

## **BRUSHING THE HISTORY AGAINST THE GRAIN-** **MAHASWETA DEVI'S "AFTER KURUKSHETRA"**

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**Abstract:** Mahasweta Devi's collection of short stories "After Kurukshetra" is a historic reflection of *The Mahabharata* where the *rajavritta* and *janavritta* confront; where the epic turns the veils of the hidden truth which spotlights the subaltern women who are from the fringes of society but no less than the vanquishers of the epic. The three subaltern women in the volume are the true heroes as they forfeit their lives for the sake of elite and conquer the lifelong pain. The paper focuses on the agony and anguishes of the marginal women of the era of *the Mahabharata*; the unsophisticated women, standing within *janavritta* confront and conquer imposing *rajavritta* intrepidly. Being insignificant, they remain isolated and abandoned the whole lives even anonymous in the great epic but their prolonged silence is an incongruous critic to the royal dynasty as well as the established social customs. In the interplay of *janavritta* and *rajavritta*, does humanity lose its identity? The paper is a sincere attempt to seek the answer.

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**Introduction:** Mahasweta Devi is accepted for her ground-breaking and inexhaustible renowned work focusing on the quandary of the cast out tribes and other marginalized people. She has evaluated the gender correlation in the perspective of ‘subaltern’ as she was enforced by a sense of history. Her immeasurable legendary works describe the inheritance of viciousness of the elite group and the wretched plight of the tormented. Tharu and K. Lalitha say: “Women’s subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppressions of class and class. But in the best of her writing she quite brilliantly, and with resonance, explores the articulation of class, caste and gender in the specific situations she depicts.” (Tharu and K. Lalitha 235) *The Mahabharata* is a momentous Sanskrit epic that forms a vital component of Hindu mythology. The war of Kurukshetra is the central point of this epic but Mahasweta contemplates and examines largely the aftermath of this battle. Since unrestrained time, even in the time of *The Mahabharata* or in present time, the androcentric patriarchal society has taken advantages, exploited and battered the female body for the sake of them.

“After Kurukshetra” traces three stories from *The Mahabharata* to portray the innate infringe between the *rajavritta* /‘elite’ and the *janavritta* /‘other’ and captures the marginalized psyche of three subaltern women. A common bond has intimately knitted all the three women; their position in the society; they all live in the marginal ring of *janavritta*, and proscribed to cross the threshold of *rajavritta* as human being, they can be the slaves of the elites but can never be the identical. In fact, they are doubly marginalized as two forces make them suppressed; the androcentric, patriarchal society and the gynocentric exclusively elite women of the societal hierarchy. The *dharma-yudhha* of Kurukshetra failed to remember the *dharma* of humankind.

The first story, “The Five Women” unfolds a cruel truth faced by the five marginal women who cross the threshold of royal palace to empathize Uttara, the wretched widow of Abhimanyu, the great warrior of the epic battle. They “are not of the *rajavrittas*, women of royalty, nor are they servants or attendants. These women are from the families of the hundreds of foot soldiers who were issued no armour. So they died in large numbers.” (Devi 1) Widowhood is a traumatic and harrowing state of womanhood both societal and psychological and no measuring means can discriminate the pain of the elite and the dreg. The common women too have the sensitivity, pain of parting but irony is that the five common widowed women are called forth in the palace to

console an elite widow, Uttara; it seems, basic sensitivity of humankind is divided by an unseen law; pain belongs to the elite group solely. So there stands a boundary between the five common widows and Uttara, the widow from the grand Pandava dynasty. As Uttara is going to beget the future king of Hastinapur, the inheritor to the throne, so it is crucial to keep her in good spirits. Actually, from time immemorial, the royal women have learnt what has been taught to them. They remain closed, secluded and absolutely unacquainted of the ruthless realities of the exterior. Therefore, reality has made them traumatized. Nevertheless, Uttara understands a precious truth of life by the five women from strong ground of reality that all those who had perished in the 'holy war of Kurukshetra' are not destined to go to *divyalok*, or heaven. "No chariots came down from *divyalok*. They did not go to heaven. The foot soldiers died fighting in the very same dharma-yuddha. But no funeral rites were held for their souls." (16)

If analyzed profoundly, it is prominent that it is not only the common females who are marginal; the queens of the palaces are in the same queue in another way. They are privileged but unconscious of the veracity of life. Howe

ver, Mahasweta uplifts the human bond above all narrow societal segregations and Uttara and the five common widows are shown inseparable breaking the wall or merging the two unlike worlds. The five women are the core energy which compels elite women to rethink and reconsider their roles in royal dynasty as well as society.

The story "Souvali" is about a *dasi* (maid servant) named Souvali who is stressed to be a sexual partner to King Dhritarashtra at the time when his wife Gandhari is with child. The subaltern woman bears Dhritarashtra's son who gets the royal name as Yuyutsu but remains unacknowledged by his father. Even more, Souvali and her son are heartlessly thrown out of *rajavritta*. Mahasweta has particularly pointed out the inherent distinction between the *rajavritta* and the 'other'. Souvali does never feel mortified for his subaltern status rather she feels liberated when she leaves behind the royal ring. In reality, it is the marginalized woman who acts as an archetypal driving force for the royal women and teaches them the truth of existence. "I was nothing but a *dasi* in the royal household but here, amongst the common people, I'm a free woman" (49) Yuyutsu, though a son of a subaltern mother did the *tarpan* for his deceased father

but he has a crucial question at the same, “Never went near him, never called him ‘father’, and today I did the tarpan for him.” (43) Can salvation be achieved by a royal king with the *tarpan* of his illegitimate subaltern son? The stories of Souvalya and Karna are quite alike. Both are of royal lineage, but are never acknowledged, both are punished without any sin.

The encounter between the *Kshatriya* queen and the untouchable Nishadin in “Kunti and the Nishadin,” is an ethical confrontation. The story is another mirror which reflects the barbarous torture of the elite sect. The Nishadins are considered to be the most marginalized sect of the society but when Kunti, the great queen royal dynasty and proud mother of brave *Pandavas* confronts the old Nishadin woman, she is wrecked as she is reminded “her greatest crime.” (130) The Nishadin is a long-grieving mother, who lost her five children in the fire at Varnavrat, where they died in order that Kunti and the *Pandavas* could live, considers Kunti as ‘sinner’ because “to sacrifice or harm innocents in one’s own self-interest is the most unpardonable sin” (131) and Kunti is guilty. As Madhu Singh says, “Devi’s obvious intention is to underscore the contrast between the *Rajavritta*, in which one becomes ‘cunning and treacherous’, and the *Lokavritta*, in which one ‘honours’ and celebrates life.” (Madhu 7) But a divine retribution for the sins of the past is planned and a natural forest fire is waiting to take place and it will scorch the earth and burn alive the three royals. There is a heart touching description of the mass death in the story “...at Yudhisthira’s orders, burned on mass pyres organized by Vidura. The air was thick with the stench of burning flesh. To cover the stink of putrefaction; ghee and camphor were poured onto the flames. But the fumes of death may not be so easily hid.” (32) The untouchable Nishadin brings Kunti to a littered recognition of her crimes, that of abandoning Karna and murdering six innocent tribals. The Nishadin’s final judgment splinters Kunti since customary atonement cannot berate her sins, “You couldn’t even remember this sin. Causing six innocent forest tribals to be burnt to death to serve your own interests. In our eyes, by the laws of Mother Nature, you, your sons, your allies, are all held guilty.” (38)

**Conclusion:** In all these stories of the volume “The Kuruksheta” the royal house becomes the oppressor but the polyphony and heterogeneity of female voices of Mahasweta dislodges the omniscient narrative voice of Vyasa. It is obvious that until the collective consciousness of society is heaved and impelled into invalidating the venerable paradigm of caste, class and

gender hegemony towards a more egalitarian society, the *lokavritta* or *janavritta* will continue to suffer. *After Kurukshetra* is an essential companion to *The Mahabharata* because it tells the untold stories, brings in the unknown heroes and compels to listen to the unheard music of the forbidden and forlorn heroes. With a subtlety, the stories ignite the intellectual minds to travel through the myriad by-lanes and hidden corners of mythology. *The Mahabharat*, altogether is not just one effortless naive story; it is meant to dole out as a discourse on Dharma, the lesson of right and wrong. But the inquisitive minds surely ask, whose Dharma is it about?

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