

## **Rhetoric of Resistance: A Study of Sarah Joseph's *Budhini* and Mahua Maji's *The Toxic Tribal Land of Marang Goda***

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### *Abstract*

*Writing can be a powerful form of resistance in the hands of writers intending to bring about change. In contemporary society, environmental resistance grounded on indigenous knowledge, has emerged as a significant concern for the writers in the context of globalization and neoliberalism. Indian writers in vernacular languages as Sarah Joseph and Mahua Maji, effectively voice the issues and perspectives of Indigenous communities worldwide who suffer from pollution, radiation and displacement in the name of resource development. This paper aims to examine Sarah Joseph's *Budhini* (translated from Malayalam) alongside Mahua Maji's *The Toxic Tribal Land of Marang Goda* (translated from Hindi), as literary texts pleading for resistance against the resource-extractive capitalist model of development. For this purpose, the discussion employs the framework of the rhetoric of resistance and environmentalism of the poor. The paper highlights strategic use of counter-memory, testimony and irony that constitute tools of the rhetoric of resistance in the texts. By doing so, it seeks to uncover the texts' broader implications in the global fight against ecological destruction and social injustice, underlining literature's significant role in advocating for the rights of the marginalized communities, and promoting sustainable futures.*

**Keywords:** Rhetoric of Resistance, Environmentalism, Development, Countermemory, Testimony, Irony

### **Introduction**

Rhetoric of resistance implies the use of language to respond to, critique, challenge, or change an established arrangement in society, its history, practices and values. As a form of rhetoric, it appeals to the emotions and reason of intended audience for persuasion. It promotes effective rhetorical systems for resisting oppressive systems, such as neoliberalism. Ashley Canter's concept of "affective rhetorical resistance" goes further to include the use of bodily strategies along with linguistic strategies "to make visible the lived realities of neoliberalism, realities too often forgotten, silenced, and not listened to" (Canter 106). Indigenous communities worldwide have endured devastating impacts from development projects propelled by capitalist and neoliberal agendas. Typically located in resource-rich yet economically disadvantaged areas, these communities have dealt with issues such as environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and

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forced displacement. Significant events like the “Standing Rock” protests in the U.S., where Native American tribes opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the resistance in the Amazon against deforestation by multinational corporations highlight the struggles of tribal populations. The Ogoni resistance in Nigeria’s Niger Delta, headed by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) was organized against environmental degradation caused by oil companies like Shell and the Nigerian government. Literary critique of similar resource-extractive development projects include Alexis Wright’s novel *Carpentaria* (2006), which addresses colonization and resource exploitation faced by Aboriginal Australians, and Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (1995), inspired by Cree and Inuit protests against dams in Canada. Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Songs in A Time of War* (1985), critiques the destruction of the Ogoni people’s culture and environment. Ibiwari Ikiriko’s poetry collection *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000) critiques the power dynamics between the Nigerian government and oil companies. This growing body of literature underscores a critique of extractive capitalism through a rhetoric of resistance. In this context, writers like Sarah Joseph and Mahua Maji address issues faced by indigenous communities in India, adding to the literature of rhetoric of resistance.

The present paper analyses Maji’s *The Toxic Tribal Land of Marang Goda* (2004) and Joseph’s *Budhini* (2021) as texts imbued with a rhetoric of resistance. I argue that these texts challenge, question, and expose the truth behind developmental projects by strategic use of countermemory, counter-discourse, irony and testimony which constitute the texts’ rhetoric of resistance. The rhetorical resistance examined in these texts, is built upon the framework of the environmentalism of the poor. Historians and sociologists like Ramachandra Guha, Rob Nixon and Juan Martinez Alier have described environmental resistance in countries of the Global South as “the environmentalism of the poor”. In contrast to “the environmentalism of the rich” or that of the North which emphasizes biodiversity conservation from a planetary viewpoint, it is an environmental movement of the poor peasants and tribals dependent on the natural resources for their survival and livelihood. It opposes resource-extractive model of development.

Sarah Joseph is a grassroot feminist, environmentalist, activist and writer from Kerela who joined the Silent Valley movement (1970s), an anti-dam movement to protect the Silent Valley Forest surrounding the Western Ghats of Palakkad district, Kerela. She is of the view that writing and activism are interconnected. Although, one cannot reproduce the intensity of reality in exact terms, activism gives clarity to our pursuits in writing and reshapes the way our imagination operates. Mahua Maji is a prominent figure of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), a party fighting for tribal interests, and a member of the Rajya Sabha, upper house of Indian Parliament. Being a member of JMM that critiques nuclear energy program, she has spoken about energy issues in the parliament.

### **Texts and Contexts**

Joseph’s novel *Budhini* (originally published in 2019), translated from the Malayalam into English by Sangeeta Sreenivasan and published in 2021, centers around the historical event of the inauguration of the Panchet Dam across Damodar River in 1959 by the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. It raises a voice for the people displaced by dam and coal-mine projects. The critical scholarship on *Budhini* has analyzed it as a critique of development discourse, articulating the exploitation of tribal communities and giving voice to the marginalized. Varughese and Mukherjee employ new-historicism in their article “Development-Induced Dispossession:

Adivasi Existence in the Milieu of Contemporary Indian Texts in Translation” to address land alienation. However, rhetorical resistance in the novel has not been widely explored.

Maji’s *The Toxic Tribal Land of Marang Goda (TTLMG)* is about the discovery of uranium mines, radiation and movements such as the ‘Jungle Bachao Andolan’ in and around Jharkhand that took place in the early 1980s. The first uranium mine was discovered in 1951, in Jaduguda in Singhbhum Thrust Belt. The agitation led by Sagen and MOAR (Marang Goda’s Organisation Against Radiation) represents ‘the environmentalism of the poor,’ seeking a radiation-free environment for the tribals of Marang Goda. They gradually gain local and international support in their protest against the uranium mining company and get protection measures implemented by government and the company. The novel provides indigenous perspectives on historical events and challenges dominant narratives related to the displacement in Singhbhum. Critical study on *TTLMG* address the narrative’s exploration of pollution and environmental risks from uranium mining. Joya John’s dissertation on *TTLMG* highlights the representation of the non-human environment, indigenous cosmology, and Adivasi indigeneity through transnational imaginaries. However, the rhetorical strategies employed in the text have received comparatively less attention. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the rhetoric of resistance in selected works by Joseph and Maji, who, similar to the writer-activists discussed in Rob Nixon’s book on slow violence, expose injustices through testimonial protest and counterhistories. The following section will discuss these rhetorical strategies of resistance in selected texts.

### Questioning the Truth

Rhetoric of resistance reshapes our collective understanding of justice, truth and power. It restores silenced truths by questioning dominant discourses. Plato has suggested in *Phaedrus* that a true art of rhetoric grounded on knowledge can be a medium of truth. “Rhetoric is the art of soul leading by means of words” (Plato 261a). In another context, Vivian M. May argues, “Resistance rhetoric often reveals buried truths—those silenced by dominant ideologies—and re-centers marginalized epistemologies” (May 102). Texts like *Budhini* engage in counter-discourse by questioning “truths”- the truth behind progress, nation-building process, or modernization. The novel condemns forms of development that are resource-extractive and not accessible to all. Hence, we find Somnath Hembrom calling development, or *vikas*, a dirty word “which is worse than the bulldozers and earthmovers” (Joseph 240). The author’s use of terms like bulldozers, police, and earthmovers is symbolic of evacuation by physical violence, but *vikas*, when clubbed with the law, is worse because it validates displacement of people. Moreover, Joseph uses the trope of “lenses” to emphasize the need to look beyond the celebratory ideological apparatuses (like the notion of nation-building process in the post-independent era of India under the leadership of J. Nehru) and realize the true nature of things occurring around oneself. Somnath had once told his son-in-law Doso to try and see things without lenses. “What one sees through the lenses, Baba had said, were magnified images and visions. Even the blind see things, Baba had explained” (Joseph 256). One would never discover the truth if one doesn’t break free of the dominant discourses reflecting partial reality only. Such popular discourses hide the dark side of state activities. As narrated in the novel, Somnath Hembrom was able to discern the government’s plan for a thermal power plant and had warned about the arrival of the Company and confiscation of their lands (Joseph 239, 256). It was because of his ability to see without “lenses” that he could notice the connection between the prime minister’s visit to Bangladesh

and the arrival of Company Babu with him.

Joseph's *Budhini* and Maji's *TTLG* incorporate indigenous idioms and knowledge systems that challenge the nation's model of development. In *Budhini*, the Santal people attribute spirituality and sacredness to elements of nature. They consider water to be "aadi bhoota" and refer to nature as "Bosumatha" (Joseph 41, 42). They understand that the river Damodar cannot be controlled by building dams. Their belief system fosters respect for and balance with nature. One of the main reasons for distress and protest in the novel is the loss of *jahers*—sacred groves in villages dedicated to the departed souls known as *Bongas*. In stark contrast, the patriotic characters in the novel, such as sub-inspector Sudhansu Biswas, embrace a utilitarian view of nature. He believes that natural resources must be utilized to produce energy and develop industries in the country. This perspective overlooks the real costs and benefits—both human and ecological—as discussed in Arundhati Roy's article "The Greater Common Good." Indigenous idioms like *aadi bhoota* compel us to examine the true nature of things.

Similarly, the tribal people's comparison of uranium to a venomous serpent in *TTLMG* highlights a rhetoric aimed at revising our understanding of truth. The protagonist and Santal leader Sagen holds onto the traditional wisdom that uranium is "the venomous serpent" that must remain in its hole and never be disturbed (Maji 193). He and the members of MOAR protested against uranium mining in Marang Goda, and their protests escalated from a local to an international level. They participated in conferences and summits, including the Indigenous World Uranium Summit held in Navaho Nation's capital, Window Rock, Arizona. There, Sagen learned about the Navaho tribe's legend of Creation, which emphasizes that uranium should stay underground; if extracted, it will transform into a serpent, bringing death and destruction (Joseph 354). Another folktale from the Santal community, recounted by Sagen's grandfather's sister-in-law, considers iron extraction to be "the Asur profession" or the demonic profession (Joseph 144). This tale warns against deforestation, pollution, and the degradation of living beings caused by mineral extraction. The rhetoric of resistance manifests through these indigenous idioms, cautioning against dangers while also offering an alternative view of development.

The authors, therefore, incorporate indigenous knowledge and belief systems to reshape our understanding of the reality behind resource-extractive models of development. The two novels present the harsh realities faced by people experiencing health risk and loss of ancestral land, illustrating the dangers of ignoring indigenous wisdom and models of environmental management. Maji also includes a chapter titled "For A New Model of Development" in her novel.

### Countermemory

It is a strategy of rhetorical resistance in the two selected novels where countermemory disrupts dominant cultural narratives. Michel Foucault, who introduced the concept, defines it as "a way of resisting the official versions of history by remembering those voices that have been silenced" (Foucault 160). Stephen H. Brown notes in his essay on Rhetoric and Public Memory that "counter-memory serves as a rhetoric of resistance by offering discursive spaces in which marginalized voices challenge dominant narratives" (Brown 239). Additionally, April L. O'Brien and James Chase Sanchez explain in their introduction to *Countermemory: A Rhetoric of Resistance* that countermemory functions as a medium for creating meaning and communicating ideas about identities, histories, and stories, and is fundamentally rooted in rhetoric.

In *Budhini*, Joseph revives the stories of forgotten developmental refugees through the charac-

ter of Budhini, a Santal girl symbolizing marginalized struggles. Beginning with “Let us begin with the woman who persevered” (Joseph 1), the narrative highlights her displacements and her community’s unhealed wounds. Her poignant question, “Nation! What nation? Which is my nation?” underscores her status as an outcast from her community first, then from her workplace, and ultimately from the nation, as she was forced to live as a refugee (Joseph 266).

This narrative reveals the darker aspects of modernization and industrialization through various narrators sharing their experiences. These accounts are interconnected through the search for Budhini by journalist Rupi Murmu, who conducted research on the Santal villages submerged due to dam projects. Rupi’s written account also reflects the identity crises faced by the Santals, illustrating their bureaucratically enforced invisibility:

They were not fugitives. They were neither Hindus nor Muslims. Nonetheless, their names were recorded in the statistics of the victims of Partition. Dams were not even mentioned. They were never labeled as the hundreds of thousands of people from the settlements that were submerged. After that, their lives and deaths became the responsibility of no one. (Joseph 13)

The Santals had not only lost their villages, their means of livelihood to the submergence zone, but also became invisible, being reduced to what Rob Nixon terms as “uninhabitants” or “non-statistics” (Nixon 162). They are simultaneously removed from time, place and memory. In another episode, Rupi attributes proper identity and respect to the farmers whose lands in Godda were confiscated by government for a thermal power plant. Rupi uses the phrase “martyrdom of farmers” for those who had been killed in the protest against the Company and the government. Somnath Hembrom is reported as the “Old revolutionary” who died of a gunshot wound, rather than as one of the many casualties in the government driven operation in Godda.

The author also includes stories of Viswanath Hasda’s rebellion based on the historical Santal rebellion, Santal Hool (1855-56) and Tilka Manjhi’s rebellion of 1771-84 against the British colonial regime and the exploitative zamindari system. In his fervour, the headmaster Dayananda Tudu asserts that the history of the Indian freedom struggle should begin not with the First War of Independence of 1857 but with Baba Tilka Manjhi’s revolt of 1771 (Joseph 215). The Santals were the first to strike against the white men, as one can discern from critical studies like that of P.K. Shukla’s article titled “Adivasi Peasantry’s Struggle for Land-Rights and the Quest for Identity: A Study of Colonial Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana (Jharkhand)”. However, the historians ousted the Santal and other tribal martyrs from the chronicle of freedom struggle as stated by Dayananda in the novel. The headmaster’s zeal and claim for Tilka Manjhi’s place in history constitutes a counter to dominant historical narratives, thus, contributing to the resistance rhetoric of the novel.

Maji’s *TTLMG* presents the perspective of indigenous Santal communities on historical events like discovery of uranium in the hills around Singhbhum, the rule of kings, zamindars, colonization, and the nuclear tests conducted in May 1998, India. The novel begins with a “Dedication” laying foundation for a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of national progress. This counter-narrative represents experiences of the natives, or the sons and daughters of soil who were effected by the national developmental projects. While escorting the research scholar Pragma through Saranda forest, Sagen and Chariba narrate their version of the history of a peace loving, civilized community turning into fighters for the sake of land rights. Sagen tells about the “agrarian democratic villages, developed rural administration, monogamy and adult

marriage”, and absence of “war gods” in the folktales or songs of their community in the past (Maji 322). Their ancestors were peace loving who “allowed different communities and castes like gwalas, kumhar, tanti and lohar to settle down (in their areas) so that they could get their services” (ibid). They had turned aggressive because of land-revenues imposed by zamindars and kings, invasion during colonization and “the mistreatment of our women at gunpoint” (p. 326). In the chapter entitled “Hutur-Lan Tonga Ahsar”, Chariba narrates the history Ho warriors who had gloriously fought against the British soldiers, “equipped with traditional weapons like bow and arrows, hutur-lan, tonga, ahsar, etc.” (Maji 256). The Santal terms for traditional weapons in the chapter’s title establishes non-submissive, fighting spirit of the community against the oppressive colonial regime. On the other hand, the beautiful saying about these people living in the lap of nature, “their walk is a dance and their speech is a song”, illustrates their calm, artistic personality (Maji 294).

In contradiction to the nation-wide celebration over the nuclear tests conducted at the Pokharan Test Range in Rajasthan, the agitators of Marang Goda in the novel, are represented as feeling miserable at the achievement, “They realized that this triumph was at the cost of the health of countless innocent persons” (Maji 214). The deformities, diseases, environmental pollution these people were facing, made them dismissive of such triumphs. By inviting scholars, doctors, and survey reports by nuclear scientists, the members of MOAR developed a counter-discourse challenging the silence imposed over matters of radiation by the government and mining company. For instance, the booklet of a report on radiation prepared by Doctor Sam is considered as “a weapon” against the company representatives claiming “there is no radiation borne problem” in their area (Maji 381).

### **Irony**

As a rhetorical tool of resistance, irony serves as a powerful and subversive strategy employed by marginalized or oppressed groups to critique dominant ideologies, expose contradictions, and reclaim agency—often without directly confronting those in power. This approach enables speakers to communicate truths to power indirectly, frequently under the guise of humor, satire, or understatement, making it both artistically compelling and politically effective.

In the novel, Budhini Mejhan’s husband, Datta, ironically states, “It is heard that we are ourselves the gormen” (Joseph 166). In a democratic country, where the government is established by the people and for their welfare, individuals like Budhini and Datta remain vulnerable, receiving no assistance from the government. Budhini’s story illustrates how she was utilized merely as “a mud block” to be “broken during nation-building” (Joseph 10). After losing her job at the DVC due to rumors about her being Nehru’s wife, she was forced to move from place to place, doing odd jobs. Ultimately, she settled in a hut built on public land, only to be evicted because she had encroached on government property. Datta’s seemingly simple statement ironically critiques the injustices faced by people like him.

Maji also highlights the ironic situation of the people of Marang Goda in her novel’s rhetoric. The Santal youth, Lakhai Soren, who showed the tailing dam of uranium waste to Pragya, described the ironic circumstances of their community. Poverty compelled them to work in uranium mines, risking their health and lives. When members of MOAR tried to persuade them, they replied, “We can digest radiation but cannot bear our or the children’s hunger” (Maji 373). The greatest irony lies in the fact that once all the uranium is exhausted, the mining company will abandon

Marang Goda, leaving the area in ruins, the people without livelihood, and the activists unheard in their demands for clean air, water, and land. Thus, the youth effectively satirize the leaders of his nation by comparing them to the clean, white tailing dam of uranium waste: “Don’t be misled by its external appearance, madam. There is a vast difference between its face and its characteristics. Just like the leaders of our nation, hollowing the country with their dark deeds despite their white clothes” (Maji 371). The author’s use of irony and satire thus allows the subalterns to speak subversively throughout the novel.

### Testimonies

The two novels include testimonial accounts of suppression and degrading experiences of individuals and marginalized communities. These testimonies are often narrated in the plural voice ‘we’ indicating shared victim-hood. According to Bell Hooks, “The act of telling our stories is an act of resistance to the silence imposed by systems of domination” (Hooks 5). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is of the view, “The subaltern cannot speak... yet, through acts of testimony, subaltern subjects find ways to challenge hegemonic silencing” (Spivak 279). Characters like Jagdip Murmu in *Budhini*, narrate their story of displacement from villages near rivers. For the people in Jagdip’s village, Bharatpur, flood was a familiar phenomenon that followed every year. They had adapted to it, farming between one flood and another. “But with the coming of dams, things changed. The water forced us out forever”, he told his granddaughter Rupri (Joseph 12). Displaced by the rising water of the dams submerging their villages, Jagdip and his family ended up as homeless beggars first and later as workers in cities. His loss of family members and village had made him dismissive of national developmental projects like dam. Thus, he asks “whether there are any other places more devastating than these” dams, wishing for their demolition (Joseph 12). The systems of domination are exposed through testimonies of characters in the novel like Sudarsan. He narrates how he had to give up farming in his land once the company discovered that the people in Jharia were “living above a treasure mine of the best coal ever, with no speck of ash” (Joseph 74). In an ironical tone, he tells that this treasure of coal itself becomes the fuel ‘to melt their lives down’. Having lost his fields, Sudarsan lived in abject poverty as the company paid very little wages for loading coal into their vehicles. Sudarsan’s family didn’t have enough money to settle far away from Jharia, so they were stranded in their own land, now turned into coalfield and ever-burning mines. His case illustrates displacement without movement, or ‘displacement in place’ that has been discussed by Nixon in his book on *Slow Violence*. Similarly, there are other displaced people like Robon Manjhi who never got the proper compensation promised to them.

*TTLMG* acts as a testimony of slow violence spanning across three generations of a Ho tribal family. Her narrative imaginings offer a witness to the violence occurring slowly and structurally upon tribal communities. Rob Nixon defines it as a “violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (2). The three generations of the family central to this narrative include Jambheera who witnessed the discovery of uranium, his son Rimil who worked at the uranium mines, and Jambheera’s grandson Sagen who learnt about the effects of uranium mining and protested against it. Sagen had seen his grandfather die of lung cancer and rotting wounds caused by exposure to radiation from uranium dust in Company’s mill. In a series of questions posed by Sagen, the narrative exposes the systemic violence against illiterate tribals: “Was this radiation affair being swept under the carpet deliberately?... why were the illiterate and little educated tribals of this place being kept ignorant of this horrible truth?” (Maji 178).

## Conclusion

The two novels by Joseph and Maji, thus, manifest a rhetoric of resistance apart from personal, cultural and political resistance. The writers develop counter-histories, counter-discourses, satire along with other rhetorical tools for critiquing and challenging dominant narratives as well as oppressive systems. This kind of rhetorical resistance also highlights a sense of ‘betrayal by the government’, the vulnerability of the rural poor living in resource-rich places, and questions the model of development followed in developing countries which are a few characteristics of “the environmentalism of the poor.”

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