

Ethics, Environmental Justice, and Mahasweta Devi's *Salgirar Dake***Dr Tanmoy Bhattacharjee**Visiting Faculty, Department of English
Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira (Autonomous)**Abstract**

This article examines the ethico-ecological prudence of Mahasweta Devi's Bengali novel *Salgirar Dake* (1982) but the approach presupposes a quick glance at the concept of asymptote. The word traces its origin to Greek *asumptotos*, the implication being "not falling together". Reviewed metaphorically, the concept of asymptote calls into question all such hitherto mapped-out interstices that describe the shared matrix of and beyond the ecocentric-anthropocentric binary. The Environmental Justice (EJ) literature, the ethico-legal term by which ecocritic Lawrence Buell has stereotyped a cluster of contemporary texts, has been given undue emphasis as the sole torch-bearer of environmental justice concerns. Buell has categorized certain landmark features of EJ literature but his ideas are eerily silent about the question of ethics, liminality and ambivalence. In fact, no work on environment or environmental justice can afford to gloss over the pull of ambivalence, this very sense being a necessary mark of ethical choice and prudence.

Keywords: Ethics; Asymptote; Environment; Justice; Ambivalence**Introduction**

Mahasweta Devi's (1926-2016) novel *Salgirar Dake* (*As Salgira Calls*¹) concentrates on how the more-than-human world summons its human counterpart and how the one reciprocates the other. This sense of reciprocity is surely a significant motif of the novel and to get a clearer understanding of this motif it is imperative that we put environment and its ethico-ecological dimension at the cynosure of the research-question. Environment being the crux of the critical approach, one cannot but think of a new canon of literature, popularly known as Environmental Justice (EJ) literature, whose features ecocritic Lawrence Buell charts out at length in one of his articles "Enough is Enough?: Re-imagining an ethics and aesthetics of sustainability for the twenty-first century" (Mueller and Syse 19). Any effort of categorization, Prof. Buell upholds, is slippery. In every step there is the risk of oversimplifying a culture so diverse, varied and eclectic. However, so far as his ideas are concerned, the features fall into three broad categories: (a) First, they (EJ works) testify to the sharply unequal distribution of environmental benefits and risks across different population groups; (b) Secondly, they are witness to land degradation and/ or the habitat loss by dominant national and transnational regimes, both political and economic; (c) Thirdly, and as a consequence, they dramatize the dire long-run effects of bad ecological custodianship, all of which are potentially resulting in the crumbling of the ecosystem and in the ruin of the people contingent on the said ecosystem.

Beyond Sectarian Practices and the Protagonist

Tilka Majhi (1750-1785), presumably the first known rebel-figure of Indian freedom movement from the so-called fringes of the society, is the central character of *Salgirar Dake*. In conformity with the annals of history Devi shows how Tilka inherited a tradition with a difference. Tilka's grandfather, who was the village-headman, died a ghastly death trying to

stand by a neighboring clan in jeopardy. Sundra, Tilka's father, always had an inner urge to see his own small community in a bigger, broader perspective. The word "bir" means forest in the Santhali language and "dharti" is earth. "Dharti" and "bir", according to Sundra, were the only quintessential things in life that deserved keener exploring.

A pricking restlessness won't let Sundra rest and what kept buzzing around his ears was that he had got to find out the enormity of the earth: "More often than not Sundra soliloquized that Sundra would love to see how big the earth is" (Devi, *Salgirar Dake* 2). Though uninvited, Sundra went all the solitary way to the mountainous villages of the *Malpaharias* just to see what these inhabitants of the old mountains did with their nonhuman surroundings. One brisk midday, accompanied by Atoari Murmu and Lakha Saren, he took the trouble of visiting a *Rajput* feudal lord's farmland and soon got absorbed in understanding the art of agriculture. This chequered interface between humankind and the more-than-human world, Sundra grasped, is a necessary driving force behind all forms of creation in life. Sundra, in fact, made it a point that he would volunteer himself to these numerous threads between human and nonhuman and it was no surprise that Sundra's cup of experience brimmed to the full.

Espousal of Myth, Doctrine, and Environment

Salgirar Dake shows that Sundra's way of life made a profound impact on little Tilka. Not just Sundra; rather, Sundra's entire family, especially Sundra's mother, through her stories, introduced to Tilka not only the huge, unexplored forestland but also the apparently yet inordinately animate nonhuman environment. Little Tilka felt a strange, almost inexplicable communion with forest so much so that he could spend hours with his *garam ayu* (grandmother) listening to her fascinating tales of mountains, rivers and woods. Tilka's grandmother spoke as if the forestland itself were speaking.

By thus imbibing these great myths and stories, Tilka could altogether forget his own self so overwhelmingly that he encountered, in the deepest of his dream, that big, towering goose from whose fluttering, milk-white wings came cascading the golden moonbeams. On his two great wings the goose flew and, in his stomach, lay the first parents of the Santhals. It is incidental but true that in the absolute desolation of the wee hours, the more the human world (represented by Tilka) tried to feel oneness with nature-myths, the more animated the non-human surroundings (represented by the winging goose and cascading moonbeams) became. Together the first parents of the Santhals and the swiftly flying goose impinge on our mind a collective image of a very intimate correspondence between the human milieu and that of the nonhuman. The image clearly denotes the organic embeddedness of the nonhuman in the human and vice-versa. Like so many myths of their community, the *Pilcuburhi* and *Pilcuharam* myth is just another myth; the wandering milk-feathered goose might be just another. But myths have their own poetry and the poetry of myths was, in fact, preparing little Tilka to bear the upcoming prose of life.

Tilka's quest was about the origin of his own self just like that of Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Kunstlerroman A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Tilka's undying quest took him to the Sun-god ritual of the Paharias during winter. In his desperation, he tried to understand closely the interface between the three principal deities and the surrounding environment: "Of three prime deities, the first is *Morenko*. Rich harvests, wish-fulfillments and cure from diseases are his purviews. *Morenko*'s elder brother is *Maramburu*; white cock

and white goat are but simple sacrifices but they are enough to mollify him. *Morenko* takes red cock and red goat and *Jahira*, the sister of these two deities, accepts red hen and red she-goat as sacrifices . . . the Winter is close to our hearts” (48). It was a searing agony for Tilka that he despite the most painstaking efforts couldn’t locate his belongingness. When he was a child, the fabled narratives of his grandmother gave him a moment’s solace. The oft-repeated names of festivities (*Akhon, Magh-Sim, Sarjom Baha, Aro-Sim, Mahomare, Rohin, Asariya, Mor-Ati, Noyayi, Jontal, Bonga-Rakab, Sak-Raat*) seemed to have given his impressionable boyhood some sort of certitude. However, family, friends, customs, marital-relation and even religion—they were nowhere near a fitting answer to Tilka’s questions but Tilka won’t swerve from his search. His cognitive background was saturated with a mixture of nature-worship and anti-anthropocentrism. He was, hence, intuitive and full of empathy for the landscape and people embedded in the landscape.

Place as Opposed to Space: A Blurring Corporeality

Tilka, however, could not comprehend why he felt such an ineluctable affinity for the nonhuman environment. Tilka wanted to see himself in every form of nature, in every single ingredient of the nonhuman milieu around: “This forest-world is a fantasy-world to Tilka. If he could, he would have winged all the way to the farthest fringe of the forestland. He would have penetrated deeper into the earth’s womb as a serpent. He would have quaked the earth as a vigorously trumpeting pachyderm. He would have vertically escalated up into the sky as a tree. He would have greened all the blasted lands under his sylvan tapestry” (23). This, according to me, is the ecospace² stage of this particular narrative. At this stage, the nonhuman components are perceptible but they are still waiting to be articulated through the human world. The human world, as epitomized by Tilka, doesn’t yet know what right emotion or what right values it would invest the nonhuman environment with. In this sense, the still-to-be-defined world of Tilka (both human and nonhuman combined) is hitherto devoid of sentiments, sensitivity, love, emotion and affect and it can safely be described as a value-neutral ecospace.

A time was approaching when a more intimate correspondence was likely to be built between the human and the nonhuman environment. This intimate precondition was not just an image, a visual metaphor or a vehement willingness to be at one with the surrounding world. It was more about articulation than anything else, this time from the end of nonhuman environment. The nonhuman would make a figural intervention; the nonhuman would think and articulate through human world just as Amitav Ghosh in some other context argues, “In *How Forests Think*, the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn suggests that ‘forms’ — by which he means much more than shapes or visual metaphors — are one of the means that enable our surroundings to think through us” (110). Such an anagnorisis (the word anagnorisis is being used in the absence of a more appropriate term) overtook Tilka on a melancholy night, the night on which Tilka lost his *Apung* (father): “Tilka shared this sharpest of agony with all his works around. Father said, all seemed blanketed in dust-storm and hanging mist; the storm was threatening. Tilka was walking flanked between the far-stretching forestlands on either side — woods, lands and multitude — up above was circling that ancient mother goose, circling ever and ever” (Devi, *Salgirar Dake* 66). After Eduardo Kohn I might say that on such a melancholy night, the surroundings, as if in an epiphany, leapt into life and got Tilka to be their means of articulation.

Tilka was gradually realizing that he was with all being gravitating closer and closer to the nonhuman milieu; his whole affective ability rose to such a height that he could feel³ his corporeal frame to be the land of Bhagalpur, the Titapani river and the Araburu village to be his madly churning blood and the vast forest to be his lamenting, writhing, staggering mother-forest. The mother-forest, as it were, was repeatedly pleading him for her complete absolution, a complete sanctification. Mother forest felt defiled, de-sanctified. So did Tilka. The moonbeam-oozing, milk-white, enormous goose epitomized the forest's laments. It was flying and flying without a moment's rest. It wanted to sit somewhere and relax. But it could not. Tilka perceived it; the unsheltered creature, the tottering avian got mingled with Tilka's blood, his whole being. Of all places on earth, the goose's safest landing was Tilka's breast or, in other words, the forestland's only security was Tilka. This was a moment of reckoning for him, for he could pluck up the unthinkable courage of declaring his own vibrant metamorphosis from a Santhali tribal (delegating a human world, the anthropocentric) to *baba Tilka Majhi* (delegating the nonhuman environment, the ecocentric).

Towards an Ecocentric Paradigm

No sooner did Tilka introduce himself as *baba Tilka Majhi* than he mobilized himself to bring his preaching into practice; he made his followers see that if their land was in danger, they were in danger; similarly, if the forest was imperiled, they were imperiled. The whole community gathered from Tilka the dangers of erecting narrow domestic walls around this clan and that clan. An undercurrent of difference lay among them—the *Paharias*, the *Malpaharias* and the Santhals. Tilka invoked everyone to axe down this bigotry, this compartmentalization, this sectarianism. At this stage, Tilka's path was their path; Tilka's mission was their mission. They were ready to forsake the old values, the old beliefs and the thousand shackles of bigotry. Tilka gave them this very necessary one, undifferentiated identity—they were one single society, one single community, one single clan in whose breast lay awake the values of a forest, a mountain and a river.

The *Paharias* and the Santhals, Tilka firmly agreed, must get united and fight shoulder to shoulder against the foreign usurpers. The *Paharias* had already committed a grievous mistake. String-pulled by gaudy bric-a-brac, colourful dresses and petty cash, the *Paharias* were almost on the verge of accepting without demur the then East India Company administrator Augustus Cleveland's (1754-1784) policy of Damin-i-Koh. Once implemented, the mountain-people (the *Paharias*) would be forced to leave their dwellings across wide trajectories of Rajmahal, Bhagalpur, Murshidabad and Birbhum. The Santhals would then be forced to follow suit. Tilka had got to find out means for forging together the various communities of the forestland living apparently disjunctively. It was only by summoning help from the surrounding nonhuman milieu that Tilka gave the brewing fighting-zeal a fitting outlet. Quite appropriately, he, like his father, Sundra Murmu, sent *salgira* (invitation in the form of Sal leaf) to all and sundry to bring them together in the shared interest of land, mountain, river and forest.

The credibility of Tilka's words was gaining mileage every single day. Tilka felt it deep down. More so, when he, instead of spurning the *Paharias*, accommodated them in the greater fabric of the forest-community. He received this wonderful sense of reciprocity, this sense of all-inclusiveness from nowhere but forestland. The white-winged goose or, in other words, the whole of the forestland enkindled in Tilka a consciousness of its own kind and right

beside the Titapani river, Tilka convened his first-ever meeting not as Tilka of the anthropocentric worldview but as *baba Tilka Majhi* of the ecocentric one:

Tilka Majhi sent everyone *gira*. The year 1780 was close by. Acres of pebbled lands stretch along the Titapani river. Standing head and shoulder on a giant piece of stone, Tilka Majhi declared—I am neither *Deshmajhi* nor *Parganait* and still I send you *gira* (summons). Recurringly in my dreams I find our first parents; they sit on my chest. I garner strength from them. Rainy days are approaching—hard times. The company will subject us to severest tortures; the company will take us to task; they will soon levy taxes. (70)

Jadu Parganait, Shyam Singh Ghatoal, Mahar Hembram, Palan Rabidas, Sarjan Singh, Mansa Paharia—they all saw in *baba Tilka Majhi* a possibility of emancipation, a possibility of continuing to live in nature's own state of freedom. By state of freedom, Tilka must have meant a space where the nonhuman milieu would be able to act, work and articulate at its own free will. Right here beside the Titapani river and along the endless stretches of pebbled lands, the wait for the nonhuman to be articulating was over. Tilka was, by now, so inalienably enmeshed with his nonhuman surroundings that his corporeal personae were gradually dissipating, yielding both place and voice to the nonhuman reality.

Nonhuman Sentience Through Tripartite Phase-Formation

It was the nature's own thoughts that could presently spring forth through Tilka. Rajmahal, Bhagalpur, Murshidabad, Birbhum were no more just certain isolated blocks of landmasses for him. The entire forestland including its fauna and flora was now Tilka's own consciousness. This complete merging of one's own self and the surrounding nonhuman milieu can best be appreciated by taking a look at Lawrence Buell's article "Five Dimensions of Place-Connectedness"⁴. The fourth dimension of place sense, as Buell argues, is "an accumulation or composite of all the places that have been significant to a person, or a people, over time . . ." (Buell 69).

To elaborate on how such place sense has a direct or indirect bearing on an individual's holistic personality, he says: "Minimally one might stipulate that all the places a person has lived that she or he still dreams about sometimes are embedded and responsible for shaping present identity beyond what is consciously realized" (69). Exactly this very identity beyond what is consciously realized is the present identity of Tilka. At this stage, this no longer stands out to be just a mutual overlapping of identities of two entities — Tilka, an individual and the nonhuman surroundings. The Santhal community at large is seriously yet painfully in an interchangeable relationship with nature. Exactly the same concern finds eloquence when Birsa, the protagonist of Mahasweta Devi's magnum opus *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), reinforces this deep embeddedness between the Munda community and the surrounding plant-world. If ever there was any tall *Sal*, *Piyasal* or *Kend* on the face of earth, Birsa would ascribe their height and robustness to the blood, flesh, bone and marrow of the Mundas: "*Sal*, *Piyasal*, *Kend* are sometimes quite unusually tall on the face of earth. They are so because they are born out of the blood, flesh, bone and marrow of the Mundas who laid their lives for *Ulgulan*"⁵ (Devi, *Aranyer Adhikar* 185).

In the earlier phase, which I chose to describe as the ecospace phase of EJ literature, Tilka and the nonhuman environment were two categorically distinguishable agencies; they were often closer, at times very much to the point of communion but the desired articulation of the nonhuman milieu through the human entity was yet to be accomplished. The more intimately

Tilka proceeded towards forest, the more wholeheartedly he lost his own self into it. The environment, as it were, began to articulate through him and the more eloquent environment became, the further Tilka receded into silence. The followers of Tilka, too, receded into silence. At this crucial juncture of the narrative, a complete shifting of paradigm took place: Human feelings got stuck or suspended and only the nonhuman environment continued. This phase necessitates a complete self-erasing or self-suspension of what we deem to be the anthropocentric and this, in turn, lends voice to the apparently voiceless nonhuman surroundings. These ever-shifting stances of human and the nonhuman, almost like the contrapuntal cadences of music, lead us to an apparent belief that the anthropocentric and the ecocentric have always been on the same plateau of everyday experience. This seemingly perceptible phase is typical of almost all EJ literature and so far as Mahasweta Devi's *Salgirar Dake* is concerned, I choose to call it ecoplace⁶ phase.

The historic *Hul* broke out. However, it suffered a setback in the Pipul village. The Pipul-village failure is something that Sarjan Singh could not shrug off from his memory. Next when both the Santhals and the Paharias recouped themselves for a fresh series of resistance at the Nahar Singh's farmland on the other bank of the Titapani river (93), they all thought that this time they were invincible; Tilka himself endorsed it. It was in the Tilakpur forest (99) that the revolt reached its climax. Tilka knew that they were fighting for the forest and the same forest would act as their saviour. A time came when the whole Tilakpur forestland gradually turned out to be the second home for most of Tilka's followers. The nonhuman place, on the one hand, acted as their shelter of safety, and on the other, it provided them the guts for the revolt. This Tilakpur forest or the nonhuman surroundings of Tilakpur, Tilka was more than convinced, would prove impregnable for the enemies. Despite the best resistance, Tilka and his comrades-in-arms failed. For Tilka, the yardstick of success or failure was of a completely different dimension. Sarjan Singh, however, couldn't feel like Tilka; nor could he foresee like Tilka. A nagging scepticism hovered and Sarjan Singh couldn't get rid of it.

Conclusion

This is once again an extremely important phase for any EJ literature and I would call it ecoscape phase. In fact, the ecoscape phase is the culmination of the preceding two phases— (a) ecospace phase and (b) ecoplace phase. A sheer ambivalence or a continuum of vacillation happens to be an abiding feature of this phase. The undying indeterminacy about the future of the *Hul* or the future of the forestland creates the trajectory of what I call the ecoscape. This phase is ambivalent in the sense that it is visionary, full of prognostication but equally elusive. Everyone who followed Tilka knows Tilka's vision but till the very last sentence of the novel there is no collective pledge for any concrete action. There is promise for future revolts and for rights over forest; there is even louder promise for dissemination of Tilka's ideas. None, however, is free from ambivalence and this creates before us a grey area which indubitably makes us peep through the rift that invariably exists between the anthropocentric and the ecocentric.

The ecospace phase culminates in a seemingly promising ecoplace phase but the final ecoscape phase reasonably interrogates the earlier two phases. Seen this way, Mahasweta Devi's novel *Salgirar Dake* is neither a dystopia nor a utopia. EJ works, ecocritics argue, deal essentially with either dystopia or utopia. Devi's *Salgirar Dake* stands out as a glaring exception. The heart-of-darkness kind of grey area of the ecoscape phase essentially

problematizes the crux and perspective of *Salgirar Dake*, thereby making it a very special sort of environmental justice literature.

¹ All English translations from Mahasweta Devi's Bengali works including the title of this particular Bengali novel, *Salgirar Dake*, if not mentioned otherwise, are mine.

² The term "ecospace" is my coinage. While using the term I do keep in mind the very vital distinction between "space" and "place" as illustrated by Lawrence Buell in his thought-provoking book *Writing for an Endangered World*: {"Place" as opposed to "space" implies (among other connotations) "space to which meaning has been ascribed", assigned distinctness and value} (59).

³ Human development or degradation is inextricably bound up with ecosystemic flourish or degradation. In other words, human beings are inseparable from the surrounding material environment. Madhab Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have described this inseparability as "transcorporeal" (4).

⁴ At the very outset of the article Buell reminds the readership that none can claim to have perceived place or theorized place definitively. He will, however, try to arrive at a workable conception of place sense which will, in turn, underline the utility of such idea for literary and cultural imagination (Buell 64).

⁵ In Mundari cultural parlance, "Ulgulan" refers to "resistance, mutiny" (*Sabdakosa* 80).

⁶ Place sense is a context of multifold conception and what transforms this multifold conception of place from analytical model to environmental ethic and aesthetic is to be found from the concluding part of Buell's essay "The Importance of Place Imagination" (Buell 78).

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