

## Voice of Subaltern Souvali in Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurushetra*

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### Abstract

In the contemporary scenario, *Subaltern Studies* group brings together the writers, like Amitav Ghosh and Mahasweta Devi who have been frequently associated with subaltern concerns. Mahasweta Devi is a champion of subaltern community and through her works she always indicts and questions the government and other people about the sanctioning of human rights to dalits, tribals, women and children. Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurushetra* narrates the stories of women who were subalternized by the kings and queens of Hastinapur. The life stories of these women appeared in the forms of short stories namely "The Five Women (Panchakanya)", "Kunti and the Nishadin (Kunti O Nishadi)", and "Souvali" in *After Kurushetra*. "Souvali" narrates the story of Souvali who was a dasi working in the royal palace of Hastinapur: She was sexually exploited by Dhritarashtra and gave birth to a son named Yuyutsu. Though Yuyutsu @ Souvalya was not considered by Dhritarashtra as his first son, yet he was allowed by Yudhishtira to give 'tarpan' to Dhritarashtra during the time of 'mahatarpan.' Souvalya, as a son, had done his duty to Dhritarashtra but Souvali voiced against the oppressions meted on her by the king through her action. She did not adhere to the

norms of widowhood after the death of Dhritarashtara for she was never considered by him as his wife.

Keywords: Subalternized, Dasi, Marginality, Stereotypical Images, Dasiputra, *Rajavritta*, *Janavritta*.

## Introduction

The subaltern study in literature marks many writers. Of all, Mulk Raj Anand is the one who set a path to the future writers to deal with the matter of marginality empathetically. In the contemporary scenario, it brings together the writers like Amitav Ghosh and Mahasweta Devi who have been frequently associated with subaltern concerns. Other internationally acclaimed writers, like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Khushwant Singh, whose works also deal with disparities in Indian society and the representation of them. Therefore, *Subaltern Vision* has a valuable contextualizing 'Preface' by Debjani Ganguly. The editor, Aparajita De's 'Introduction' also illuminates the evolution to subaltern studies. The writers of *Subaltern Vision* question the stereotypical images imposed on the subaltern community. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedwick have explained the term in the following words:

A stereotype is an oversimplified and usually value-laden view of the attitudes, behaviour, and expectations of a group or individual. Such views, which may be deeply embedded in sexist, racist, or otherwise prejudiced cultures are typically highly resistant to change, and play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of members of the culture to others. (380-81)

Mahasweta Devi who is a champion of subaltern community through her works always indicts and questions the government and other people about the sanctioning of human rights to dalits, tribals, women and children. Devi's works document the struggle of

the subaltern to cope with the doomed life. Her works showcase her commitment and concern for the lowliest of low who are denied of their fundamental rights which the mainstream writers keep on ominous silence. Rendering voice to the silenced, Mahasweta Devi emerges as a crusader of the underdogs of the society for whom human rights are the basic demands. In real sense, she is not only a writer giving voice to the voiceless but also a social activist who demonstrated *dharna* for the upliftment of these people.

### Discussion

Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurushetra* narrates the stories of women who were subalternized by the kings and queens of Hastinapur. The stories of these women appeared in the forms of short stories namely "The Five Women (Panchakanya)", "Kunti and the Nishadin (Kunti O Nishadi)", and "Souvali" in *After Kurushetra*. Though many Indian writers have attempted to retell the Indian great epics namely *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* in many different ways by incorporating postcolonial and postmodern sensibilities, yet Mahasweta Devi's attempt in retelling the story of *The Mahabharata* is different and unique, because in these stories, the author has brought out the erased history of subaltern community.

Like the other works of Mahasweta Devi, the stories in *After Kurushetra* locate the subaltern women in the centre. By doing so, Mahasweta Devi condemns the privileged class and caste people of India and the social system which encouraged the divisions among the people. Of the three stories in the collection, "Panchakanya" appeared in *Proma* autumn issue (2000) "Kunti O Nishadi" and "Souvali" appeared in *Biodan Bichitra* in 1999 and 2000 respectively. The articulation of the muted voice of the women belonging to farmer, hunter and 'dasa' classes are echoed in these stories. These subaltern women courageously question and challenge the warrior heroes and the royal women who constitute the 'rajavritta.' They

created their own history and charted out their own life as they practice their independent beliefs and also following the system of gender equality existing in their community.

The caste division is well defined in *The Mahabharata* which explicates the truth that in India caste system has been existed since time immemorial. Taking the privilege of caste, the royal men and women subjugated and oppressed the ordinary people. Women, especially the tribal women were sexually exploited and men were forcibly made to participate in the epical war of 'Mahabharata.' *After Kurushetra* presents marginalized women who defy the class, caste, and gender divisions for living their lives on their own terms. About the caste system in India John Keay and Michael Edwardes opine thus:

An Aryanised society may be defined as one in which primacy is accorded to a particular language (Sanskrit) to an authorized priesthood (Brahmans) and to a hierarchical social structure (caste). (Keay 28)

When the Aryans entered India they already had class divisions, between the nobility and the ordinary tribesmen. Once they settled down, class-divisions hardened to exclude the indigenous peoples whom the Aryans called *dasa*, or slave, and Aryans who intermarried with them. (Edwardes 5)

"Souvali" narrates the story of Souvali who was a *dasi* working in the royal palace of Hastinapur. She was sexually exploited by Dhritarashtra and had a son named Yuyutsu. In fact, Dhritarashtra plundered her femininity taking the privilege of his caste, class and gender supremacy. He did not bother about the life of either Souvali or the son. Souvali and the son were humiliated for they belonged to 'dasa' class. She opened up her inner mind to her son saying, "Born into a vaishya family. They took us to serve as *dasis* from our childhood. Then when Gandhari was carrying, I got pregnant with you. When you were born, I forgot all my sorrow" (48). In fact, Yuyutsu was the first born of Dhritarashtra but his rights did not extend beyond his name for he was a *dasiputra*. Poor Souvali was voiceless before the king and the

system. Yet she wanted to show her resistance and so she changed the name of her son and called him Souvalya in her own line: “In this house, he is Souvalya. Not Yuyutsu. At the sound of that name, his mother flares up” (47). Besides this Souvali could not do anything against the oppressors.

Until age five, Yuyutsu was brought up in the royal palace but was kept in the limited space meant for *dasi*'s children. Then he was sent to gurukul, that itself gurukul meant for poor children. However, the Kauravas were sent to the gurukul meant for king's children. Later sometime, Yuyutsu was transferred to the gurukul where the Kauravas were trained, in order to do errands for the Kauravas: “Dasiputras were sent to a separate gurugriha. Then, when the time came for training in arms, for some reason I was transferred to the same gurugriha as the Kauravas.... Who else would retrieve their arrows? Who else would fetch the birds they shot down?” (49). After the separation from her son, Souvali requested Gandhari to release her from royal service. With the help of the head *dasi*, Dhruva, Souvali started living in a hut in the outskirts of the town. Banibrata Mahanta in this regard makes a pertinent remark:

Souvali, a woman from the *janavritta* is forced to part with her son who is sent to the gurugriha at the tender age of five. Unable to reconcile herself to the life of the inner quarters of the *rajavritta* she gives up her *dasi* status and goes to live outside the town, waiting for her son to return. (32)

Dhritarashtra paid no attention on Yuyutsu. For him Duryodhana was everything. Even Gandhari did not allow Dhritarashtra to pay attention on both Souvali and Yuyutsu. But Souvali thought that she did not commit any sin and so she was not ready to ask any forgiveness. Yet she was not ready to forgive Dhritarashtra who inflicted pain in her life. Yet she resented for her fate: “Couldn't even inform your father. He was well protected, guarded by the watchful eyes of Gandhari.... Duryodhana meant everything to him. He used to ask

Dhruva about you on the quiet. That too, just one or twice” (49). Souvali could bear the inflictions caused on her but she could not bear the pain of her son’s separation. Her motherhood started aching for the son. She cherished the memories of her son by keeping the toys used by him. Above all the beautiful Souvali rejected all marriage offers from her community to nurture her bond with her son.

In the royal place neither Gandhari nor Kunti nor Pandavas acknowledged Yuyutsu as one among Kauravas. Duryodhana always ill-treated Yuyutsu by calling him ‘dasiputra’. For them, Yuyutsu was a dasiputra and so he was humiliated all the time in one way or the other. The pain caused in the lives of both Souvali and Souvalya remained as a harrowing scar in the psyche of them. Years of humiliation in the Kaurava household made Souvalya to take a drastic decision at the time of Great War. He took the side of the Pandavas at the time of great battle much to the contempt of Duryodhana. In this way, Souvalya put a healing balm to his burning psyche. Being a subaltern he had no other option to voice against the oppressors through his action. Even after the war and the loss of his hundred sons, Dhritarashtra had not have heart to consider Yuyutsu as his son. Instead he went to forest with Gandhari and Kunti to spend the rest of his life. Later they were caught up in the forest fire and died.

Therefore, “mahatarpan” was performed to them by Yudhishtira. During that time he allowed Souvalya, the first son of Dhritarashtra to do tarpan for his father: “I told them, I’ll do the tarpan for my father.... Finally Yudhishtira said in a dry tone, Son of Dhritarashtra! I know you are a man of conscience, son of a good woman... (48). Then Yudhishtira allowed Souvalya to inform Souvali about it in order to adhere to the rites of widowhood by her. Hence Souvalya visited Souvali after a long time. Departed at the age of five and united with his mother when he gets grey lines of hair on his head made Souvalya to think that his mother did not have love for him. But seeing the toys and other things used by him at the house of Souvali, Souvalya started shedding tears. Souvali also showed her love for him. She was so

happy that at least for one day Sovalya was allowed to stay with her. Her motherhood found a fulfillment of seeing her son after such a long time as her own: “One night with you. I ‘m going to hold you close, my son. You’ve been lost to me since childhood” (51).

The conversation between Souvali and her son reveals the difference between the haves and have-nots. He informed his mother about the attitude of the royal people who controlled their emotions even for their very close relatives. He also informed that he was insulted whenever he showed emotions: “They’d taunt me. Say that only dasipurta suffered such unmanly needs, cried for their mothers” (52). With the same attitude they considered the emotions of ordinary people as mean things. Hence Souvali said that human beings are bundles of emotions and the royal people gave up all these emotions and lived like ghosts. They knew only war and so they faced downfall. In fact, they executed such approaches even on the poor people like Souvali:

It’s true. It’s in the *janavritta*, amongst the common people, that we are in touch without natural emotions. Tenderness, caring, compassion, romance, love, anger, jealousy. But in the *rajavritta*, you know how they keep such natural emotions strictly in check. And that’s their downfall. It’s always been power, greed, arrogance, and enmity that’s caused the ruin of the *rajavritta*. (52)

Souvali wanted her son to remain in the *janavritta* for she is fully aware that in their heart of hearts the Pandavas too would never accept Souvalya one among them. Souvali knew that her son was being used as a pawn by Yudhishtira: “Her son is foolish. Following the norms and customs of royalty even though he’s one of the common folk. She thinks to herself; if you must learn, learn from your mother. I was nothing but a dasi in the royal household but here, amongst the common people, I’m a free woman” (54). Souvali’s strong resistance against the patriarchy is shown in her action. All through her life she had contempt for Dhritarashtra who had robbed her femininity.

Further pain had been inflicted in Souvali's heart when young Souvalya was separated from her. She also had resentment in her heart for Souvalya was being used as a pawn in the hands of the Pandavas. Being a subaltern her voice had been muted but she showed strong resistance through her action. She feasted on sweet and honey on the day of tarpan offered to Dhritarashtra by Souvalya. She refused to adapt the rites of widowhood while the dasis living in the palace appeared in white saris. She did not perform any death rites to Dhritarashtra. She vehemently questioned, "What death rites? Who was Dhritarashtra to me" (53). These words of Souvali express the deep pain that she had been experiencing in life due to the callous attitude of Dhritarashtra.

Souvali accepted her son's duty of giving tarpan to Dhritarashtra. Yet she did not treat Dhritarashtra as her husband because she was not taken into consideration while she was impregnated by him. For her Dhritarashtra was her son's father and not her husband: "Son's father. And my son had done his duty." (53). Like the feminists of the contemporary age, Souvali has written her own dharma and in this way she has rebelled against the caste, class and gender discriminations. Though she showed her resistance through her action, yet she still worried about her son who was still in the hands of the royal people. She took pity at her son who still adhered to royal norms and rituals. She knew very well that her son would not be recognized by the Pandavas as one among them: "When will Souvalya realize? That even the Pandavas will never accept him as one of their own?" (54).

## Conclusion

The master narrative of monarchy, patriarchy and dogma crushed into pieces as Souvali delightfully collapsed and declared to herself "I'm a free woman" (53) and in this way she had "defied the dead Dhritarashtra" (53). Being a subaltern, Souvali could not fight against the oppressive mechanism. Yet through her action she has given therapy to her



burning psyche. The resistance of Souvali can be treated as the voice of subaltern. This implies that she questions the entire society, 'why should she speak?' Is her action can't be treated as her strong voice against the oppressive system. The ideologies of Souvali is an answer to those who say that 'can subaltern speak?' as opined by Ludden, "on the subaltern, the autonomous domain of the people, to demonstrate they had their own consciousness, their own politics of resistance, their own mobilization and their own ideologies of opposition" (192). In fact, Souvali's action proves that this autonomous domain has been existed ever since the introduction of divisions based on caste, class, race and gender discriminations. Yet like Souvali only a few could understand this to live a 'free life' in their own terms.

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