

Breaking the Chains: A Critical Analysis of Women's Voices in *After Kurukshetra* by Mahasweta Devi

R. POOJA

*Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages
SRMIST, KTR, Chennai*

Dr. L. KAVITHA NAIR

*Professor & Head, Department of English and Foreign Languages
SRMIST, KTR, Chennai*

Abstract

After Kurukshetra by Mahasweta Devi is a collection of three stories that retell different episodes from the Mahabharata, focusing on the perspectives of women from different economic and marginalized backgrounds of the Indian society. This paper aims to critically analyse the various woman's voices found subdued in the grand epic Mahabharata and also point out the forms of marginalization of women in the Indian Society. Applying the theoretical framework of Gynocriticism propounded by Elaine Showalter, this paper will make an attempt to understand the epic from the perspectives of women and also point out the stark contrasts between various economic classes, and also show how suppression is normalized in varied ways in the "established" structures of Indian society.

Keywords: Gynocriticism, Perspectives, Mahabharata

"The subjugation must have been a regular thing for her because she concealed to everyone. This is how it works. After a while, you become accustomed to suppression."

- Aparana Sinha, Ashwamedha.

In his ground-breaking study, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels observed that in societies based chiefly on hunting and gathering, where all members of the tribe worked and all property was owned communally, women did not have second-class status. He further noted that the subordination of women arises alongside the development of distinct social classes based on private property. The conclusion that Engels drew is that male supremacy, which in varying forms has characterized all known civilizations, is not the product of hard-wired biological distinctions

between sexes, but rather a historically-determined phenomenon.

In the Indian subcontinent, during the period of the Rig Veda, women played a significant role in the everyday functioning of both families and society. They actively participated in the decision-making processes of the community. According to Frederick Engels, the society of that time resembled a socialist structure, where everything was shared among members of the same clan or tribe. Likewise, there was a system of mutual exchange of goods, and societal division was virtually non-existent, despite the mention of the caste system in the Rig Veda. However, as money became the formal means of economic exchange, there was a gradual shift in the societal structure.

Gynocriticism, a term coined and defined by Elaine Showalter in her Seminal Text *Towards a*

Feminist Poetics, advocates for rewriting of histories including the women folk of the society and it also encourages the women writers to take up the issue of the dead so that their stories shouldn't be forgotten along with them. In Margaret Atwood's nonfiction book *Negotiation with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), Atwood discusses the importance of the female writer's responsibility, that is to write as a woman or about women means that you have taken upon yourself the responsibility of writing as a form of negotiation with our female dead and with what these dead took with them - the truth about who they were. By reading and rewriting our communal past, women writers pay tribute to our female ancestors by voicing their silent stories while also changing gender stereotypes, complicating who these women were, and acknowledging their accomplishments.

Taking inspiration from the Mahabharata, *After Kurukshetra* by Mahasweta Devi is a fictionalised representation of certain episodes of Mahabharata about what would have happened after the epic struggle between the brothers of the same family written from the perspective of women and from different communities. *After Kurukshetra*, an anthology, comprises three distinct stories featuring characters who, despite their individual differences, share a connection to the central figures of the Kurukshetra war. The women in the three short stories suffer for reasons that are in no way related to them. Their only mistake was being born a woman and being related to men who had no chance of escape from participating in the battle between the brothers of a same family.

All the stories of *After Kurukshetra* revolve around the concept of marriage and what is expected of the women after it. When with her husband she enjoys a status of high respect being the wife of someone. But once her husband dies she loses all

her respect and she is considered inauspicious both in the society and in her family. All the prayers and rituals of the woman's life are directed towards the procurement of a husband, his longevity and the propagation of his lineage through the birth of male off springs.

The women of the play are affected by the "Holy War" that has happened. The United Nations in a statements has said that "Women and girls suffer disproportionately during and after war, as existing inequalities are magnified making them more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation." The holy war might have been "HOLY" for those who are directly related to it but to others is a huge question and a matter of concern. The number of women and children affected because of this war is huge and the loss that has been incurred on them is irreparable. The foot soldiers who died in the war were not even issued armour to protect themselves. Their major task was to protect their leaders.

"Disaster? What disaster? Huh, Old woman? Was this some natural calamity? So many great kings join in a war between brothers. Some choose one side, some cross over to the other. It wasn't just brother slaughtering brother. We know of quarrels-jealousies-rivalries too. But such a war for just a throne? This, a holy war?! A righteous war?! Just call it a war of greed!"(3)

The above lines are uttered by one of the five women while staying in the palace. This clearly expresses the frustration that women undergo in the name of war. With men making up the majority of casualties caused by war, women often find themselves in a position where they must shoulder the sole responsibility of supporting their families. Even if women are not directly harmed during armed conflicts, the devastating impact on them and their families, coupled with the constant threat of violence,

can lead to their isolation. Widowhood, migration to cities, and confinement within their homes as a means to avoid violence all contribute to the stagnation of social institutions and the isolation of women. Additionally, widowed women face obstacles in claiming land ownership rights after the death of their husbands, unless they have progressive and open-minded in-laws. Beyond these challenges, women also endure severe consequences from the destruction of healthcare and other essential infrastructure, as well as the broader economic setbacks resulting from conflict. Displacement and the breakdown of social order further exacerbate the vulnerability of women, who become targets of sexual violence both within and outside their own homes.

After *Kurukshetra* apart from examining the conflicts between the forward thinking and conventional woman also speaks about how these women are caught in the tides of the hierarchal structures. All the three stories in the anthology talks about women belonging to different caste and class. The two classes of women who have been mentioned in the text are named women of the Rajavritta and women of the Lokavritta. Rajavritta women being the women who belong to the upper castes and the ruling castes and the Lokavritta women are generally from the lower castes. Both the section of women have indeed been affected by the war but there is a huge sea of difference between these women and in the way they see life and these differences have been constantly highlighted.

The Rajavritta women, who enjoy economic stability, are empowered by their privileged position to make a significant difference in addressing the challenges faced by society, even in this advanced century. However, this advantage has led them to resist the idea of working outside or even within the confines of their homes. This dynamic puts the

livelihoods of Lokavritta women at risk, as they face significant financial insecurity and become vulnerable to exploitation within the patriarchal society.

In the first story one may find that the young Uttara is being served by the Five Women who belong to the Lokavritta. But these simple women have their own self-identity constructed by them for themselves and we can see these identities come out when they show their reluctance to be *dasis* even under great loss on the financial side. "We refuse to serve as *dasis*, to live as *dasis*."⁽⁴⁾ Their lives vary from the Rajavritta women who are expected to do as they are told. The Lokavritta women do not regard the war which caused so much bloodshed as holy or righteous but merely something that has been thrust upon them. Now that 'something' has come off their shoulders, they prefer to go back to how their lives that was before the war, unlike the Rajavritta women who don't see the dawn of a new beginning after the end.

The Lokavritta women see life as it should be and just because a mishap has happened in their lives it doesn't mean that they should sink by it. They refuse to take up the roles that are thrust upon them i.e. the role of a widow. They see life beyond it and more over they see happiness beyond that sadness which the women of the Rajavritta will never be able to comprehend as these women are there in the worlds that are created only by illusion that everything is perfect and that their way of life is the one that would give them *moksha*.

At a significant place in the first story where the five women come for work as they were not in a state of crossing the *Kurukshetra* land because of the heat generated by the funeral proceedings, they find job in the royal palace where the Rajavritta woman describes the duty of these women which is filled with arrogance. She says, "Nothing in particular. Just do

whatever she wants. Ah, my poor child. Like a lotus in full bloom she was. And now! Withering away in the cruel heat of grief.”(5) These lines are spoken with such arrogance that it means as if grief was meant only for the women of the higher caste and though the women of the lower caste are also indeed affected by the war but the so called societal structures don't allow the women of the lower caste to even mourn for their beloved ones. There is a huge sea of difference highlighted throughout the stories and each story stands as a testimony for the discrimination that the women of the lower caste society face till this day. Though the reference has been made to an epic and this epic has been one of major markers in the making of Indian society and history which makes the problem relevant even in the present day scenario as one may find honour killings happening on a constant basis because of caste based differences.

A major differentiation that has been highlighted in the first story is that of the concept of widow remarriage. Written Histories have always spoken only of the economically stronger sections of the society and not much has been spoken about the downtrodden sections. The economically stronger sections create for themselves ways which would pacify the inner egoism of the man. The stronger sex considered the weaker sex to be a community of slaves always ready to serve them. When a woman loses her husband she is considered inauspicious and she isn't allowed to be a part of the mainstream society. The society confines her into the four walls, makes her do rituals for the dead and makes her lead a secluded life. On the contrary the economically not so sound society allows for the widowed women to be remarried and create life out of the new arrangement as that's the whole purpose of being a woman. A woman is the creator of life and the light

giver to the family and it is indeed important that she does that role. Devi comments on the above in the following way:

“Once we return, all of us together will perform the necessary funerary rituals for our dead. Then the elders will arrange marriages. We need husbands, we need children. The village needs to hear the sound of chatter and laughter. We will... create life. That's what Nature teaches us.” (25)

In the second story, “Kunti and Nishadin”, we feel that Kunti deserves the end she gets. There has been references to the house of Lac incident in *Mahabharata* where Kunti in order to save herself and her sons makes an arrangement that would kill a mother and her five sons. She drugs the servants who fall asleep and cause them to fall prey to the fire. In Mahasweta Devi's version of this incident we see that these unknown, unnamed servants are given an identity as a Dalit woman with her five sons. The Nishadin who is regarded as polluted being by Kunti comes to speak to her and tells her what lays in store for her. Here the Nishadin is someone who is shown as taking revenge. It is for a fact that the Rajavritta community doesn't attribute the concept of revenge to the lower caste society but yes, revenge is common for everyone and revenge is sweet! The Nishadin tells Kunti that “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, that's the way of the Rajavritta. That's what Kurukshetra was all about. The Lokavritta's ways are different.”(43) When the ego of a person belonging to the Rajavritta is disturbed then they make sure that a revenge is taken for that insult. But the life of Lokavritta is different in many ways because they are subjected to insults on a daily basis because of the societal setup that the Indian society follows.

The society, in general, lacks an understanding of the profound impact of compelling circumstances,

which can push individuals from both privileged backgrounds (Rajavritta) and underprivileged backgrounds (Lokavritta) to contemplate seeking revenge. The actions of Nishadin, who truthfully warns about an impending forest fire, cannot be categorized as revenge. For instance, when faced with this warning, Kunti chooses to remain in the forest, which could be seen as a form of self-inflicted harm or even considered a kind of suicide due to the mistakes she has made in her life. Kunti's acceptance of accountability for her actions might be viewed as a more appropriate response rather than hastily attributing Nishadin's actions as an act of revenge.

The last story lays focus on Souvali, a *dasi* of the blind Dhritarashtra who revered him as a husband in the same way as Gandhari. But Souvali is never given the identity of a wife. Her son is viewed as a son of a *dasi* and not as the son of Dhritarashtra. The story "Souvali" is dated after Dhritarashtra's death. Souvali does not consent to be a part of her Dhritarashtra's last rites. She does not observe the last rites that needs to be performed on him and she refuses to wear white cloth and she feels good to have defied the dead Dhritarashtra because of the injustice meted to her. It is indeed important to note here that she considered herself to be the wife of the blind Dhritarashtra but she always had in mind that she was only a *dasi* and Gandhari also made sure that Souvali doesn't get whatever she was supposed to get.

All through the story of Souvali one may find that there has been denial of rights to Souvalaya. Though he is the son of Dhritarashtra he doesn't get equal rights and share in whatever that he is supposed to get because of the fact that he was born to the ILLEGAL union between the King and a *Dasi*. Among the Rajavritta community the male children don't stay with their mothers but it is not the same with the

Lokavritta, the male children also get all the love and affection from their entire families. Devi comments on the above said through the words of Souvalaya and Souvali that:

"I stayed as long as they let you be with me. In the Rajavritta, male offspring aren't left with their mothers for long. They are suckled by wet nurses; they stay with the *dasis*. I showered you with love and care, kept you safe."(48)

The male offsprings of the Rajavritta community is being taught to disrespect the women right from the time they come into this world. They are separated from their mothers and everything to them is spoon-fed by hired people who in turn belong to the Lokavritta who are treated as objects. Researches has proved that when a child is being brought up, the child observes everything that surrounds it. So when a child is exposed to the ill-treatment of women, it has a deep impact on the child and when the child grows up it also mishandle the women of its own clan.

The Rajavritta says, "Only *dasiputras* suffer such unmanly needs, cried for their mothers."(52). This shows how the Caste conflict has influenced the man of the upper caste and how this leads to a greater conflict between the various castes of the Indian society and this all together has disturbed the very existence of a woman even in giving her best for the child whom she gave birth to.

After Kurukshetra is a place where there is a construction of female history where the lives of the women who have sacrificed themselves in the process of servicing the male community. Writing a history for women needs a lot of reading and re-reading of various established histories and texts and a lot will have to be done in this area for understanding "Women." It is important in the contemporary society where there should be reading

and rewriting of our communal past in order to understand the basic reasons behind the currently established social customs, which determines the state of the women in the society. By doing so the women writers pay tribute to our female ancestors by voicing their silent stories and ideologies.

Through all these one may understand that it is important that as a female writer, she has an important role in making the society understand who women are and what is her role in the society and history that is the history that has always been forgotten and how she is the crucial factor in making histories happen. *After Kurukshetra* highlights the stories of women who are independent thinkers and who have the free will to make a change happen in the society thereby, positioning the women in history and making the society understand the role of women in making of the society at large.

The stories of *After Kurukshetra* demonstrate how Mahasweta uses the aesthetics of literature to blend history, fiction and myth with a touch of documentary reality and create a new history which is

inclusive of women altogether and this research looked into how she blends the above said to find the lost space for the women in history and in the Indian Caste structures that are a result of unequal power dynamics which are triply marginalizing the lower caste Indian Woman.

References

1. Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 2002. Print.
2. Devi, Mahasweta. *After Kurukshetra*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005. Print.
3. Engels, Friedrich. *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. internetarchive.org. 2010.
4. Sinha, Aparna. *Ashwamedha*. Srishti Publishers & Distributors. New Delhi. 2016. Print.
5. Valli, Pushpa. "Rewriting history in 'After Kurukshetra' of Mahasweta Devi". *IJMER*, Vol.3, No. 2(5), 2014, pp 236-241.