

Exploring the imperilled tribal tapestry and ecological crisis amid modernity: A critical reading of Mahua Maji's *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua*

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ABSTRACT

Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua is a semi-fictional novel originally written in Hindi by Mahua Maji that explores the intertwined themes of tribal life and ecological crisis due to unsafe, compromised and insensible projects in the name of development and modernity. The story is set in the forest of Saranda, spread across the Singhbhum districts of Jharkhand. The narrative revolves around the lives of Adivasi tribes of the region, who have long coexisted in the natural surroundings. The author, using scientific facts, artfully portrays the lives of tribal people and their deep-rooted connection with the land, forests, and rivers before mining begins in the area. The book uncovers how uranium mining has exposed the locals to deadly radiation and forced them to lose their ancestral lands. This paper attempts to analyze the novel's dealing with global issues, such as the Anthropocene environmental crisis in excavation sites and its impact on local communities. It also seeks to interpret how creative expressions like this can address these complex issues in developing ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Uranium Mining, Tribal, Indigeneity, Modernity, Ecological-consciousness, Health Hazard, Environmental justice.

INTRODUCTION

Mahua Maji, a prominent voice in exploring the crises faced by marginalized communities, has made significant contributions to literature and academia. Her first novel, "Main Borishaila" (The Novel of Bangladesh), was published in 2006. In 2008, its English translation was completed and subsequently included in the B.A. Modern Literature course at "Sapienza University of Rome. Her second novel, *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* (The Saga of Adivasis Struggling with Radiation, Pollution, and Displacement), was published in 2012. In the same year, she received the 'Rajkamal Prakashan Kriti Award: Maila Anchal—Phanishwar Nath Renu Award,' and was also bestowed with the 'Jharkhand Ratna Award' by the Lok Seva Samiti, Jharkhand, and the 'Rajbhasha Award' by the Government of Jharkhand. In 2019, she was awarded the 'Bihar Hindi Sahitya Sammelan Centenary Award,' among others. As an activist and Rajya Sabha MP from Jharkhand, she has an intimate understanding of the ground realities faced by Adivasis in the region. Her literary works bring significant attention to these issues, establishing her academic and literary credibility.

The Hindi novel *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* apparently derives its plot from the 1999 documentary *Buddha Weeps in Jadugoda*, which highlights the devastating effects of uranium mining on the

Adivasi tribes near the Jadugoda mining site in East Singhbhum, Jharkhand. For nearly three decades, substandard mining practices and mismanagement by the Uranium Corporation of India Limited have caused increased radiation levels and environmental contamination, leading to severe health issues, genetic mutations, and the destruction of the local ecosystem. The novel, while fictional, is rooted in the real-life struggles of these tribes, depicting their decline due to modern development's adverse impacts.

Adivasis, who turned to mining for employment, faced harsh conditions and lacked medical aid. Meanwhile, farmers lost their ancestral lands and livelihoods, resulting in cultural disintegration. The novel critiques the post-independence democratic ideals and development policies of modern India, echoing the sentiments from the United Nations' *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* report (2009), which underlines the displacement and economic insecurity faced by the Santhal Adivasis. "Thousands of families of the Santhal Adivasi people in Jharkhand province of India have reportedly been displaced as a result of the extraction of minerals, without proper compensation or economic security." (SOWIP 89)

This paper aims to examine the novel's portrayal of historical and ecological injustices against the Adivasis and to raise awareness of their ongoing struggles, urging readers to reflect on the ignored and underrepresented life challenges of these communities.

The narrative vividly depicts the consequences of uranium mining on the local Adivasi tribes, thus raising awareness of their plight. The novel's detailed descriptions of environmental degradation, health crises, and cultural loss make abstract statistics and reports more tangible and emotionally resonant. Through well-developed characters and personal stories, it humanizes broader socio-political issues, making them more relatable and urgent. The novel critically examines post-independence development policies and the modern nation-state's idea of progress, encouraging readers to reflect on the costs of such development, especially for marginalized communities. By setting the story against the backdrop of historical events and ecological disasters, it educates readers on the long-term impacts of colonialism and modern exploitation, grounding the fictional narrative in factual reality and enhancing its credibility. The portrayal of the Adivasis' resilience and resistance against injustices serves as a powerful call for action, motivating readers to advocate for tribal communities' rights and welfare.

Additionally, by highlighting the Adivasis' cultural disintegration due to displacement and environmental destruction, the novel underlines the importance of preserving tribal cultures and traditions, fostering a deeper appreciation and respect for these communities' way of life, which is otherwise imperilled and on the verge of extinction.

METHODOLOGY

This paper conducts a qualitative analysis of the semi-fictional text "Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua," focusing on uncovering the author's underlying motives in portraying the intricate relationship between indigeneity and the disrupted ecological landscape due to uranium mining. Through a close reading approach, the study aims to discern the deeper intent behind the author's narrative concerning the local tribal community's

interaction with modernity. Historical contextualization plays a crucial role in establishing the legitimacy of local claims to the land, emphasizing their historical rights and ties to the region before mining activities. The author's narrative is validated through cross-referencing with official reports from authorized agencies and analysis of newspaper accounts, ensuring alignment between events in the novel and real-world incidents regarding the environmental hazards posed by the mining site. The analysis extends to examining the impact of mining on the Adivasi tribal community, encompassing social, cultural, and economic repercussions, including displacement and loss of ancestral lands. Ethical considerations are integral to the evaluation, probing how the novel addresses the ethical dimensions of portraying these communities as victims of development. The paper critically engages with broader discussions on development ethics, encouraging reflection on the implications of projects that endanger marginalized communities and their environment. Lastly, the study explores how the novel's creative expression shapes perspectives on sustainable development and raises awareness of Indigenous issues and ecological crises, noting that textual quotations have been translated into English and explained by the author of this paper from the original Hindi text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Historical Context

The Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL), established as a public sector entity post-independence, operates under the Department of Atomic Energy for mining and processing uranium ore. UCIL began its operations in Jaduguda in 1968, an area primarily inhabited by the Santhal and Ho tribes. Traditionally hunters and gatherers, the Santhals transitioned to settled cultivation, with most engaged in farming or agricultural labor. The Ho tribe, concentrated in the Kolhan region, historically inhabited parts of Orissa, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh.

The novel *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* provides a historical account of the Adivasi tribes' plight, rooted in colonial experiences that led to their marginalization. During colonial times, they were barred from entering the forests, crucial for their livelihoods. The narrative highlights how the British exploited the Saranda forests for timber, employing contractors and displacing the indigenous people.

The Saranda forests, meaning “surrounded by 800 hills,” are rich in minerals and serve as the backdrop for the novel, which spans three generations.

The story begins with Jambira of the Ho tribe, referencing the Kol uprising of 1831-32, where Ho ancestors fought against the British and found refuge in the Singhbhum jungles, living harmoniously with the Santhals. Jambira recounts his past to Sukumarni, sharing how he lost his wife, Menjari, in the forest. While narrating he recalls his efforts to gather the *gogong* (bride price) by working for a timber contractor. He reflects on his ancestors' connection to the land, emphasizing their role as caretakers who fought wild beasts and prepared the land for farming. This highlights the irony of their current struggle to claim rightful ownership against corporate encroachments under development pretexts. When Jambira consents to work for

the contractor, Menjari reminds him of their forefathers' courage in defending the forest from British colonialists. She urged Jambira not to submit to the "Angrezo ke Pitthus" (British lackeys), mentioning how their brave ancestors never bowed to forest contractors or outsiders attempting to infringe upon their land rights. (Maji 30). The ancestral land holds deep reverence for Adivasi communities globally, crucial to their identity as recognized by the UN Declaration of 2007.

The novel is an urgent call to tribal communities to remind and reclaim their communal consciousness, which is being threatened by the pressures of modernity and market-driven crony capitalism. Jambira's reflection on his ancestors' struggle against the British, unable to reclaim their land due to missing documentation, questions the fairness of laws imposed by outsiders. (Maji 45). It serves as a rallying call for solidarity among the younger generation to protect their land and sacred forests. He wonders whether the Supreme God foresaw their settlement in this dense jungle, their ancestral home for generations, now restricted by laws preventing their access to the essential resources vital for their livelihoods

Nature-Centric Tribal Philosophy

Vandana Tete, an Adivasi literary critic and activist, emphasizes that "For the Adivasis, the forest is not a resource; it is their life." In Adivasi culture, nature is central as a provider and guiding force in human existence, with a responsibility to coexist with and protect all-natural elements, living or non-living. Unlike the Anthropocene concept, Adivasi philosophy rejects human supremacy over other entities and extends its concern to the entire universe, with no division between humans and non-humans. Tete further argues that An Adivasi cannot be trapped in the wordplay of modernity. The sun is still the sun, the moon is the moon, water is water, human is human, and blood is blood to them." The novel explores similar themes, highlighting how modernity deceives the simple Adivasi community and creates an urgency to address these injustices. It evaluates that real progress and development in a democracy must be inclusive. On the issue of Adivasis' identity amid a mindless roadmap of development at the cost of loss of socio-cultural identity and economic deprivation of the Adivasis, GN Devy writes:

Despite legal provisions aimed at safeguarding communities and their cultures, they [Adivasis] are diminishing and suffering undeserving obsolescence in a world that has been vandalizing the natural resources of the earth as never before...rapid depletion of forest resources had become a major cause of their pauperisation. (Devy xix).

Maji's novel reflect on the systemic forces that have driven tribal communities into poverty. Young Jambira contemplates on the historical injustices against his community, questioning how outsiders became owners of their jungle and imposed taxes collected by village heads for the government treasury. Since colonial times, the encroachment and appropriation of tribal lands have intensified, continuing into post-independence India under the guise of "development through integration." The novel exposes this lop-sided development paradigm, illustrating through characters like Jambira and his grandson Sagen the struggles of Adivasis forced into hazardous mining, including uranium, for their livelihoods. It chronicles the hardships

faced by generations, revealing a systematic conspiracy to seize the mineral-rich lands of Adivasis, leaving them marginalized and impoverished.

Impact of Mining on Local Tribal Communities

In the tribal value system, material and physical comfort are considered insignificant compared to simplicity, mutual trust, and communal labor. They coexist harmoniously with nature, meeting life's needs without extravagance. However, the advent of economic liberalization has manipulated Adivasi communities under the guise of progress, endangering their traditional values and pushing them into extreme deprivation, threatening their cultural and spiritual identity. Jambira's life changed when his land was acquired for a Uranium Mill, and he found work at the processing unit. Despite the income, Sagen, his grandson, noticed the risks and the yellow dust from uranium on Jambira's clothes, which his grandmother diligently washed. Concerned, Sagen asked if his *tatang* felt discomfort. Jambira, brushing off the dust, ironically remarked that the dust was from precious stones worth thousands of rupees, contrasting it with the muddy fields he used to work. (Maji 60). The novel highlights how the members of previous generations like Jambira's trusted development agencies at the cost of their lands and health, were unaware of the risks posed by mining and processing uranium. While content with his earnings, Jambira didn't foresee the health hazards like cancer linked to his job. The story of Jambira's grandson Sagen signifies a shift where younger Adivasis question such developments, indicating a growing awareness and resistance to projects that threaten their way of life.

Health Hazard

The issue of contamination and health concerns of local habitants from uranium production and tailing dams was thoroughly addressed in an International Workshop organised by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2005. These tailings retain a substantial amount of radioactivity from the ore, posing potential hazards. The long-lasting radioactivity exacerbates the risks and contains harmful heavy metals and compounds. The novelist has evidently illustrated the scientific facts about uranium mining, posing a grave ecological crisis. The novel discusses how the tailing dams were created to dispose of waste produced while processing radioactive elements like uranium in the surrounding environment, adversely affecting the flora and fauna of the area — Sagen and his friends had found a new white snowy field to play which became a matter of pride for the Marang Goda and people came from adjacent places to admire the wonder of advancement and wished such fields were created in their villages too. The cattle were grazing near the dams without any worries. Stones with lower uranium content began to be discarded in the dams' waste. Some unaware and ignorant villagers started collecting these stones to build walls around their huts. (Maji 91).

In a survey conducted by Indian Doctors for Peace and Development on the impact of uranium mining on the tribal communities of Jaduguda Jharkhand, it was observed that despite better economic and educational status compared to other surrounding villages with tribal populations, people of Jadugoda are vulnerable to specific health issues. The study outlines a higher prevalence of sterility and a noticeable increase in congenital deformities among children. The child mortality rate in the region is also higher. Moreover, the report suggests that villages surrounding uranium mining operations report higher cancer-

related deaths. (Rahman 7). Jambira worked in the mines to provide for his family, and Sagen was relieved that his grandfather worked in the processing unit, avoiding the dangers of the mines. Despite this, Jambira developed painful, pus-filled wounds and soon passed away, followed by his grandmother's death from severe stomach pain. The author highlights the harmful effects of radiation exposure, such as cancer and reproductive health issues, which the villagers are ill-equipped to handle. Uranium mining has led to water contamination, adversely affecting the local population's health, including kidneys, bones, and various organs. The tribal community faces numerous health hazards like infertility, congenital deformities, chronic lung diseases, cancer, and tuberculosis. The villagers' ignorance and superstitions benefit the Corporation, which conceals its negligence.

An episode in the novel illustrates this when a mysterious disease leads the villagers to falsely accuse Sagen's aunt of being a witch. Sagen, an educated and aware young man, reaches his breaking point and begins to challenge these baseless accusations. After his aunt is forced to leave the village, he embarks on a mission to uncover the truth behind the diseases affecting newborns. Sagen organizes his community to spread awareness and combat superstitions, with Adityashree's support, a journalist committed to exposing the reality of mining at Marang Goda. Together, they document and publicize the mining's harmful effects to inform and protect the community.

The hazardous work of transporting drums filled with uranium waste to the tailings dam carried on laborers' bare hands and backs is also depicted in the book through the lens of Adityashree's video. (Maji 180). It compels an international team of doctors to visit the site where they find a significant number of children with Down syndrome. Sagen is informed that such cases were quite prevalent in Hiroshima and Nagasaki due to radiation. The novel also portrays the anguish of women who had to undergo multiple abortions or faced the sorrow of their children dying within a few days of birth.

Additionally, it sheds light on the unfortunate circumstances where their husbands abandoned a considerable number of women who could not conceive. (Maji 182).

Environmental Concern

Through the characters of Jambira and Sagen, the novel highlights the tribal communities' deep concern about the reckless deforestation in the Saranda Forest and their ancestral heritage. The story beautifully portrays their love and reverence for nature, with Sagen's narrative serving as a call to action for future generations to protect their cultural heritage by preserving the forests (Maji 174). The book aims to give a strong voice to the suffering of Adivasis, enlightening non-Adivasi society about the injustices they face and instilling new awareness about these issues.

Sagen uncovers the truth about uranium mining and tailing dams, mobilizing his community to protect their sacred land from contamination. He actively brings these environmental threats to national and international forums, ensuring future generations are aware of the dangers. The book references Greenpeace, an organization advocating for tribal communities' rights to a clean and healthy environment amidst

modernization. Maji vividly depicts the tailing dam site and its potential climatic impact, underscoring the urgent need for environmental preservation. She describes the catastrophic environmental effects of uranium mining on a local river system. Uranium-laden water, which is contaminated and potentially hazardous, flows from the mining site into a nearby river. This river eventually merges with Swarnrekha, a significant river in Jharkhand, and continues its journey for hundreds of kilometers until it reaches the Bay of Bengal. Along its course, the river provides water to countless people who depend on it for essential daily activities such as drinking, irrigation for their fields, bathing, and general cleansing. The description underscores the far-reaching consequences of contamination, highlighting how the pollutants from mining operations can affect large populations and ecosystems over great distances.

Inspired by Greenpeace's "Rainbow Warriors," Sagen joins their cause, aiming to address his community's injustices and the ecological crisis on a global platform (Maji 179). The narrative also takes readers to Japan, where Adityashree's documentary on Goda is showcased at an international film festival, drawing parallels to the Chernobyl disaster and emphasizing the need for thorough assessment before harnessing nuclear energy (Maji 217).

The novel effectively raises awareness about social justice, human rights, and climate concerns. From an Anthropocene perspective, it highlights how human actions have significantly altered Earth's ecosystems, jeopardizing our survival. It warns against the dire consequences of exploiting nature, particularly unsafe uranium mining, stressing the urgent need for sustainable practices.

Ram Dayal Munda and Dayamani Barla, prominent Adivasi intellectuals, emphasize the adverse effects of modern development on tribal communities. They highlight the dispossession and neocolonial impacts of globalization, liberalization, and privatization on tribal resources and identities (Munda 21, 23; Barla qtd. in Dutta 114). The novel underscores these crises, urging the protection of tribal rights and sustainable resource management. From an eco-feminist standpoint, a nuanced analysis of the issues can be undertaken, explicitly scrutinizing the repercussions of modern development on women and children. Additionally, a comprehensive examination of the intersectionality of marginalization experienced by the underprivileged in our society deserves academic attention, as depicted in the book.

Impact of the Novel

Mahashweta Devi, an eminent tribal activist and writer, praises Maji for her sensitive and profound portrayal of tribal communities in her novel. Devi advocates for the novel's widespread dissemination in schools and colleges, emphasizing its importance in understanding the Adivasi worldview and their reverence for nature. The novel aligns with UNESCO's "Education for Sustainable Development 2030" program, which highlights education's role in addressing environmental concerns and promoting sustainability. ESD aims to foster a holistic understanding of social, economic, and environmental issues, recognizing education as a powerful tool for societal transformation.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples acknowledges the organic relationship between Indigenous communities and their environment. Article 29 grants them the right to conserve and protect their lands and resources, and directs States to assist in these efforts. Despite India voting in favor of this declaration, it denies the existence of Indigenous communities within its borders, complicating their struggle for land rights and identity. The novel exposes the detrimental impact of uranium mining, which corporations downplay, and highlights ongoing issues like water contamination, displacement, and health problems in affected regions.

Maji presents the tribal worldview against the backdrop of their vibrant culture and the panoramic forest setting, urging readers to understand the simple philosophy of Adivasi life and the urgent need to minimize the exploitation of natural resources. Her novel not only provides a compelling narrative but also includes a comprehensive reference list to verify the authenticity of the issues discussed. This approach makes the book more than just fiction but a well-researched document that calls for political action and inclusivity of all in a modern democratic state.

Conclusion

The novel *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* is a powerful narrative that sheds light on the imperilled tapestry of tribal life and the ecological crisis induced by uranium mining in Jharkhand. It poignantly captures the severe environmental degradation resulting from substandard mining practices, illustrating the long-term ecological damage through vivid descriptions of increased radiation levels, water contamination, and soil degradation. These ecological crises are intricately linked to the health crises faced by the Adivasi tribes, who suffer from genetic mutations and chronic illnesses exacerbated by a lack of medical aid. The displacement of Adivasi farmers from their ancestral lands further compounds these issues, leading to the erosion of their cultural identity and traditions. The novel's depiction of these struggles underscores the economic insecurity that arises when traditional livelihoods are replaced by unstable mining jobs, resulting in these communities' marginalized status and pushing them to extreme poverty.

The implications of these findings are profound, offering significant insights into the challenges faced by tribal communities and the ecological crisis in the context of modernity. The detailed portrayal of the Adivasis' struggles raises awareness and is a powerful tool for advocacy, emphasizing the need for more informed and empathetic policy-making. The novel critiques post-independence development policies, encouraging a re-evaluation of what constitutes progress and highlighting the necessity for development models that are inclusive, sustainable, and respectful of Indigenous rights and environmental health. By situating current issues within a historical framework, the novel underscores the long-term impacts of colonialism and exploitation, emphasizing the importance of addressing the root causes of present-day injustices.

To address these issues, several measures must be taken into consideration such as strengthening environmental regulations at the site of forest population to prevent further cultural as well as ecological degradation, improving healthcare infrastructure to address radiation-related health issues, and supporting

initiatives aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of tribal communities. Ensuring fair compensation and sustainable employment opportunities for displaced Adivasi families is crucial, as is involving tribal communities in decision-making processes related to land use and industrial projects. Implementing educational programs that raise awareness about environmental conservation and sustainable practices is also essential. These steps can help protect the rights and welfare of indigenous communities, promote ecological sustainability, and foster a deeper appreciation and respect for the way of life of these marginalized groups. *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* thus serves not only as a literary work but as a clarion call for social justice, human rights, and climate concern at both local and global levels.

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