colonial and postcolonial capital severs the relational webs that bind tribal communities, land, and non-human life, converting reciprocal ecologies into extractive economies of debt, timber, and flesh. As prescription, the same narratives model an alternative ethics of relation in the figures of Mary Oraon and Douloti, whose bodies and acts of resistance re-assert an ecological selfhood that refuses to be fully instrumentalized. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice theory, and Hubert Zapf's concept of literature as “cultural ecology,” this article proposes that Devi's fiction models a two-stage movement from broken to unbroken relationality that offers a distinct contribution to environmental humanities scholarship on Indian literature. The article concludes that this diagnostic-prescriptive structure distinguishes Devi's ecological vision from purely representational ecocriticism, positioning her fiction as an active site of ecological re-imagination rather than mere environmental commentary.

Keywords: Ecological relationality, Mahasweta Devi, Postcolonial ecocriticism, Environmental justice, Indigenous ecologies, Indian fiction, Diagnostic-Prescriptive framework

Introduction

Environmental crisis in the Indian subcontinent is inseparable from histories of dispossession: forests enclosed, rivers redirected, and tribal communities displaced in the name of development, extraction, and revenue. Mahasweta Devi's fiction, composed largely from decades of activist engagement with Adivasi and Dalit communities in eastern India, does not merely depict this crisis; it diagnoses its structural causes and gestures toward alternative relational ethics. This article argues that Devi's short stories “*The Hunt*” and “*Douloti the Bountiful*” enact a two-part movement that this article terms *broken to unbroken relationality*: the narratives first diagnose the rupture of ecological and social bonds under extractive capital, then prescribe through character, act, and image a restored, if precarious, model of relational ecology.

The term “relationality” as used here draws on ecocritical and environmental humanities scholarship that understands ecological thought as fundamentally concerned with connectedness rather than discrete objects of study. Hubert Zapf’s influential formulation of literature as “cultural ecology” holds that narrative text processes relationality and difference simultaneously, functioning not only as a medium of representation but as a regenerative force within the larger cultural system (Zapf 81–82). This framework productively extends to Devi’s fiction, where relationality is not an abstract theme but a lived, embodied, and violently contested condition. Land, kinship, ritual, and the non-human world in Devi’s tribal settings exist in webs of mutual obligation that colonial and postcolonial capital systematically dismantle — and that her protagonists, in turn, partially restore through acts of refusal and resistance.

This article proceeds in three movements. First, it establishes the theoretical framework of ecological relationality and the diagnostic-prescriptive model. Second, it examines “The Hunt” as a diagnostic text, tracing how the timber contractor’s economy severs the forest-community relation before Mary Oraon’s act of violence prescriptively restores a form of ecological agency. Third, it examines “*Douloti the Bountiful*” as an even starker diagnosis of relational rupture the conversion of a woman’s body into extractable resource before considering how the story’s devastating final image nonetheless functions prescriptively, indicting the nation itself and demanding a re-imagined relational ethic.

Ecological Relationality: A Diagnostic-Prescriptive Framework

Postcolonial ecocriticism has long insisted that environmental degradation in the formerly colonized world cannot be separated from histories of racial and economic subjugation. Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” describes environmental harm that is “incremental and accretive,” unfolding across time in ways that are not spectacular enough to command the urgency typically reserved for violence understood as immediate (Nixon 2). Devi’s fiction, however, complicates any purely gradualist account: her narratives depict both the slow violence of ecological attrition and the sudden, visible violence sexual, physical, economic — that punctuates it. This combination positions her work as diagnostic in a fuller sense: it names not only the pace of ecological harm but its precise social mechanisms.

The diagnostic function of Devi’s fiction operates by exposing how the relational webs binding Adivasi communities to forest, river, and land are converted into unilateral extraction. Trees become timber; rivers become resources for revenue; women’s bodies become currency in transactions of debt and desire. This conversion is never presented as natural or inevitable but as an imposed rupture a breaking of relation that Devi’s narration insists on tracing back to specific historical agents: contractors, moneylenders, landlords, and the state apparatus that enables them.

The prescriptive function, by contrast, does not offer programmatic solutions or restored utopias. Devi is notably unsentimental about repair. Instead, prescription in her fiction takes the form of embodied refusal: a character singular act that reasserts relational agency even within, or precisely because of, systems designed to foreclose it. This prescriptive gesture is partial and costly often achieved through violence or death, but it nonetheless models an alternative logic in which the human is reintegrated into a web of ecological and communal obligation rather than extracted from it. It is this combination of unflinching diagnosis paired with costly, embodied prescription that this article identifies as the distinguishing structure of Devi’s ecological imagination.

Diagnosis and Prescription in “The Hunt”

“The Hunt” centers on Mary Oraon, a woman of mixed Oraon and Australian descent who works among the tribal community of a forested region targeted by a timber contractor, Tehsildar Singh. The story's diagnostic work begins with its careful attention to the forest as a site of communal, seasonal, and spiritual relation to the contractor's economic logic treats as an obstacle to be cleared rather than a system to be respected. The felling of the trees for profit stands as the story's central image of relational rupture: the forest's slow, cyclical time is overridden by the linear, extractive time of the market.

Mary's own hybrid social position neither fully inside nor outside the tribal community, economically independent, and physically strong allows the narrative to diagnose the layered vulnerabilities that extractive capital exploits: gender, caste and tribal marginality, and ecological dispossession converge on her body and on the community's collective fate. Tehsildar Singh's predation, both economic and sexual, is presented as continuous with his relation to the forest itself both are objects to be used and discarded. This continuity is the story's sharpest diagnostic insight: the logic that commodifies land and the logic that commodifies the female body are shown to be one and the same extractive rationality.

The story's prescriptive turn arrives through Mary's decisive violence against Singh during the community's annual hunting festival itself a ritual that inverts ordinary social hierarchy and briefly restores an older relational order between the community and the forest. Mary's act, occurring within this ritual space, does not restore the forest that has already been felled, nor does it undo the economic structure that produced Singh. It does, however, prescriptively reassert a relational ethic in which the human body, the ritual calendar, and the forest's own rhythms act in concert against the extractive intrusion. Mary's violence is neither redemptive in a simple sense nor celebrated uncritically by the narrative; rather, it stands as the costly, singular gesture through which Devi's fiction models resistance to relational rupture without pretending that resistance restores what has been lost.

Diagnosis and Prescription in “*Douloti the Bountiful*”

If “The Hunt” diagnoses relational rupture through the felling of forest and the predation of a single woman, “*Douloti the Bountiful*” diagnoses that same rupture at a more systemic and devastating scale. Douloti, a young Dalit woman, is sold into bonded sexual labor to settle her father's debt, and the narrative traces with unflinching precision how systems of caste, debt-bondage, and patriarchal exploitation strip her of any relational belonging to family, to community, to her own body. Devi's diagnosis here extends beyond the human-nature relation narrowly construed to encompass the broader ecology of social relations: kinship, obligation, and community are shown to be as vulnerable to extractive logic as forest or river.

The story's most devastating image Douloti's dying body collapsing across a map of India drawn in chalk for a nationalist celebration has been widely read as an indictment of the postcolonial nation-state's failure to extend the promises of independence to its most marginalized citizens. Read through the lens of ecological relationality, this image can also be understood as the story's diagnostic culmination: Douloti's body, having been reduced to an extractable resource by every institution that touches her, is literally superimposed onto the map of the nation, exposing the identity between the exploitation of her body and the extractive logic of the nation-building project itself.

The prescriptive dimension of “*Douloti the Bountiful*” is considerably starker than that of “*The Hunt*.” There is no act of individual resistance that restores relational agency; Douloti dies. Yet the story's prescriptive force lies

precisely in this refusal of easy repair: by forcing Douloti's body into visible superimposition on the map of the nation, Devi's narrative indicts the reader and the nation-state alike, demanding a relational ethic that the story itself withholds from its characters. The prescription, in other words, is directed outward toward the reader, the state, and the structures of postcolonial development rather than inward toward narrative resolution. This is Devi's most severe formulation of the broken-to-unbroken movement: the story refuses to enact repair within its own fictional world in order to demand that repair be enacted beyond it.

Toward a Comparative Model of Relational Repair

Read together, “*The Hunt*” and “*Douloti the Bountiful*” demonstrate that Devi's diagnostic-prescriptive structure is neither uniform nor formulaic. “*The Hunt*” locates prescription within the fictional world itself, in Mary's embodied act of resistance during a moment of ritual inversion. “*Douloti the Bountiful*” withholds that internal prescription entirely, displacing the demand for relational repair onto the reader and the nation. This variation suggests that ecological relationality, in Devi's fiction, is not a fixed thematic content but a flexible narrative strategy calibrated to the specific structures of exploitation each story diagnoses: individualized predation in one case, systemic debt-bondage and state complicity in the other.

This flexibility distinguishes Devi's contribution from more general accounts of Indian ecocriticism, which have tended to emphasize the personification of nature or the recovery of traditional ecological wisdom as stable, recurring devices. Devi's fiction instead treats relationality as itself as contested terrain something that can be broken in different ways, and that therefore demands different, situationally specific forms of prescriptive response. It is this responsiveness to the particularity of exploitation, rather than a general celebration of nature-culture harmony, that makes Devi's fiction a significant resource for environmental humanities scholarship on the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Mahasweta Devi's “*The Hunt*” and “*Douloti the Bountiful*” enact a diagnostic-prescriptive movement from broken to unbroken relationality, exposing the specific mechanisms by which extractive capital severs the bonds between tribal communities, land, and body, while modeling through embodied resistance or devastating indictment an alternative relational ethic. This framework offers a distinct contribution to postcolonial ecocriticism by insisting that Devi's fiction does not merely represent ecological crisis but actively diagnoses its causes and prescribes, however partially or painfully, a path toward relational repair. Future scholarship might extend this diagnostic-prescriptive model to Devi's longer fiction, such as *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, to examine whether the same structure of costly, embodied prescription holds across her broader corpus, and whether comparable models can be identified in the work of other Indian writers engaged with tribal and environmental justice.

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