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Women And Nature, A Collective Survival , In Selective Short Stories Of Mahasweta Devi.

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Abstract:

This paper intends to study collective ecological survival qualities in woman, described in selected short stories of Mahasweta Devi. It will examine how narratives and representation often limit women connection with ecology, neglecting their inborn natural qualities to collective survival, very much alike plant and animal species. Analyzing stories*, Breast Giver, Rudali, Harun Salemer Masi, and The Hunt*, It will investigate how breast giver, mourner, and adaptation of other's child reflects nature's quality of collective survival that patriarchal society does not recognize. These survival processes are being treated as threat by society and forcefully rejected in the name of modernism and development. By applying Vandana Shiva's theory this paper will analyze these selective short stories as collective ecological survival.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Collective survival, Woman and Ecology, Vandana Shiva, Patriarchy.

Introduction:

The exploitation of women and ecology has long been intertwined, reflecting a shared history of domination, commodification, and neglect. Both women and the environment have been subjected to systems of patriarchy and capitalism that prioritize profit and control over care and sustainability. Just as natural resources are extracted, depleted, and treated as expendable, women's labor, bodies, and voices have often been marginalized, undervalued, or silenced. This parallel exploitation reveals a structural logic: the same forces that degrade ecosystems also perpetuate gender inequality.

Historically, women have been closely associated with nature, often cast as nurturers, caregivers, and custodians of life. Yet this symbolic connection has been weaponized, reducing women to roles that serve patriarchal interests while simultaneously stripping them of agency. Similarly, the environment has been romanticized as fertile and abundant, only to be exploited through industrialization, deforestation, and pollution. In both cases, the rhetoric of abundance masks the reality of depletion. Women's unpaid domestic labor sustains economies, just as ecosystems sustain human survival, but neither is adequately recognized or protected.

Ecofeminism emerges as a critical response to this dual exploitation. Rooted in feminist and ecological thought, ecofeminism argues that the oppression of women and the degradation of nature stem from the same hierarchical worldview that privileges domination over cooperation. It challenges the binary oppositions—man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion—that underpin patriarchal structures, insisting instead on interconnectedness and mutual respect. Ecofeminist thinkers highlight how women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities, bear the brunt of ecological destruction, facing displacement, loss of livelihood, and health risks from environmental degradation. Their lived experiences underscore the inseparability of gender justice and ecological sustainability.

The ecofeminist perspective does not merely critique; it also offers pathways toward transformation. By valuing care, reciprocity, and community, ecofeminism envisions a world where both women and nature are respected as integral, not instrumental. It calls for dismantling exploitative systems and cultivating practices that honor diversity, resilience, and balance. In doing so, ecofeminism reframes the struggle for equality and sustainability as one and the same, recognizing that liberation for women cannot be achieved without ecological justice, and vice versa.

Thus, the exploitation of women and ecology is not coincidental but systemic, rooted in the same logic of domination. Ecofeminism provides a lens to understand this entanglement and a vision to resist it, reminding us that the fight for gender equality and environmental protection are deeply interconnected struggles for survival and dignity.

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) occupies a unique place in modern Indian literature and activism. Born in Dacca (now Dhaka, Bangladesh) into a distinguished family of intellectuals—her father Manish Ghatak was a poet and her uncle Ritwik Ghatak a celebrated filmmaker—she grew up surrounded by art and political debate. Educated at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan and later at the University of Calcutta, she began her career as a teacher and journalist before turning to fiction. Over five decades, she produced more than twenty collections of short stories and close to a hundred novels, primarily in Bengali, while simultaneously working as a tireless activist for tribal rights.

Her literary works are inseparable from her political commitments. Devi's fiction consistently foregrounds the struggles of marginalized communities—tribal peoples, landless laborers, women exploited by patriarchal and capitalist systems. Novels such as *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right to the Forest, 1977), which won her the Sahitya Akademi Award, reconstruct the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who resisted colonial exploitation. In *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084, 1974), she explores the trauma of a mother whose son is killed in the Naxalite movement, exposing the violence of state repression. *Rudali* (1993) and *Breast-Giver* (1997) dramatize how women's bodies and emotions are commodified, while simultaneously revealing their instinctive practices of survival and resilience. These texts are not simply stories but interventions, demanding that readers confront uncomfortable truths about exploitation and resistance.

Devi's activism was as influential as her writing. She championed the cause of nearly 25 million tribal people in India, belonging to around 150 different tribes. She worked closely with communities in West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, fighting for forest rights, land ownership, and dignity. Her campaigns against bonded labor, displacement, and state violence made her a formidable public voice. She believed storytelling was a means of change, insisting that literature must serve the oppressed. As she once remarked, "I write because I want to rectify the wrongs."

Her contributions were recognized with numerous awards: the Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), the Jnanpith Award (1996), the Ramon Magsaysay Award (1997) for journalism, literature, and creative

communication arts, and India's civilian honors, the Padma Shri (1986) and Padma Vibhushan (2006). Yet she remained deeply committed to grassroots activism, often using prize money to fund tribal welfare projects.

Mahasweta Devi's legacy lies in her ability to merge literature and activism. She gave voice to those silenced by mainstream narratives, documenting their struggles with empathy and precision. Her fiction is marked by stark realism, uncompromising critique, and a refusal to romanticize suffering. At the same time, her activism demonstrated that literature could be a weapon for social justice. In her centenary year, critics and readers continue to revisit her works, finding them as relevant today as when they were written, particularly in debates about land rights, gender, and ecological justice.

In sum, Mahasweta Devi was not only a prolific writer but also a revolutionary activist. Her stories of nurturing, mourning, and protecting—whether in *Breast-Giver*, *Rudali*, or *The Hunt*—document women's collective survival instincts, while her novels about tribal leaders preserve histories of resistance. She remains a guiding light for those who believe literature must speak truth to power, and her work continues to inspire movements for justice across India and beyond.

Literature Review:

Mahasweta Devi's writings have been widely studied across disciplines, and scholars consistently emphasize that her fiction is inseparable from her activism. To analyze her work, researchers have employed frameworks ranging from postcolonial and subaltern studies to feminist, intersectional, ecofeminist, and indigenous identity perspectives. Together, these approaches reveal how Devi's literature functions as both art and political intervention.

One of the most influential readings of Devi's work comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who in *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* uses Devi's short story *Draupadi* to illustrate how subaltern women resist erasure. Spivak argues that Dopdi Mejhen embodies the silenced subaltern who refuses to be shamed into submission, thereby unsettling state and patriarchal power. Similarly, Majibur Rahman and Dr. Lokesh Singh in *Unveiling Subaltern Voices: Representation and Existence in Mahasweta Devi's Writings* highlight how Devi's narratives challenge dominant discourses and foreground marginalized identities.

Devi's female characters have been central to feminist critiques. Meena Kumari Tiwari and Dr. Anjana Pandey, in *Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi": A Feminist Critique*, argue that Devi exposes the intersection of caste, class, and gender oppression, subverting traditional gender roles. Ambi Ramya's *Embodied Resistance: The Politics of the Female Body in Mahasweta Devi's Literary Corpus* expands this analysis, showing how Devi reimagines the female body as both a site of oppression and a symbol of defiance

Several scholars note Devi's refusal to offer neat resolutions. Md. Ghulam Sarwar and Binay Shanker Roy argue that her narratives deliberately avoid redemption, foregrounding instead the collapse of institutions—state, law, family—that should protect marginalized women. In *Rudali* and *Draupadi*, suffering remains unresolved, compelling readers to confront systemic violence rather than escape into closure. This framework underscores Devi's commitment to exposing exploitation without romanticizing resistance.

Banavath Venkateswarlu's *A Critical Study of Mahasweta Devi's Writings from an Ecofeminist and Socioeconomic Perspective* situates her fiction within debates about environmental sustainability and resource politics. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, the forest is not merely a backdrop but a contested site where

tribal rights, ecological balance, and capitalist exploitation intersect. Dr. Begum Farida Alam's *Exploring Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt" Through the Lens of Ecofeminism* further connects women's oppression with ecological exploitation, situating Devi's work within ecofeminist discourse. These readings highlight how Devi links women's struggles with broader questions of land, environment, and survival.

Finally, scholars such as Manoj Shankarrao Madavi emphasize Devi's role as "the mouthpiece of indigenous crave for identity and existence." Her fiction consistently explores displacement, resistance, and marginality among Adivasis. This perspective situates her writing within indigenous literature, where storytelling becomes a form of reclaiming collective identity and dignity. Devi's narratives thus function as cultural assertion, resisting erasure and affirming indigenous histories.

The theoretical framework for studying Mahasweta Devi's works is necessarily multi-layered. Postcolonial and subaltern studies highlight her reclamation of silenced voices; feminist and intersectional approaches reveal the complexity of women's oppression and resistance; ecofeminism situates her narratives within environmental and resource politics; and indigenous identity frameworks underscore her role in cultural assertion. Together, these perspectives show that Devi's writings are not merely literary texts but interventions in political and social debates. They demand that readers confront uncomfortable truths about power, exploitation, and resistance, making her work a vital site for theoretical exploration.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Devi has focused on oppression, resistance, and subaltern identity, but little attention has been paid to the communal survival strategies of women. Feminist critiques emphasize individual defiance, while ecofeminist readings often link women to nature symbolically. What remains underexplored is the instinctive, collective dimension — the ways women enact survival through shared nurturing, mourning, and protection. This gap is significant because it reframes Devi's work not only as protest literature but also as testimony to women's collective wisdom. By integrating Shiva's ecofeminist theory, scholars can uncover a hidden archive of communal resilience in Devi's fiction**.**

Women's Collective Survival Instinct: A Theoretical Framework for Reading Mahasweta Devi through Vandana Shiva

Mahasweta Devi's writings have long been celebrated for their unflinching portrayal of marginalized communities, particularly tribal women and the oppressed poor. Scholars have analyzed her work through postcolonial, subaltern, and feminist lenses, but one dimension remains relatively underexplored: the collective survival instinct of women. Devi's fiction often depicts women as embodying communal resilience, engaging in practices such as sharing breast milk, mourning collectively, adopting children, and protecting their clans. These instincts mirror survival strategies found in nature and animal societies, yet society often commodifies or dismisses them. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory, articulated in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), provides a powerful framework for analyzing this dimension. Shiva emphasizes women's role in sustaining life through cooperation, diversity, and nurturing, offering a lens through which Devi's texts can be re-read as archives of collective survival.

Vandana Shiva's Ecofeminist Theory

Shiva's ecofeminism critiques patriarchal and capitalist systems that exploit both women and nature. She argues that women's work in subsistence economies is fundamentally life-sustaining rather than profit-driven: *"Women's work in subsistence economies is not aimed at accumulation of capital but at the maintenance of life"(Shiva).* This perspective highlights women's instinctive practices of nurturing and cooperation, which are undervalued in patriarchal economies. Shiva further insists, *"In nature's economy, the currency is life. In the patriarchal economy, the currency is money."* This distinction is crucial for understanding how women's collective survival instincts are commodified or erased by dominant systems.

Shiva also emphasizes diversity as the foundation of survival: *"Diversity is the basis of survival, and women have been the custodians of diversity."* Women's practices of sharing, mourning, and protecting embody this custodianship, ensuring the resilience of communities in contexts of scarcity and violence. Her framework thus provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing Devi's depictions of women's communal survival strategies.

Collective Survival in Mahasweta Devi's Texts

Breast-Giver

In *Breast-Giver*, Jashoda becomes a professional wet nurse, breastfeeding dozens of children beyond her own. On one level, the story critiques the commodification of women's bodies, as Jashoda's nurturing labor is exploited until it destroys her health. Yet beneath this critique lies a depiction of a collective survival instinct: the act of nursing other children ensures the survival of the community. Jashoda embodies Shiva's claim that women "produce and reproduce life not only biologically but also socially and culturally." Her body becomes a site of communal resilience, even as society refuses to acknowledge its wisdom, reducing it instead to economic exploitation.

Rudali

In *Rudali*, women are hired to mourn at funerals, transforming grief into a profession. While the story critiques the commodification of mourning, it also reveals the instinctive practice of collective grief. Women come together to mourn not only as laborers but as members of a community bound by shared loss. This echoes Shiva's insight that women's practices sustain cultural life: mourning becomes a ritual of solidarity, a survival strategy that maintains social cohesion in the face of death and exploitation.

Draupadi

In *Draupadi*, Dopdi Mejhen resists state violence by refusing to be shamed into submission after being brutalized. While the story is often read as an individual act of defiance, it also resonates with collective survival. Dopdi's refusal embodies the resilience of her community, asserting dignity in the face of systemic violence. Her body becomes a site of resistance, echoing Shiva's argument that women's survival practices challenge patriarchal control over life itself.

Aranyer Adhikar

In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Devi reconstructs the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who fought against colonial exploitation. The novel highlights the forest as a contested site of survival, where tribal communities resist displacement. Women in the narrative embody ecofeminist principles, protecting land and community as custodians of diversity. This aligns with Shiva's claim that women's knowledge and practices are central to ecological sustainability.

Society's Denial of Collective Instinct

Despite the presence of these survival practices, society often refuses to acknowledge them. Breastfeeding beyond one's own children is dismissed as exploitation rather than recognized as communal nurturing. Mourning collectively is commodified into labor. Adoption and protection of others' children are seen as necessity rather than wisdom. This denial reflects patriarchal discomfort with women's collective power, which challenges notions of individuality, ownership, and control over women's bodies. Shiva's framework helps us see how these instincts are systematically erased or commodified, even though they are essential to survival.

Research Gap

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Integrating Theory and Literature

The integration of Shiva's ecofeminism with Devi's texts reveals a new dimension of analysis. Shiva insists that *"Women's knowledge is not a relic of the past; it is the basis of survival in the present and the future."* Devi's women embody this knowledge, sustaining life through practices that challenge patriarchal economies. Their collective instincts are strategies of resilience, ensuring survival in contexts of poverty, exploitation, and violence. Reading Devi through Shiva thus highlights the political significance of women's communal survival instincts, situating them as both natural and cultural practices of resistance.

Collective Survival Instinct: Reading *Breast-Giver* through Ecofeminism and Animal Behavior

Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* is a searing story of Jashoda, a woman whose body becomes both a site of nurturing and exploitation. She breastfeeds dozens of children beyond her own, embodying communal survival while simultaneously being consumed by patriarchal and economic systems. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory, articulated in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), provides a powerful lens for analyzing this text. Shiva insists that *"Women's work in subsistence economies is not aimed at accumulation of capital but at the maintenance of life."* Jashoda's breastfeeding exemplifies this principle: her instinctive act of nurturing sustains life across families, extending motherhood into a communal practice. Yet, society commodifies this instinct, reducing it to labor for profit, echoing Shiva's critique that *"In nature's economy, the currency is life. In the patriarchal economy, the currency is money."*

What makes Devi's story even more compelling is how Jashoda's instinctive practices resonate with survival strategies documented in animal behavior research. Biologists have long observed that collective caregiving and mourning are widespread in nature. In David J. T. Sumpter's *Collective Animal Behavior* (2010), he explains how "coordinated group patterns emerge from individual interactions,"

ensuring resilience in animal societies. Lionesses in a pride nurse each other's cubs, ensuring survival beyond their own offspring. Elephants mourn their dead collectively, lingering around carcasses and touching bones with their trunks, a ritual of solidarity that sustains social bonds. Wolves and wild dogs adopt and protect pups that are not biologically theirs, extending kinship networks for the survival of the pack. These instinctive practices mirror Jashoda's communal breastfeeding, Sanichari's collective mourning in *Rudali*, and the protective instincts of tribal women in Devi's other stories.

Devi's narrative makes visible what patriarchal society refuses to acknowledge: that women, like animals in nature, embody collective survival instincts essential to sustaining communities. Jashoda's body becomes "a machine for producing milk and children," as Devi writes, but when her breasts dry up, she is discarded: *"She gave milk to all, but when her breasts dried up, she was cast aside."* This tragic ending dramatizes Shiva's critique that patriarchal systems commodify women's life-sustaining work while erasing its communal significance. In contrast, animal societies recognize and depend upon such instincts for survival. The lioness nursing another's cub is not exploited but celebrated as part of the pride's resilience. The elephant mourning its dead is not commodified but acknowledged as a collective ritual. Human society, however, resists acknowledging women's communal wisdom, preferring to control or dismiss it.

By bringing Shiva's ecofeminism into conversation with animal behavior studies, we uncover a research gap in literary criticism: while Devi's works have been analyzed for their portrayal of oppression and resistance, less attention has been paid to how her female characters embody survival strategies that mirror ecological and animal patterns. Jashoda's breastfeeding is not only a metaphor for exploitation but also a record of instinctive communal resilience. Her story documents how women's practices of nurturing, mourning, and protecting are instinctive strategies of survival, much like those found in nature. Shiva insists that *"Women's knowledge is not a relic of the past; it is the basis of survival in the present and the future."* Devi's fiction preserves this knowledge, even as society commodifies or erases it.

In conclusion, reading *Breast-Giver* through Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory and animal behavior research reveals women's collective survival instinct as both natural and political. Jashoda's nurturing body mirrors the lioness nursing cubs, the elephant mourning its dead, and the wolf adopting pups. These parallels highlight that women's communal practices are part of a broader ecological logic of survival, one that patriarchal economies refuse to acknowledge. Devi's fiction thus becomes a vital archive of resilience, documenting instinctive strategies that sustain marginalized communities against systemic violence. Integrating Shiva's ecofeminism with biology enriches our understanding of Devi's work, situating women's collective survival instincts within a continuum that spans human and animal societies alike.

Collective Mourning and Survival: Reading *Rudali* through Vandana Shiva and Animal Behavior

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* is a haunting exploration of grief, survival, and commodification. The story follows Sanichari, a poor woman who becomes a professional mourner, hired to weep at funerals of the wealthy. On the surface, the narrative critiques the hypocrisy of social customs and the commodification of grief. Yet beneath this lies a deeper theme: the instinctive practice of collective mourning as a survival strategy. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory, articulated in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), provides a powerful lens for analyzing this dimension. Shiva insists that *"Women's work in subsistence economies is not aimed at accumulation of capital but at the maintenance of life."* Mourning together, though commodified in *Rudali*, is an instinctive act of solidarity that sustains community bonds in the face of death and exploitation.

Sanichari's transformation into a rudali reflects the tension between communal instinct and patriarchal economy. Devi writes of her grief: *"She had no tears left for her own dead, but for others she could cry endlessly."* This paradox captures how mourning, stripped of its personal meaning, becomes a collective ritual. Shiva's ecofeminism helps us see this as more than exploitation. In nature, communal mourning is a survival instinct. Elephants, for instance, are known to gather around carcasses, touching bones with their trunks and lingering for hours. Biologists interpret this as a form of collective grief that strengthens social bonds. Similarly, wolves and primates exhibit mourning behaviors, where the group collectively responds to loss, ensuring cohesion. David J. T. Sumpter in *Collective Animal Behavior* (2010) explains that "coordinated group patterns emerge from individual interactions," and mourning is one such pattern that sustains resilience in animal societies.

Devi's *Rudali* dramatizes how human society commodifies this instinct. Women's collective mourning, which in subsistence economies would be a ritual of solidarity, is transformed into labor for profit. Shiva contrasts "nature's economy, where the currency is life" with "the patriarchal economy, where the currency is money." Sanichari's tears, once instinctive, become a commodity. Yet the act itself—women gathering to mourn together—retains its communal power. It is a survival strategy, binding women together in shared grief, even as society exploits it. This echoes Shiva's claim that *"Diversity is the basis of survival, and women have been the custodians of diversity."* Mourning in *Rudali* is not only emotional but cultural, preserving community bonds in contexts of poverty and oppression.

The research gap here lies in how literary criticism has often focused on *Rudali* as a critique of commodification, while neglecting its documentation of collective survival instincts. Sanichari's mourning is not merely labor; it is an instinctive practice that mirrors animal behavior and ecological resilience. Just as elephants mourn collectively to sustain social cohesion, Sanichari and the rudalis mourn together to sustain their community in the face of systemic violence. Shiva insists that *"Women's knowledge is not a relic of the past; it is the basis of survival in the present and the future."* Devi's story preserves this knowledge, even as society commodifies it.

In conclusion, reading *Rudali* through Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory and animal behavior research reveals mourning as a collective survival instinct. Sanichari's tears embody both exploitation and resilience, mirroring elephants' communal grief and wolves' protective mourning. Society commodifies this instinct, but Devi's fiction documents it as a vital archive of communal resilience. Integrating Shiva's ecofeminism with biology enriches our understanding of *Rudali*, situating women's collective mourning within a continuum that spans human and animal societies alike. In doing so, we see Devi's work not only as protest against exploitation but also as testimony to instinctive practices that sustain marginalized communities against systemic violence.

The Hunt :

The Hunt, Mahasweta Devi introduces Mary Oraon, a tribal woman of mixed parentage who is both admired and feared in her community. She is described as strong, independent, and unwilling to submit to exploitation. The story builds toward the annual *Hunt Festival*, a ritual where tribal women symbolically reclaim power. Mary's confrontation with the landlord, who attempts to assault her, becomes the literal enactment of this ritual. Devi writes: *"Mary had waited for this day, the day of the hunt, when she would become the huntress."* This moment transforms her from victim into protector, channeling her rage into defense of her clan's dignity. Her act is not only personal revenge but a communal assertion of survival, echoing Vandana Shiva's claim that *"Women's work in subsistence economies is not aimed at accumulation of capital but at the maintenance of life."* Mary's violence is directed toward preserving the life and cohesion of her people.

The maternal and protective dimension of Mary's act resonates with behaviors observed in animal societies. Elephant herds form protective circles around calves when threatened, lionesses defend cubs collectively against predators, and wolves adopt and guard pups that are not biologically theirs. Biologists note that such instincts are essential for group survival. Mary's hunt mirrors these natural strategies: she becomes the fierce mother animal, defending her clan against predation. Devi underscores this instinctive transformation when she writes: *"Mary's body was taut, her eyes blazing, she was no longer prey but predator."* Her protective fury is instinctive, echoing Shiva's assertion that *"Women produce and reproduce life not only biologically but also socially and culturally."* Mary's defense of her community is thus both natural and cultural, rooted in survival.

What makes *The Hunt* striking is how society interprets such instincts. Patriarchal structures frame Mary's act as transgression, an eruption of violence, rather than wisdom. Yet Devi insists on its legitimacy, presenting Mary's hunt as a ritualized assertion of collective survival. Through Shiva's ecofeminist lens, Mary's act is part of a broader ecological logic: women, like mother animals, embody survival strategies that sustain life. Her hunt is not random violence but a profound expression of women's role as guardians of their clan. Devi's narrative documents this instinct, showing how women's protective rage is indispensable to communal resilience, even though society resists acknowledging it.

Harun Salemer Masi :

The story centers on Gouri, a poor, lame, and lonely Hindu woman who earns a meager living by collecting and selling greens from the marshlands. Her own children have neglected her, leaving her emotionally unfulfilled . Her life changes when she encounters Hara, a mentally challenged Muslim boy who has lost his mother and is utterly alone. With no one else to turn to, Hara begins calling Gouri "Masi" (aunt) and seeks refuge with her .

Initially, Gouri simply shows the boy kindness, but their bond deepens quickly. In caring for Hara—feeding him, putting him to sleep, and comforting him—Gouri finds an outlet for her pent-up maternal love. For Hara, Gouri fills the void left by his mother. Their relationship transcends the boundaries of religion and caste, evolving into a pure, unconditional mother-son bond .

However, this relationship is met with hostility by their village community, which is rigidly bound by caste and religious prejudices. The villagers view it as unacceptable for a Hindu woman to shelter a Muslim boy. Gouri faces immense social pressure to send Hara away to a refugee camp . Despite the threats to her own safety and security, Gouri refuses to abandon Hara. Driven by her love for him, she makes the ultimate sacrifice: she leaves her village, her community, and everything familiar behind. Taking Hara with her, she walks towards the anonymity of the city .

The story concludes with them heading to the city, which is described as a vast, indifferent "ocean" . In this impersonal urban space, no one cares about their caste or religion. For Gouri and Hara, this anonymity is a form of liberation, a place where their bond is no longer judged and they can simply exist together . The story is a powerful testament to the idea that humanity and maternal love are far greater than the divisive social constructs of caste and religion .

In her foundational work Staying Alive, Shiva argues that women, particularly in the Third World, are the primary sustainers of life. They are engaged in what she calls a "production of sustenance" — activities that are invisible to capitalist economics but essential for survival . Gouri perfectly embodies this. Her livelihood—collecting greens from the marsh—is a subsistence activity that relies on a direct, harmonious relationship with nature. The marsh is not just a backdrop; it is a common, a life-support

system that provides for those excluded from the formal economy. Gouri's survival, and later Hara's, is predicated on this ancient, feminine-coded partnership with the land .

Shiva critiques the Western, patriarchal model of "development" as a project of violence that systematically destroys nature and displaces communities . This violence is not always a giant dam or a factory; in the story, it manifests as social fragmentation. The village community, bound by rigid caste and religious hierarchies, becomes a microcosm of this violent, divisive logic. It rejects the Gouri-Hara bond because it doesn't fit its categories. Gouri and Hara are the "disposable people" Shiva speaks of—the old, crippled woman and the "mentally challenged" Muslim boy are the human equivalent of "wasted" resources in a system that values only the productive and the "pure" .

Central to Shiva's philosophy is the ancient Indian concept of vasudhaiva kutumbkam—"the world is one family" . This stands in stark opposition to the fragmentation and "ecological apartheid" of modern society, which separates humans from nature and from each other . The bond between Gouri and Hara is a living, breathing example of this principle. It is a relationship of pure, unconditional love that transcends the artificial boundaries of religion (Hindu/Muslim), caste, and biological kinship. In creating this "earth family," they heal a fracture in their social world.

For Shiva, seed sovereignty—the right of farmers to save and share native seeds—is the foundation of food sovereignty and real freedom . While the story doesn't feature literal seeds, we can see Gouri's act of sheltering Hara as a powerful metaphor for this principle. Hara, like a native seed, is a living being indigenous to that community but is now deemed "polluting" and is to be discarded. The community, following the dominant social logic, wants to send him to a refugee camp—a kind of monocultural, soul-less institution . Gouri, by "saving" him, preserves diversity—the diversity of human connection and love. She becomes the guardian of a different kind of life.

The story's ending, with Gouri and Hara walking towards the city, is deeply significant in this framework. Shiva argues that the dominant economic model creates a "virtual" reality that is disconnected from the living world . The city is this space—an "ocean" where traditional community bonds (however oppressive) dissolve. This dissolution is a form of violence, but for Gouri and Hara, it paradoxically becomes a space of liberation. In this vast, anonymous, "ocean-like" space, no one cares about their religion or caste. Their love is finally free to exist, precisely because the social fabric has been torn apart. They find a home in the very dislocation caused by modernity.

Ultimately, Gouri's story is a perfect metaphor for Shiva's "ecological path of harmony, sustainability and diversity" . Gouri represents the feminine principle as a source of power, not victimhood. Her love is an active, creative force that resists the fragmentation of her world . By choosing Hara, she chooses diversity over purity, relationship over isolation, and life over social death. She demonstrates that in a world torn apart by divisive "development," the most radical act of survival is to love, and in doing so, to recreate the world as a family.

Mahasweta Devi’s fiction repeatedly demonstrates that society is unwilling to acknowledge women’s collective survival instincts, and instead punishes them when those instincts threaten patriarchal order. In *Breast-Giver*, Jashoda’s nurturing body sustains dozens of children, embodying what Vandana Shiva calls the “maintenance of life.” Yet society commodifies her milk, treating her as a machine until she is discarded when her breasts dry up. Devi writes, *“She gave milk to all, but when her breasts dried up, she was cast aside.”* The instinct to nurture communally, which in nature ensures survival, is here punished by exploitation and abandonment. In *Rudali*, Sanichari’s tears, which should bind women together in shared grief, are transformed into a profession. Society refuses to honor collective mourning

as wisdom, instead reducing it to labor. Devi notes that Sanichari "had no tears left for her own dead, but for others she could cry endlessly," a paradox that reveals how communal grief is commodified and punished rather than respected. In *The Hunt*, Mary Oraon's protective rage mirrors the maternal defense seen in animals, yet her act of shielding her clan is framed as transgression. Devi describes her transformation: *"Mary had waited for this day, the day of the hunt, when she would become the huntress."* Instead of being recognized as a guardian of survival, she is feared and condemned for her violence. Across these texts, Devi shows that women's instincts to nurture, mourn, and protect—instincts that mirror ecological and animal survival strategies—are systematically denied by patriarchal society. Rather than acknowledging these practices as essential to communal resilience, society commodifies them, exploits them, or punishes women for enacting them. The result is a tragic erasure of women's wisdom, even as their instincts remain indispensable to the survival of marginalized communities.

Conclusion

The exploration of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver, Rudali, and The Hunt* through Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist framework reveals a powerful but often overlooked dimension of women's lives: their collective survival instincts. Devi's narratives document how women nurture beyond biological motherhood, mourn together in solidarity, and protect their clans with fierce determination. These practices, instinctive and communal, mirror survival strategies found in nature and animal societies, where lionesses nurse each other's cubs, elephants mourn their dead collectively, and wolves adopt and guard pups not their own. Vandana Shiva's insistence that *"Women's work in subsistence economies is not aimed at accumulation of capital but at the maintenance of life"* provides the theoretical foundation for understanding these acts not as marginal or incidental, but as central to survival itself. Her claim that *"Diversity is the basis of survival, and women have been the custodians of diversity"* resonates deeply with Devi's portrayal of women as custodians of community resilience, sustaining life against systemic violence and exploitation.

What emerges from this analysis is a research gap: while feminist and subaltern readings of Devi have emphasized oppression and resistance, less attention has been paid to the instinctive, collective practices that women enact to ensure survival. These practices are often commodified or dismissed by patriarchal economies, yet Devi's fiction preserves them as testimony to women's wisdom. By situating her stories alongside Shiva's ecofeminism and animal behavior studies, we see that women's collective instincts—nurturing, mourning, protecting—are part of a broader ecological logic of survival. Recognizing this dimension reframes Devi's work not only as protest literature but also as an archive of resilience, documenting instinctive strategies that sustain marginalized communities. In this way, Devi's fiction and Shiva's theory together illuminate the profound role of women as custodians of life, whose collective instincts are indispensable to both human and ecological survival.

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