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Traces Of Ecological Imperialism In Mahasweta Devi's Novel Titu Mir

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Abstract

Ecocriticism complements the third world writers' voice against the developed countries' politics to centralize the world's natural resources in their periphery. This politics is a prominent legacy passed on by the colonial masters who reigned the east till the half of 20th century. Ecological Imperialism can be defined as a theory which believes that Colonization has been a successful undertaking because the Colonists have executed an ecological strategy based on a thoughtful introduction of an ecosystem which could easily disintegrate the native land's ecosystem. The term Ecological Imperialism was introduced by Alfred Crosby in his book *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* whereby he tries to explore reasons behind the overwhelming European dominance over the third world. He tags the places where the Europeans colonized and settled as the 'Neo-Europe'. He contemplated whether technology was the factor behind the massive victory over the native's land or the success of European imperialism has an ecological tactics. According to Crosby, there was more biological tactics and less military expertise behind such success. The European Imperialists introduced new plants and live stocks which effortlessly outnumbered their indigenous counterparts. The new ecological intervention resulted in many outbreaks which threatened the demography of indigenous people. Pneumonia, dysentery and venereal diseases were unfamiliar to them while the Europeans knew the cure for such diseases. Mahasweta Devi's Novel *Titu Mir* revolves around the ecological exploitation of the East India Company during in Colonial India. It focuses on the forceful plantation of Indigo on arable lands and the extensive exportation of indigenous resources to Britain which was challenging the environment of the indigenous people. *Titu Mir*, the hero of the novel organises a government consisting of people from his village and Wahabis to overthrow the 'Ecological Imperialism' activated by the British in their land.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ecological imperialism, colonisation, indigenous, colonial India.

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Ecological Imperialism in India

British interventionism began in India from 1757 and sustained for two centuries. Indian History reflects the ruthless policy of the colonizers which restrained all rights of the Indians amongst which political and economic are the most widely discussed themes. There has been a plethora of topics debated regarding the various forms of exploitation subjected to the Indians as a result of colonization. However, it can be said that there have been only few inspections regarding the ecological impairment brought by British Colonization.

The Indian subcontinent has been ruled by several dynasties before the British intervened. Islamic rulers who invaded India had no intention to exploit the ecological status of India. Even the most powerful Islamic dynasty, Mughals did not endorse commercialisation of natural resources. They were rather enthusiastic in keeping records of natural history. Babar and Jehangir are known as the earliest naturalists from the country. Abdul Qadir Badauni, the famous historian during the Mughal period listed some important sins and offenses according to the law set by the Mughal Empire in his famous chronicle *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*. The chronicle mentions that cutting down a shady tree and killing animals are serious crimes. The most popular Mughal ruler Akbar was famous for promoting afforestation and water management during his rule. Gadgil and Guha highlighted the disparity observed between Muslim rulers and those of the Europeans:

Even the Mughals, whose religion was Islam, were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to radically alter the existing patterns of resource use and the social structures in which they were embedded. It was an entirely different story vis-à-vis India's contacts with Christian Europe. (This Fissured Land 99)

British Ecological exploitation has its roots in the East India Company's trade interests which started in 1613 under the Mughal emperor Jehangir who granted the permission to set up a factory in Surat. Gradually, the exploitation spread across the Indian Empire. They took interests in trading spices, silk, cotton, indigo dye, tea and Opium extensively. However, their motive extended beyond simple trade. Now their aim is to plunder the wealth of India. Their dream came true in 1764 after the Battle of Buxar which transformed them from a trading company to a ruling one. It also strengthened its vision to exploit all the natural resources found in the country and monopolize trade across the globe. Gadgil and Guha elucidate:

World ecology has been profoundly altered by western capitalism, in whose dynamic expansion other ecosystems were disrupted, first through trade and later by colonialism. (Fissured Land 102)

Ecological Imperialism in Titu Mir

India's natural wealth became the fuel for accelerating the economic growth of England during Colonization. Huge plantation projects were unscrupulously carried out in the fertile agricultural land watched over by the Indian farmers. Mahasweta Devi, in *Titu Mir* fictionalized historical events which occurred after the Permanent Settlement in 1793. The Permanent Settlement was proposed by the East India Company initially to the Zamindars of Bengal to curb fixed taxes from the farmers' agricultural land without taking the produce into account. The proposal was accepted by a new flock of unconventional Zamindars who traded the peasant rights over land to the British. The novel also recollects the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 where millions died of starvation.

When the British came to the Indian subcontinent, they rightly anticipated that the resources from the Indian soil and forests could bring huge opulence. They assumed its people to be barbarians unaware of new crops and agricultural methods while overlooking the fact that indigenous people had expertise in harmonizing culture and ecology. Their livelihood based on agriculture and foraging constitutes their way of life and formed their culture. They had balanced this relationship without compromising on either one of the entities. They had never trespassed nature's sanctity to the extent of exploiting it for their benefit. The colonized state's land is a virgin space for the colonizers. It is deliberately interpreted or made to be perceived as wasteland. This concept has been propagated by the colonizers to justify their action of exploiting indigenous third world land and its resources. Huggan and Tiffin aptly remark:

“European imports to the newly settled colonies – humans, animals, plants- were regarded on the other hand as necessary and ‘natural’ impositions on, or substitutes for, the local bush or wilderness; and even if these invading species were initially difficult to establish or acclimatise, they soon prospered in lands where their control predators were absent. The genuinely natural ways of indigenous ecosystems were irretrievably undone as ‘wild’ lands were cleared for farming or opened up to pastoralism” (Postcolonial Ecocriticism 8)

Mahasweta Devi's *Titu Mir* is a novella which centres on the battle fought by the legendary fighter Titu Mir during the 1830's in Bengal. Mahasweta Devi recalls the dark period of Bengal where famine struck Bengal and was further impoverished by the mandatory taxes imposed by the British. Devi points out the polarity of the British regime. Rimi B. Chatterjee translates:

“Fifty million people died in that famine, yet the Company had not seen fit to waive that year's tax. The year 1770 saw the famine; in 1771 the tax collected was even higher...his first priority was to put the Company and its revenues on a firm footing and for that, even as the famine of 1770 reduced Bengal to a charnel ground, Hastings squeezed the people into yielding yet more revenue.” (*Titu Mir* 9).

Titu Mir, in the novel is introduced as a little boy who fascinates to own a leopard cub and often indulges in hunting activities with his friends. He is considered to be a wayward boy who is least interested in helping his parents in the field and more engrossed in the events happening in the village. Titu's propensity to escape from agricultural activities highlights the fact that it was pointless to involve one in such activities as it bears profit neither to the farmers nor to the land. *Titu Mir* belongs to Hyderpur, a village situated not very far from Calcutta, the capital of Bengal. There exists an intimate relationship between nature and the farmers dwelling in Hyderpur. Like many other villages in the country, Hyderpur is not spared from the indigo plantation venture reinforced by the East India Company after Louis Bonnard introduced it to the Indian soil in 1777. Vast agricultural lands were only meant for cultivation of cash crops while cultivation of indigenous food crops were abandoned. This gave a huge income to the elite zamindars and most importantly ensured an economic boost for the British colonists while posing a threat to indigenous farmer's livelihood:

The imposition of heavy land taxes under British rule paralyzed agriculture, preventing its development. At the same time, the economic surplus siphoned from India helped feed British industrialization. In this way, India was gradually integrated into the capitalist world economy as a dependency of Britain, the most important possession in the British Empire. (*Imperialism and Ecology* 86-87)

Rice being the staple food in the country has been widely cultivated by its peasants. The replacement of rice crops by indigo poses a threat to the livelihood of the peasants and denies their very right to

exist. A peasant's life in Hyderpur revolves around rice cultivation. Titu's father, like others, is involved in rice farming. Rokeya, Titu's mother, gives us a glimpse of the hard work done by the farmers of Hyderpur in the rice fields: 'They are planting the rice now; he's been busy all day with the labourers in the blazing sun.' (Titu Mir 3). However, their entire life cycle is shattered with the advent of indigo plantation. Indigo plantation on agricultural land not only displaces the staple crop rice but also leaves the soil infertile for cultivation of food crops. Bhudeb Choudhury, who is a genuine landowner of Hyderpur's agricultural land shows his fear regarding the future of the villagers. His statement reflects the repercussions of the Zamindari system and the added miseries caused by Indigo Plantation.

The Company doesn't want zamindars like us. These days anyone can be a zamindar if he can raise the taxes...That's the kind of landlord they want now: the kind who won't even care to visit occasionally...And now these indigo sahibs have come to gobble up what's left. It's sure ruin for people. (22)

Tarini Sanyal, an agent of a British Indigo planter in conversation with Bhudeb Pal Choudhury's chief lathial Sardar Ramchand Chakravati clearly interprets the British Planter's greed over the land of Hyderpur:

But what fertile land! Tarini sighed. Look at the paddy fields! I know the sahib looks at it all the time, and his heart's fit to burst with greed. Such excellent soil, and he can't plant a stalk of indigo on it! It sticks on his throat. He sees all this and tells me, you fool, you're not looking after my interests. (Titu Mir 31)

The Sahibs indoctrinated a new set of elite class emerging in the late 18th century with the notion that the inferior culture of the indigenous had undermined the proper utilization of the land. The fascination for a better culture based on reason and productivity was injected upon the new zamindars that enabled the colonizer's self-centred venture. They alienated themselves from village life settling in the city thereby giving the whole of their responsibility to their managers. They have no empathy for the land and the peasants who look after them. Devi highlights:

This indigo farming is such a curse! The planters and the zamindars talk and plan among themselves, and the poor farmers know nothing of it. If they make two grains of rice, one goes to fill their bellies, and the other into the zamindar's moneybags. And the managers and their guards come and stuff earnest money down their throats and mark out their best land for indigo. (80)

The new zamindars were disparate from traditional Zamindars. Traditional Zamindars worked for the welfare of the community. In many instances they had taken measures to protect the environment by planting trees and building water storages so as to curtail calamities which may occur during dry seasons. One such Zamindar is Bhudeb Pal Choudhary who is concerned about the village land and the peasants. Expressing his concern regarding the condition of Hyderpur, he says that now there is 'no more pond-digging or tree planting in the country. The village schools are closing for want of patronage.' (Titu Mir 22).

The British had no legal rights to acquire land. Therefore, they buy lands in the name of their servants and entice people like Tarini Sanyal and Ramchand Chakravarty to deceive their master zamindars and plant Indigo by giving good commissions. Tarini Sanyal easily becomes the Indigo planter's agent as his master is unlike Bhudeb Pal Choudhary. His master belongs to the new creed of 'absentee landlords' who hardly care for the peasants and the land till he gets his revenue regularly. Devi describes that

“They’re happy just to get their rents in. They can see the most fertile land being staked out; how much of a crop do they expect from poor soil? Yet they go on raising the tax. The zamindars and the planters are turning this land to ashes; they’ll buy it yet.” (80) Bhudeb Pal Chaudhary becomes the common enemy of people like Ramchand and the British as he is determined to protect the soil and his people from the veracity of the British. Rimi B. Chatterjee describes: “The old landlords, who lived with their people and shared their lives, found it difficult to pressurize them as the times now demanded”. (34).

Titu is a son of a farmer and an inhabitant of a village. It was understandable that he felt strange at the very ambience of markets in Calcutta. In his village the wave of commercialisation hadn’t reached yet. Most of the village folks’ livelihood comes from working in paddy fields and being labour at the zamindar’s chores or at the plantation sites. They had never exploited the naturally available medicinal herbs or any kind of valuable resources found in the forest. They had never thought of trading it to earn profits. They only took enough for their survival. Therefore, their forest remains well preserved. However, it could not be hypothesized that these forests would remain preserved throughout colonial rule and the future after. The British had its eyes already in the agricultural lands of Hyderpur and the forests were not very far away from it. Such was the situation in the village of Hyderpur, but the set-up in Calcutta totally blew away Titu. He is anxious of the fact that rapid commercialisation of exotic herbs and plants were taking place in the city and exportation of materials and goods were occurring at an enormous scale at the ports of Bengal. He believed that such development in trade and business is rather destructive to the country as it will ultimately lead to extreme exploitation of the resources. Titu contemplates:

“What a place! People paid good money to buy thor and mocha, kochu and kolapatta, that you could pick up anywhere in the villages. It would be best for the world if such a city did not grow any further; the more it grew, the more its markets would suck the substance out of the rest of the country. (28)

The naturally found goods were extracted at a large scale and exported for profit to foreign lands. Devi condemns the exploitation through Titu. The status of export marketing was at zenith during this period all sustained by the new breed of zamindars. Chatterjee translates:

“FROM CALCUTTA’S PORT WENT OUT SACKS OF COTTON, rice, sugar, saltpetre, soont, silk, indigo, asafœtida, borax, castor oil, salt, cloves, coconut oil, yarn, ivory, gallnuts, buffalo horn, pipul, Indian madder, nutmeg, nux vomica, red sandalwood and kusumphul,. Chests of opium, bales of many kinds of cloth, goat-hides, shawls by the pair and canes by the bunch – we were then exporting goods worth 10 to 12crore rupees. The salt trade alone brought in a profit of two crores...How could an operation of such magnitude be run without the active connivance of zamindars? This prodigious river of goods had its source in the soil of Bengal.” (34)

Titu is against such monopoly initiated by the British. Therefore, he revolted against the British by forming a government along with Wahabis (supporter of the Islamic reform movement founded by Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb) which infuriated the Zamindars and British. Titu and his men were burnt alive in their bamboo fort as per Mc Donald’s order in 19th November 1831.

Conclusion

The story of Titu Mir is an adventurous historical tale. But when deeply analysed, one can find the environmental issues in the novel. Many elements of Ecological Imperialism are present throughout the

story. Titu and his supporters stood against their lands transforming into a profit space. The indigo plantation was nothing less than an ecological colonisation as it could only lead ecological devastation and the end of indigenous lives. The novel depicts a remarkable phase in Indian history. However, one can find ample relevance with the environmental problems faced by indigenous people in modern India.

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