

Critical Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *after Kurukshetra*

Ms. Maheshwari G Zala¹ and Dr. Swati Gokhru²

Research Scholar, Faculty of Humanities¹

Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities²

Pacific Academy of Higher Education and Research University, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

Abstract: *One of India's best writers, Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016), advocated vehemently for the rights of women, tribal people, and adivasis. She generally wrote her novels and short stories in Bangla before having them translated into Hindi and English. Mahasweta Devi, a social activist and a best-selling author in Bengali has made contributions to literary and cultural studies in this country. Her tales are powerfully woven into haunting tales of exploitation and struggle. After Kurukshetra, which was translated from Bengali and released in 2005.*

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, After Kurukshetra, Contemporary, Stories

I. INTRODUCTION

The first story *After Kurukshetra* begins right after the end of the 'great, holy' war at Kurukshetra. But instead of giving us an account of the heroes of the war, Devi takes us on a journey to know the lives of those neglected and destroyed by the war. While Vyasa's *Mahabharata* may be terrifying in length, Devi's *After Kurukshetra* begins and ends at 53 pages. Yet Devi succeeds in producing a clear, vocal critique of the *Mahabharata*. She writes, "...*This, a holy war?! A righteous war?! Just call it a war of greed!*"

The Five Women (Panchkanya)

The focus of Devi's opening tale in *After Kurukshetra* is five widowed widows. The husbands of these women are from the *janavritta* (common people), and they lost their lives in battle at Kurukshetra. When Devi writes, "The soil of Kurukshetra was burned rock hard by the funeral fires," she devastatingly conveys the carnage and desolation of this "holy battle." The five women in Kurukshetra's story are unable to return to their village because they are unable to cross the battlefield, where so many funeral pyres have been lit that the ground itself resembles "waves of angry heat." They came to watch the battle in the hopes that their husbands would return home safely.

The five women—Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta, and Vipasha—are persuaded to join Uttara, a pregnant woman whose husband Abhimanyu had perished in the battle. The five female companions and Uttara, a member of the *rajavritta*, have diverse perspectives on widowhood, according to Devi's tale in *After Kurukshetra* (royal household). The five ladies lament their anguish, laugh, and talk to one another as Uttara is caught in the middle of conventional limitations. They also tell Uttara that tradition requires them to go back to their village and be remarried. A young woman named Uttara wonders if her own days of innocent naivete will ever come back to her at this point.

In her story "After Kurukshetra," Devi discusses how women become victims of battle in patriarchal societies. The five ladies mourn the loss of their husbands as well as the loss of their workers and landowners who farmed it. Since the janavritta women face economic exploitation and reliance in addition to what appears to be more mobility, Devi aims to highlight this discrepancy in After Kurukshetra. The only thing that can restore their financial security once their husbands pass away is another man and another marriage.

Kunti and The Nishadin (*Kunti o Nishadi*)

Kunti is the subject of *After Kurukshetra*'s second tale. Kunti promises to live the rest of her life in the jungle with Dhritrashtra and Gandhari after the conflict. Kunti spends her time caring for the elderly couple and reflecting on her own mistakes that contributed to the outbreak of the war. She frequently finds herself sitting in the wilderness and making excuses for the secrets she kept and the petty demands she made of Karna. She frequently observes a Nishadin



(a member of the 'uncivilised' Nishad tribe who spends time foraging and hunting in the forest) listening to her apologise aloud. The Nishadin's presence is ignored by Kunti because she is aware that they are unable to comprehend her language.

That in *After Kurukshetra* is a story of retribution and revenge stemming from a selfish act of injustice. To Kunti, the bodies of the Nishadins were so killable that they could not even find a mention of her guilt. For Nishadin, however, it was yet another act in the systemic marginalization of her people, the Rajavrittis, who took thousands of lives as collateral damage in their own game of brother vs. brother. *After Kurukshetra* manages to make it stand out surprisingly well in the conversation between Kunti and Nishadin.

Devi's sharp words on caste and class divisions stand true even today. It's as if she is saying war is for the privileged and by the privileged.

Souvali

The last tale focuses on Souvali, who was respected as a spouse in the same manner that Gandhari was by the blind Dhritarashtra. But Souvali never learns who her wife is. Instead of being seen as the son of Dhritarashtra, her son is seen as the son of a *dasi*. It should be remembered that Yuyutsu (referred to here as Souvalya) is ostensibly the only surviving son of Dhritarashtra during the battle of Kurukshetra. By refusing to participate in the funeral rites, she establishes herself as a rebel. In *After Kurukshetra*, Devi appears to have given more attention to the episodes from the Mahabharata that are hidden inside the text. She barely ever mentions the Kauravas, Pandavas, or any other wartime heroes. There is a noticeable bitterness there when she does mention them. Souvali is one of these tales. A son was born to Souvali, a *vaishya* (courtesan), and Dhritarashtra. Yuyutsu was the name of the son. Yuyutsu, Dhritarashtra's sole living child, is asked to conduct the funeral ceremonies after his passing. He leaves the last rituals and goes back to Souvali's hut. The mother and son talk about how the Kauravas treated them unfairly and ostracised them.

If there are any sacrifices to Devi, they are *rajavritta*. Victims of their own greed, power and arrogance. The reasons, Devi says, for their own downfall.

If we approach the stories from a feminist perspective, we can argue that both the *rajavritta* and *lokavritta* women have experienced their fair share of marginalisation. However, when we learn more, we realise that the *lokavritta* women experience double oppression. By the male sex first, followed by the ladies who are regarded as being of royal birth. In *After Kurukshetra*, these *lokavritta* women exhibit traits like fearlessness that are unique to the *kshatriya* caste. The *shudras* or *vaishyas* are the owners of the *lokavritta*.

II. CONCLUSION

These women are marginalized due to their caste as well as their sexuality. In the first story, both the *lokavritta* and *rajavritta* household are expected to undergo purification rites and to live a secluded life with meagre amount of food and other basic necessities.

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