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Empowering the Subaltern: A reading of Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's writings are mostly premised on the project of lending space and voice to the unacknowledged presences of the society. Her task is that of retrieving the silences from the grand narratives of history. *After Kurukshetra*, comprising three stories that imaginatively recreate certain segments of the epic-too, is no exception. In these stories she has attempted a revisionist reading of the *Mahabharata*, by bringing to the fore the perspectives of a marginalized section of the society. Her short stories attempt a counter historical depiction of the epic through the eyes of women who are also underclassed, thereby debunking the patriarchal brahminic discourse of the *Mahabharata*. In these stories Devi has not only granted them space but has also accorded them a superior status. The present paper would like to explore the strategies Devi has employed not only to articulate the silenced peripheries but also to give these dispossessed women an edge over their social superiors by virtue of their very marginalization.

Keywords

subaltern, epic, women

Epics and myths in India have always been integral to the cultural ethos of the nation. They have perennially been vehicles of political, social or spiritual messages in contexts demanding the promulgation of the respective discourse. Consequently, these tales of the yore have generated multiple narratives and perspectives that often run counter to each other. This trend of transmuting, adopting and appropriating the ancient narratives was furthered, when with the gradual emergence of certain postmodern theories, a deconstructive counter historical discourse came to be aimed at by writers and critics who endeavoured to recover the mini narratives and the pocket realities that they presumed the dominant discourse has silenced. The recuperation of marginalized and suppressed voices from universalist generalizing grandnarratives is precisely what Mahasweta Devi attempts in her works. She specifically aims at the recovery of the subaltern voices from the official, homogenous, documented history of the nation state. “Mahasweta Devi”, writes Nandini Sen, “belongs to that small number of writers and social activists who have chronicled the oppression to which adivasi populations and other “untouchable castes” have been subjected: the insufferable living conditions ,caste bias , denial of benefits of education and scarce employment opportunities” (Sen 12) .While the elitist imaginings tend to erase the underprivileged from recorded narratives, Devi is relentless in her project of making these absences, resurface and in this endeavour of recovering the subaltern voice, the exploration of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata becomes imperative ,given the role it plays in framing the national consciousness. In the three stories collectively titled *After Kurukshetra*, she presents certain events of the epic through the eyes of women, both royal and underprivileged, providing alternative narratives that contest the dominant discourses of the *Mahabharata*. However, in these stories her task does not end simply at reviving lost voices but she goes a step further by assigning them a privileged status vis-a-vis their social superiors, by dint of their very subalternity. In these three stories, while the women of the palace are rendered as helpless victims of social forces, their inferior counterparts, are transformed into individuals who, to quote Nandini Sen, ‘chart out their own paths of self-realization’, and attempts ‘a redefinition of the woman’s role in the severest of adverse situation’ (Sen 15). Vandana Gupta asserts ‘Mahasweta’s history of the subaltern comes forth in the form of a counter dialogue against the oppressively hegemonic *itihās purānic* history of India. Her texts demolish the dominant symbols/myths embodied in the cultural-historical texts like Vedas, Puranas, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*” (Gupta 68). True to the statement, in *After Kurukshetra* she articulates the erased stories through imaginative depiction of certain episodes, in the process subverting the

representative discourses and empowering the subaltern subjects who are excluded from the elitist Brahminic narrative.

The first story ‘The Five Women’ provides a consternating picture post the Kurukshetra war through the eyes of the eponymous protagonists. Devi does not resort to a romantic glorification of the war or exploration of the journey of the Pandavas to heaven but instead depict the heat spewing earth rendered fiery by the devastation and brutality of war, the women’s quarter of the royal household suffering the loss of their men folk and most significantly the battle as it came to be signified to the commoners whom traditional narratives deny recognition. The five women of the title are the widows of five foot soldiers who are on their way back home after the conclusion of the war that has claimed the lives of thousands including their husbands. Unable to walk any more on the heat belching ground of the Kurukshetra, as they decide to take few days of respite from their journey they are accosted by the maid servant of the royal household, Madraja, who decides to recruit them as companions of the widowed and pregnant Uttara. Heralding from a domain that lies outside the royal precincts, these five women are dismissive of everything, the royalty engenders. They vehemently contradict the popular conception of the epic battle as the war of good against evil and project the Kurukshetra as a cold-blooded power game resulting in indiscriminate blood bath. They condemn the wanton waste and inhumanity of this legendary *dharmayudhha*, “But such a war for just a throne?” comes their voice of protest, “This, a holy war?! A righteous war? Just call it a war of greed” (Devi 3). Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav observe, “Its focal story looks at the post-war scenario in the Mahabharata, conferring identity and voice to its womenfolk, salvaging subtexts about them that have gone unwritten, unheard and uncared for. The female protagonists penetrate the patri-centered narrative, critiquing its valorization of war and bellicosity. The Chandal women’s counter narrative debunks the heroism of the Pandavas and condemns the fratricidal war that menacingly claimed the lives of their husbands” (Sen et al 29). While the popular versions distanced itself from the experiences of the subaltern classes, Mahasweta Devi not only engages herself with those who exist at the bottom of the hierarchical power system but also gives these women an edge over their social superior., though it is the commoners who have greater cause of grief as their men were issued no protective armour and hence died in thousands everyday while trying to shield the chariot mounted heroes. Thus for them, Kurukshetra is only a ‘savage war...a sin’ (Devi 22). Vandana Gupta pertinently points out that Mahasweta Devi “re-writes the legend of *Mahabharata* through her protagonists for whom the only

things that this war symbolized were-death, devastation and ruin” (Gupta 70). They are assertive in their opinion so much so that even Madraja finally succumbs to their point of view. They puncture the bubble of glory that accrues round the discourse of the Kurukshetra war. Even in the alien space Devi makes her women strongly hold their ground refusing to be overwhelmed by the voice of their social superiors. They resist the status of servants that the royal women are likely to impose on them and agree to serve Uttara only in the capacity of her “companions” (Devi 4). Being outside the periphery of royal household they are unfettered by rigorous rules of widowhood, and are robust in dealing with the trauma of losing their husbands, while the royal women wallowing in grief, are severed from the joys of life and are stripped off their embellishing paraphernalia. They talk of life, of creating life, for they believe “That’s what Nature teaches us” (Devi 5). They are associated with nature in its most primal and unfettered manifestations. They make clay dolls, can feel the pangs of the parched earth and are alive to the call of the chatak bird prognosticating rain. They fetch grass and vines and weave baskets, mats and ropes with supreme dexterity. Even in the royal household they boast of a space of their own. They retain their ways, their language that makes Uttara yearn for the world that they represent which is in opposition to the premise she and the rest of the royalty, inhabit. Uttara, feels “alive” (Devi 19) in their company. ‘The panchakanya draws Uttara back to life as the vistas of a new world, that of the janavritta open upto her’ (Lucas 95). Their unpretentious nature and lack of sophistication not only endear them to her but also make them wield a strange power over this young princess. While the royal women overwhelmed with marital bereavement fail to pacify the stunned Uttara, these “insignificant presences” [12] as Draupadi perceives them, manage to restore her to normalcy. Thus these women have not only been “granted form... and notice” (Devi 25) but even the agency to determine the future of the Kuru dynasty considering the fact that Uttara’s health is imperative to the well being of the only surviving heir of the Pandavas she is carrying within her. Even as they bid adieu to the royal household the “binary of the elite rajavritta women and the working class janavritta women becomes subverted as the women leave behind the white clad widows of the ruling class ...to bring to life the earth ravaged by the destruction of the dharmayudha”(Lucas 97). Thus while the women of the royalty succumb to the pain and loss the supposedly glorious war has brought upon them, the *lokavritta* women registers their defiance against everything the war subsumes.

In the second story ‘Kunti and the Nishadin’, the subaltern is likewise invested with the power as Vandana Gupta asserts “to hold Kunti accountable for her heinous crime against

the low caste tribals” (Gupta 70). The story throws new light on the Jatugriha or the House of Lac episode of the *Mahabharata*. As the barest possible outline of the original story goes, Kauravas built a palace made of combustible materials for the Pandavas to stay in, so that they can set it ablaze. Vidura comes to their rescue and appoints an artisan to dig a secret tunnel from the palace to the forest for the Pandavas to escape. On a full moon night a Nishadin with her five sons come to sleep in the palace. At an opportune moment the Pandavas set the palace on fire and escape through the tunnel. The Kauravas mistaking the charred bodies of the Nishads for the dead bodies of Kunti and the Pandavas come to believe that they have successfully annihilated their rivals. The story ‘Kunti and the Nishadin’ begins at the point where Kunti along with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari are “supposedly living a life of renunciation, away from all material attachments” at the fag end of their lives (Gupta 70). One day Kunti is accosted by a Nishadin who is unforgiving in her scathing criticism of Kunti and the Pandavas for unscrupulously goading the innocent Nishads to death in the Jatugriha. As Kunti tries hard to remember the tribals who were sacrificed to ensure safety to the Pandavas it also comes as a scathing criticism of the readers themselves, perhaps as oblivious of such peripheral characters as Kunti herself, having been nurtured on traditional accounts of the Jatugriha episode that is solely given to the celebration of the strategic escape of the Pandavas from the trap laid by the Kauravas. The Nishadin calls Kunti by her name in subversion of the prescribed codes of conduct of the hierarchical stratification of the society and complains “Drunk on so much wine, that Nishadin mother and her five sons lay their senseless. You knew this, yet you escaped through your secret tunnel, didn’t you?” (Devi 42). While, the epics, according to Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav, being “culturally inclusive narratives... represent what Wenzel terms as the suppression of forest order” (Sen et al 29), for Mahasweta Devi, the natural space of the forest becomes the appropriate milieu where she empowers her marginalized protagonist to puncture the aureole of grandeur accruing round the royal mother, Kunti and expose her in all her weakness and vulnerability. The grand Kunti is held absolutely tongue tied by the lashing glances of the Nishadin. Vandana Gupta notes that the “natural space of the forest gives the subaltern power and agency to rip apart her guise of grandeur and hold Kunti accountable for her heinous crime against the low caste tribals” (Gupta 70). In this story the Nishadin not only catches Kunti off her guard but also asserts their superiority over the royalty, in terms of human values for they can never stoop to such ignoble deed of sacrificing innocent lives for selfish interests. The Nishads are respectful of life and of nature, to whose hands of retribution Kunti is subject to, being guilty of the unpardonable sin of jeopardizing innocent lives: “In our eyes, by the laws of Mother

Nature, you, your sons, your allies, are all held guilty” (Devi 43), the Nishadin rings a note of warning. While in the canonical versions their cries have gone unwritten, unheard and uncared for, Mahasweta Devi in her story has looked upon the forest fire that burnt Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra to death, as Nature herself taking up cudgels for the tribal men and women against their oppressors to mete out the punishment due to them. Vandana Gupta pertinently points out that Mahasweta Devi “invents and reinterprets the popular history to empower the subaltern with their own symbolic mythical domain” (Gupta 73).

In the third and the final story Mahasweta Devi focuses on Souvali, a *dasi* in the royal household, impregnated by Dhritarashtra but never integrated in his domestic premise nor the son born of this union given the status of prince owing to their social inferiority. Devi lends voice to her eponymous protagonist who vehemently rejects the subject position accorded to her by Dhritarashtra. She refuses to observe the rites of widowhood in defiance of the dead king who only fathered her son but denied them their rights. She argues “I am just a *dasi*. Was I his wedded wife, that I should undergo the death rites?” (Devi 53). All through, her son Souvalya was denied princely rights, yet quite ironically it is this unrecognized son of Dhritarashtra who performs the last rites of his father, all the Kauravas being dead and thus becomes the liberator of his father’s soul. It is at the mercy of this spurned *dasi putra* that Mahasweta Devi places Dhritarashtra’s soul thereby downplaying his social superiority. Thus she not only confers voice and identity to the silences, but also goes a step further by assigning them a privileged space vis-à-vis their royal masters and makes their very social subservience instrumental in promoting their privilege. Further, in the royal household the male off springs were suckled by wet nurses, while Souvalya, a low born was fortunate enough to have enjoyed the care and affection of his biological mother. Also significant is Souvali’s voluntary severance of ties with the royal household and her rejection of her son’s paternal name Yuyutsu, in favour of Souvalya, that smacks off maternal identity. Being unencumbered by the limitations imposed on the members of the royal household, she can assert her will. She boldly declares “I’ll feast...I’ll sleep peacefully...In the royal household the other *dasis* would be roaming around in white widow’s clothing, eating only the prescribed meagre fare... I left that place of my own free will. Today too I’ll let my own dharma tell me what’s right” (Devi 53). Mary Lucas notes “It is delightful to know that while the other widowed *dasis* clad in white would be able to eat only the religiously prescribed austere food, she can celebrate her independence with delicious food and dress in gaily coloured garments” (Lucas 101). Her social inferiority that once led to her and Souvalya’s

rejection by the royalty finally becomes instrumental in unleashing the rebel in her that directs her to formulate her own rules thereby ensuring her peace and comfort in comparison to her royal counterparts who will forever languish in misery.

Thus Mahasweta Devi recuperates these dispossessed women from their shadowy existence and employs their social subordination as vehicles of their empowerment. Mary Lucas observes “*After Kurukshetra* is a gynotext, narratives of the colonized subaltern that ‘write back’ to superimpose and obliterate the grand narratives of colonialism, patriarchy, monarchy, dogma and class division. It presents a multiplicity of discourses whereby marginality and perpetrated ‘otherness’ are sources of energy and potential change” (Lucas 101). Thus the weakness becomes their strength, the bane transforms into boon. By so disallowing the royal characters to overwhelm the underclass women with their power and grandeur and instead by making the hitherto silent presences to constantly undermine their authority, Mahasweta Devi inverts the whole system of signification the brahminical narrative of the epic is premised upon.

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