

# Neo-Malthusian Ethics and Reproductive Collapse in Mahasweta Devi's "Strange Children"

Mary Louisa Cappelli, JD, PhD

*Independent Scholar, former Lecturer Emerson College.*

---

## Abstract

Throughout the globe, the subaltern reproductive body has become an ideological battlefield of patriarchal control and reification in which women's bodies fall prey to a host of gendered, racialized and economic forces. I contend that a close reading of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Strange Children" exposes how Neo-Malthusian *mal*-development projects aimed at undermining adivasi reproductive systems and subsistence livelihoods have subverted urgent policy discussions of redistributive social justice. I specifically read Devi's documentary narrative to testify to how *mal*-development projects have led to reproductive collapse and human rights violations and how adivasis have begun to assert their rights against the many layers of corruption and continuous oppression.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, adivasis, reproductive justice, population control

From British Colonialism to post independence India, Bengali writer and social advocate Mahasweta Devi has witnessed decades of political change that have culminated in India's pivotal presence on the global stage. Inspiring young and old with her strong position in support of India's tribal populations, Devi has been a tireless advocate for the socio-economic protection, security, and political wellbeing of the adivasis, also known as the Scheduled Tribes. What is absent in many discussions of Mahasweta Devi's literature is an analysis of reproductive politics and the sensitive and controversial topic of Neo-Malthusian development projects that consider adivasi populations a major impediment to development. In this chapter, I offer a close reading of Devi's reportage and rich documentation of imagined communities to discern some of the socio-political factors that generate reproductive collapse and the fight for fertility and survival. In "Strange Children," I examine the collision of local pro-natalist values and the international political influence of Neo-Malthusian ethics that focus on development projects, which exasperate economic disparities that exist within the social structures under discussion.

## Discussion

Mahasweta Devi's reportage in "Strange Children" (Sishu) reveals how strategies for tribal assistance and concepts of ethical responsibility have been aimed at population control rather than the real source of the problem—patriarchal and capitalistic exploitation of women's

reproductive systems and India's resources. Devi highlights how sociopolitical control of the subaltern womb has subverted more important discussions—oppressive poverty and the lack of life-sustaining resources that directly contribute to excessive childbearing as social security. In "Strange Children," we witness the rise of gender violence distributed on an unprecedented scale throughout post-independence India. Mahasweta Devi's short documentary narrative testifies to the impact of capital's penetration of the subaltern reproductive systems on the tribals of southeast Bihar. In Devi's (1990) haunting conclusion of "the most heinous crimes against human civilization," genitalia have shriveled up, semen and eggs have dried up and procreative acts have been sexually strangulated (p. 241).

A brief historiography of Indian Famine reveals that famine statistics doubled under British colonization with 31 serious famines compared to 17 famines under Indian rule. Some of the worst famines occurred in the periods between 1876-1879, 1888-1891, and 1896-1902. Reportedly after witnessing the Bengal famine of 1770, Adam Smith (1776) remarked, "a famine has never arisen from any other cause but the violence of government attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconveniencies of a dearth" (p. 286). Devi suggests in the case of the 1978-79 famine in southeast Bihar that the improper means of the state contributed to the inequitable disparity of resources between India's bourgeois elite and tribal populations. "Strange Children" exposes the systematic layers of political corruption that render the adivasis disposable sites of exploitation. Kalpana Bardhan (1990) writes, "The tribals are the casualties of economic development projects, which disenfranchise them for the benefit of other people in other parts of the country" (p. 27). During periods of political transition, women's reproductive systems have become the new commercial frontier to be enclosed, controlled and put at the service of capitalist accumulation. Population control has direct economic and geopolitical advantages for developers seeking to gain control of land and resources. Neo-Malthusianism policies as described in Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (1994) place "women as objects of control and violate the basic feminist tenets of reproductive choice and bodily integrity for women" (p. xi).

"Strange Children" opens in the "burnt out valley" of dry "riverbeds," "stunted trees," and "dark copper colored" "lifeless" soil in a "place called Lohri" (Devi, p. 229). Expelled to this barren landscape "on special assignment" is "honest and compassionate" relief officer, Mr. Singh, on a three-month "loan from the food department" to deliver food supplies to the tribals (Devi, p. 229). Within this setting, the Agariyas who were once blacksmiths cannot make survive (Devi, p. 230); nor, can these tribals practice agriculture as the soil itself is "like a cremation ground" (Devi, p. 229). Instead, the tribals have buried themselves deep within the crevices and caves of the forests to protect themselves from the onslaught of destructive capital forces. Singh's romanticized bourgeoisie Bollywood image of "men playing flutes and tribal women with flowers in their oiled black hair," is devastated by the reality of "his first glimpse" of "naked, emaciated creatures, bellies swollen with worms and sick spleen" (Devi, p. 230). The incessant singing from the mournful chorus conjures the mythohistories and animistic beliefs in spirits that drive their existence and ability to make sense of their ecological predicament. The singing repeats itself incessantly until the tribals all die off.

The block development officer further explains their complicated entrapment in which they resist cultural and economic determinacy by the state by imitating and feigning desired behavior in order to survive on their own terms:

Lohri. The people are the weirdest of the lot. If you gave them land, they would sell it to the moneylender. Then they would glare at you and suddenly complain, 'Where's the water? Where's the seed? Where's the plow? and the buffalo? How can we cultivate

without those? But even if you gave them those things, they would sell everything to the moneylender and then argue back. 'What are we supposed to eat until the crop is ready? We'd borrowed to eat. We have to pay the loan with the land.' (Devi, p. 230)

In this tragic and convoluted interplay, Devi points to the complicated nature of government assistance and the irony and failure of the type of projects that do not consider the socio-cultural, political and geographical factors necessary to engage in effective development projects. It is this failure of communication and the dearth of desire to understand the geo-political others it claims to help that propel the tragic consequences of this narrative.

Devi constructs a cultural foundation for her story by narrating the influential mythohistories in the construction of cultural beliefs and ideologies. Particular to this story is the legend of King Logundi who believed he was greater than the Sun, which provoked The Sun's rage to burn his eleven brothers and Lohri. To further complicate the curse of the Agariya, King Logundi's wife gave birth to Jwalamukhi who also cursed the Sun, who in turn cursed Jwalamukhi turning all "their work as blacksmiths into ashes" (Devi, p. 231). The block officer explains this is why the Agariyas believe that they live in a state of uncleanness, as they have lost their traditional livelihoods and practices. He observes: "That's why the iron demon does not give them iron, the coal demon does not give them coal, and the fire demon does not grant them the right kind of fire" (Devi, pl.231). In establishing this legend, Devi juxtaposes another complicated socio-cultural factor, which competes for adivasi land and resources.

Devi chronicles an omniscient power; this time it is India's post independent government's *mal*-development projects in which land and resource grabbing expand the basis of elite-bourgeois economic progress. In particular in this ethnographic reportage it is the pursuit of resources in Lohri in which two Punjabi officers and a Madrasi geologist were sent to the region to "explore for iron ore" in a sacred hill area inhabited "by their three demon gods" (Devi, p. 232). The government team, discounted the Agariya's animistic beliefs, and detonated the hill most probably emitting non-metallic toxic tailings such as cadman, lead, and arsenic into the atmosphere (Devi, p. 232). M. Mohanty et. al. (2010) observes that the release of iron ores when released can cause environmental degradation. Devi's description of the land as a shade of dried up blood, seems to indicate that the detonation severely impaired an already depleted ecosystem. The block officer notes that nothing grows in the soil, and that when his nephew attempted to do so "nothing came of it. The soil grows no rice, no wheat, no maize, no millet, nothing" to nourish the tribals who must sustain themselves from its "cursed land" (Devi, p. 232). Singh learns from the tax collector that the water he bathes in, the water that fills his morning tea is toxic water and is lugged from the detonated site from the Kuva explosion. "The blast made a crater in the hillside. Water collects in it during the monsoon and serves as our water supply for the rest of the year" (Devi, p. 232). The water becomes a daily reminder of their historical and ecological conditions in a world where the struggle for water grabbing by transnational companies in collusion with governmental authorities has become a global concern.

Seeking revenge for the government actions, the "Agariyas from Kuva village came in the night and butchered them. After that, they escaped into the forest and just disappeared," approximately "one hundred to one hundred and fifty people" (Devi, p. 232). In this brutal massacre, Mr. Singh, the block development officer indifferently recounts how after the police had concluded their investigation they employed strategic scorched earth tactics to prevent land usage by burning down the village and pouring salt over the soil to destroy and prevent further cultivation (Devi, p. 232). This points to how, under the guise of "development," colluding government forces have destroyed Agariya's ecological habitation and reproductive livelihood

rendering them scavenging for food items from do-good relief projects. More importantly, Devi substantiates A. R. Desai's (1990) claims of human rights violations, "that the exploited and oppressed segments of Indian population are not accepting this situation passively and are reluctant to perish" in spite of their emaciated physical conditions (p. viii). In this narration, we witness small-scale resistance tactics. In order to survive, ghostly, emaciated beings steal small portions from the relief supply at night and then descend back into the forests. In addition, in cases of extreme drought and famine the jeep driver notes, "they leave their babies at the mission doo[r]..." delivering them onto Christian missionaries for further reproductive colonization "ruining our religious tradition" and further complicating the layers of infrastructural survival mechanisms (Devi, p. 234).

The block officer recounts the circuitous and complicit route of relief supplies that more often than not fail to reach its designated recipients and instead end up in local markets for sale. "Clothes, blankets, shoes, stoves, pots, and pans donated from all over the world. Didn't they turn up in the markets of Ranchi, and we didn't we buy them?" (Devi, p. 233). Devi charges all segments of consumer society as complicit in the failure and often pilfering of philanthropic donations intended for the poor and marginalized. In this relief project even "College students are coming to work as volunteers" to assist with the relief program (Devi p. 237). Devi's positioning of academia within the emergency relief campaign is a trenchant critique on the convoluted socio-political institutions caught up within the dynamics of global development projects.

Layered on top of this, is the block officer's growing belief in supernatural influences as responsible for the theft of food supplies. He believes that he saw "the children running away with a sack were not like human children" and were "abnormal" in appearance, "sniggering strangely" as they ran off (Devi, p. 233). Initially responsible for the thefts of food supplies in previous years, the tax collector picked "ten Agariya youth" to service the camps and protect Mr. Singh who foolishly believes he has established a trusting relationship with them when they address him as "deota" (Devi, p. 238). The youth, however, are responsible for lifting the tent's entrance and the theft of "a sack of rice and a sack of milo" (Devi, p. 238). The narration ends when the relief officer feels betrayed, his position of *deota* squashed, his do-good image bruised for having trusted the youth. He contemplates: "Is this how they return kindness? By sending children to steal relief supplies?" (Devi, p. 239). He runs after them through the forest and finds them with the sacks at "a huge treeless area, which must be where Jwalamukhi wrestled with the Sun" (Devi, p. 239). They see and approach him and in one of the most haunting observations of the impact of scientific patriarchal policies:

They come closer. Cold terror grips him. Why don't they speak? Why do they approach him so silently? Their bodies are more clearly visible now. But what is he seeing? Why are they naked? Why is their hair grown so long? Why do the little boys have white hair? Why do the little girls have dried leathery breasts hanging from their chests? Why is that one coming forward to him, the one with completely white hair? (Devi, p. 239-40)

These are the people whose reproductive systems have suffered from years of exploitation and dispossession—the enduring disposable skins of the Global South. They have experienced the exhaustive interplay of global, national, and regional resource and land grabbing on an individual level and now are ghosts of their former physical selves. The little girls' "dried and "leathery" breasts suggests the reproductive collapse of a whole generation as their systems have been depleted of the vital energy for procreative fertility.

Indeed, the people reveal that they are the survivors from Kuva, the original Agariyas who descended into the hills after the detonation of their sacred site and the ensuing massacre. It is

the total desecration of their sexual organs that is most disturbing in this story. As the desiccated sexual organs enclose him, he observes: "He is showing him his genitalia: wrinkled, dried up, hanging like a dead object. They are adults! No sound comes out of his mouth, but the realization explodes inside his brain, devastating it like Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (Devi, p. 240). The historical allusions serve to remind us of the oftentimes-devastating and genocidal nature of scientific enlightenment projects. The allusions are juxtaposed against the destruction of their sacred burial grounds and their revenge. The white haired Agariya explains:

Ever since we cut up your folks to save the honor of our gods inside the hill, we've been hiding in the forest. So many soldiers, so many policemen came to catch us. They couldn't. The old man sniggers. Ghoulis chuckles go around. A few of us have lived with the help of the Agariya villagers. The rest of us died off without food, having to hide in the forest for so long. (Devi, p. 240)

The old Agariya chastises him for chasing after him when they had only stolen two bags of food compared to the hundreds of bags that remain. He demands that Singh take a good look at how post independent India has degenerated their bodies and depleted their sexual organs and reproductive procreativity:

The men show him their genitals, the women their withered breasts. The old man is now very close to him. They all come closer. Their genitalia touch him from all sides. They feel dry and repulsive, like cast-off snakeskin. We're down just to these fourteen. Our bodies have shrunk. The men can't do anything with it except piss. The women can't get pregnant. That's why we steal food. We must eat to grow bigger again. Don't you agree? ... The Agariya villagers help us with it. The massacre of Kuva! We're like this because of the massacre of Kuva.

The officer repeats to himself that what he is seeing can't be true. If it is true everything else is false: the Copernican system, science, the twentieth century, the independence of India, the five year plans, all that he has known to be true. He keeps saying, No! No! No!" .... (Devi, p. 240)

Singh's previous reliance on twentieth century notions of Neo-Malthusian ethics, Baconian progress and what he had previously thought to be true has been crushed by the reality of his lived experience, and observations of the impact of the Agariya massacre when they surround him with their naked bodies and rub their sexual organs against him. In this curse of vulnerable nakedness, they are saying in effect: Look at us. Look at how Neo-Malthusian projects and governmental policies have rendered us sexually impotent. The cursed feel this as a threat to the fertility of their communal resources. Singh cannot seem to comprehend their vengeance towards him. He has not experienced the appetite of "American," "Canadian" nor "Russian"; he is "an ordinary Indian" living on the "absolute minimum" calories recommended by the World Health Organization (Devi, p. 241). Devi suggests, however, that Singh, like all the other individuals operating within this interconnected system of global relationships, has indeed colluded in the dispossession and displacement of their community (Devi, p. 241). Devi delivers an incisive critique of how tortured bodies become the historical battleground of deeper socio-economic and political issues, their reproductive systems a discursive site for the examination of insurrection, resistance, and decolonization. In this instance, Devi positions the sexual organs to represent the horror of post-independence India's genocidal policies towards the adivasis, in which, in human terms, people struggle daily to reproduce their livelihoods under governmental duress.

Singh's "sheer frustration" renders him incapable of screaming at the violent horror that he witnesses. Instead, he "starts to weep" (Devi, p. 241). In the end, neither emotion will serve to end the *mal*-development policies and its association of national, regional, and local actors that contributed to the systematic reproductive collapse and socio-geographical peripheralization of the adivasis.

### Conclusion and Future Study

Mahasweta Devi's "Strange Children" urgently compels an examination of the super-exploitation of adivasi communities reminding us that a close reading of literature provides a discursive space to examine historical conditions and real events (Spivak, 2008, p. 106). As a form of ethnographic reportage, Devi creates a personal space for the individual to understand how adivasi communities have been politically marginalized to the most remote areas of the forests and must struggle to survive under the most extreme ecological conditions. Systematic land, water, and resource grabbing by government and extractive national and multinational industries have pushed the adivasis to the edge of existence. Despite the pressures of large-scale development projects and forced displacement and dispossession of millions of adivasis, Devi reports that adivasi communities still exist despite economic and geopolitical marginalization. In "Strange Children," we witness small acts of local resistance and how communities manage to reproduce and sustain themselves under the most hostile of Neo-Malthusian development projects.

### References

- Devi, Mahasweta. (1997). *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*. Kolkata: Seagull Book.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Imaginary Maps*. (1994). Trans. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. New York: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1990) *Of Women, Outcasts, Peasants, and Rebels*. Trans. Kalpana Bardhan. Berkeley: University of California.
- Desai. A. R. (1990). *Repression and Resistance in India: Violation of Democratic Rights of the Working Class Rural Poor, Adivasis and Dalits*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan Pvt. Ltd, Print.
- Mohanty, M., Nabin, K.D., Patra, P. Das, B., Rama Reddy & Sita, Palli. (2010). Phytoremediation: A Novel Approach for Utilization of Iron-ore Wastes. *Reviews of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology*, 206, 129-47.
- Smith, John. (1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell. Revi.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (2008). "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's 'Stanadayini'." *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Ed. Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav. New Delhi: Pencraft International,

*Mary Cappelli is a graduate and interdisciplinary scholar from USC, UCLA, and Loyola Law School, where she studied anthropology, theater film and television, law and literature. A former Lecturer at Emerson College, she currently researches the impact of globalization on indigenous populations in Africa and Central America.*