

A Subversive Subaltern Narrative: Souvali in Mahasweta Devi's *After*

Kurukshetra

Dr. Sreekala.B

Assistant Professor

Dept of English

NSS College

Pandalam, Kerala, India

sreekala.hari@yahoo.com

Abstract

The hierarchy prevailed in the hegemonic power structure created subalterns also. The three stories in Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra*, which is a retelling of Hindu mythology explore the predicament of women in a war-ravaged world and their differential manner in coping up with it. The last story of the collection "Souvali" depicts a Shudra woman who has more strength of character and convictions. She was a *dasi* woman in the palace of Hastinapur, who is the mother of Yuyutsu, Dhritarashtra's son. She could not forgive the father who gave his son just a name and never his affection. Though she categorically belongs to the marginalized group, she has strong individuality and hence she leads the life of an empowered woman. As a servant in the royal household, she felt all her sorrows coming to an end when her son was born, but it comes to naught when he was taken away. She lost any meaning in staying in the palace as one of the *dasis* which effaces her identity as a woman. So she decided to stay in the outskirts of the town after informing the head *dasi* to tell her whereabouts if her son enquires about her. She was not ready to observe the death rites of Dhritarashtra as she is not his wedded wife. Her gender does not deter her from asserting her individuality and her independence and leading a life of her own choice. Mahasweta Devi's narrative of Souvali is a subversion of the subaltern narratives

Keywords: Subversion, Subalterns, Individuality, Hegemonic Patriarchy

The retellings on Hindu mythology in Indian Writing in English are pointers of the parochial vision of the narratives of mythology. These retellings open alternate views and perceptions to the readers and reveal that what the mythological world offered is not an egalitarian society. Diverse kinds of discrimination and injustice prevailed there, especially racial and gender discrimination and inequality. The hierarchy prevailed in the hegemonic power structure created subalterns also, among which include women characters who are always treated as the Other. It is the absence of gender justice which created situations that lead to insurmountable crisis and which resulted in the fall of nations and the end of dynasties. The alternate representations of the retellings heightened the lack of this egalitarian view in the mythologies.

The three stories in Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* explore the hitherto unexplored lacunae of women in a war-ravaged world and their differential manner in coping up with such an enormous devastation. Mahaswetha Devi's women characters differ in their approaches towards the terrible tragedy which transformed their lives from what it was. It explores the unmitigated strength and sense of righteousness, justice and self-respect on the part of less privileged women; i.e, rural class women or women belonging to a lower strata of society. It is a contra-indication of the discourses of the feminist theories; as these theories often present the aforementioned category of women as doubly-marginalized, patriarchally subjugated and hence more oppressed. But these stories portray women who belong to the lower rungs of society as more emancipated. They enjoy a better sense of self-respect, dignity and privileges compared to their counterparts –the women who belong to the higher echelons of society.

The last story of the collection "Souvali" depicts a Shudra woman who has more strength of character and convictions than any ordinary woman. She is not ready to

compromise her independence or dignity. Though she was a *dasi* woman in the palace of Hastinapur, she is the mother of Yuyutsu, Dhritarashtra's son. She has not even come to terms with the name which the father has given to the son. To her, he is Souvalya, son of Souvali and he is known in her neighborhood as such. She could not forgive the father who gave his son just a name and never his affection. Though she categorically belongs to the marginalized group, she has strong individuality and hence she leads the life of an empowered woman. Adrienne Rich suggests:

Our future as women depends on our making known our versions of reality, so that the false power gained through lying can be replaced by truth to experience. Only through repudiating the imposition of the subject definitions which encourage them to police their own oppression can women gain full control of their lives. (Rich 36).

The living space of Souvali replicates the nature and quality of her life. "On the margins of the town live the marginalized. Their settlement is a lively, noisy place" (Devi 45). This *janavritta* place itself is replete with life which is conspicuously absent in *rajavritta*. The story evolves through her thoughts on the day in which Souvalya has done the last rites for the dead Dhritarashtra, his unacknowledged father. Since all the legitimate sons of the patriarch of Hastinapur have lost their lives in the battlefield, Yuyutsu was compelled to do the *tharpan* without which the Pandavas could not do the other sacred rites for the dead. This final acknowledgement of her son as the offspring of Dhritarashtra and the descendent of the ruling family of Hastinapur displeased Souvali. "He is Souvali's son. In this house, he is Souvalya. Not Yuyutsu". At the sound of the name, his mother flares up. "Yuyutsu indeed! Give the boy a name and that's the end of all responsibility (Devi 47).

Even though he had done *tharpan* for Dhritarashtra, he was not ready to do the same for Kunti and Gandhari as both of them, during their heyday, were not ready to acknowledge

him as the blind king's son. To the people of *janavritta* all these rites are fun, just a mockery. The *maha-tarpan* and casting the remains in the river by Yudhishtira are all a spectacle for them to watch. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti have died in the forest fire a long time before, but the remains are brought only now and hence all the rites associated with a death are also observed now. The disparity between the time of the death and the time of the rites is actually a mockery of the enormous observances and rituals associated with the *rajavritta*. "Never went near him, never called him 'father', and today I did the *tarpan* for him" (Devi 47). "Or else his soul would not have gained release. *Dasiputra!* Slave child! It's because of this *dasiputra* that you got water from a son's hand!" (Devi48).

According to the *rajavritta* custom, all the male offspring will be taken away for their education and arms training to the *gurugriha*. It happened in the case of Yuyutsu also. Souvali could not continue to live with her son during his childhood days. She has to leave him resulting in the torment of the mother and the son -who was just a kid. But emotions have no place in *rajavritta*. Souvalya spoke softly. "I used to cry too. Look all over for you. *Dasiputra* 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" (Devi 49).

She longed to express it to Dhritarashtra that everything about her was taken away. She lost her youth, her son and there is her regret at the neglect of her son by the blind king, though her son is his own flesh and blood. As a servant in the royal household, she felt all her sorrows coming to an end when her son was born, but it comes to naught when he was taken away. She lost any meaning in staying in the palace as one of the *dasis* which effaces her identity as a woman. So she decided to stay in the outskirts of the town after informing the head *dasi* to tell her whereabouts if her son enquires about her. "On the outskirts of the town, everyone knew who Souvali was" (Devi50). It provides her with her identity as a woman

which she lacks in the palace which is strictly functioning according to the patriarchal norms of the *rajavritta*.

She knows that irrespective of Pandavas or Kauravas, the *rajavritta* people are alike in their attitude. Hence when Souvalya/Yuyutsu talked about his acceptance by the Pandavas as Dhritarashtra's son she thought of the disillusionment he will face soon. Hence her lips curled in contempt when he justified his decision to join Pandavas in the battle of Kurukshetra. He said, "No wonder I sided with the Pandavas in battle. The Kauravas called me *dasiputra*, treated me like one. I detested them" (Devi 50-51). His words were proof, ample enough; for the lack of humanity in a battle which claimed to be for righteousness. "And at the end...Bhima was so insulting to father... war robs man of humanity. How boastful the victors were! How arrogantly they behaved!" (Devi51). As she pointed out to her son, there is savagery on both sides in a war. She is more experienced in life than her son; especially the attributes of the upper class is better known to her and hence she chooses her own way to lead her life.

Souvali cherished each moment she spent with her son who was forcibly separated from her, from his childhood onwards. She felt the fulfilment as a mother at each moment she spent with him. Dhritarashtra was so immersed in his love for Duryodhana that he could not spare to think much about his illegitimate son. But to Souvali he is the fulfilment of her life and never allowed him to keep away from her thoughts. Though he was away from her physically most of the times, she is always with him as she carries him in her heart. It is a feeling, which was reciprocated by the son as well. He visits his mother whenever it is possible for him to do so. "They knew I used to come here. They'd taunt me. Say that only *dasiputras* suffered such unmanly needs, cried for their mothers" (Devi 52). Souvali who spent her youthful days among the *rajavritta* as a *dasi* and even bore a son from the king has

a good understanding and awareness of their ways of life. She considers the life of *janavritta* in many ways, far superior compared to them.

It's in the *janavritta*, amongst the common people, that we are in touch with our natural emotions like tenderness, caring, compassion, romance, love, anger, jealousy. But in the *rajavritta*, you know how they keep such natural emotions strictly in check (Devi52).

Her son endorsed her belief that it is the *rajavritta*'s chasing after power, their greed, arrogance and enmity that brings downfall and destruction to them. They hinder the natural flow of life which proves fatal to them and it gives birth to more destructive and negative emotions and feelings. Living among the *rajavritta* has taken its toll on her son also. "How grey his hair was, how lined his forehead! All those years of humiliation, disrespect and unkindness had caused these furrows to appear" (Devi52). Souvali knows better how difficult life in *rajavritta* was. It is this awareness that justifies her decision to leave the place as her son was taken away from her. Their patriarchal norms, their hegemonic hierarchies and their empty soulless rituals were all disgusting to her. To her every custom associated with the royal household lacks its pith; they are thus worthless observances and practices. Hence she refused to observe the death rites associated with the death of Dhritarashtra even though her son had performed his last rites. It seems to be a specialty of the *janavritta* women to have their own set of values and judgement about right and wrong. They are more empowered than the women of *rajavritta* who lives under the rigid rules and the customs imposed upon them by the patriarchal authority. Souvali was bold enough to tell herself "Why worry about all that? I'm hungry, so I'll eat. I left that place of my own free will. Today too I'll let my own dharma tell me what's right" (Devi53). With all her feelings of discrimination faced by herself and her son, she feels a sense of elation in not observing the death rites meant for the wife of the dead person.

I'm just a *dasi*. Was I his wedded wife, that I should undergo the death rites? In the royal household, so many of us *dasis* come and go, so many bear children...observe *as haucha*, the contamination rites? Do *tarpan*? Wear white cloth, fast? Why? (Devi53).

According to her it is meaningless to observe all these rituals for the death of a man who treated her as an object of pleasure and that too one among many of them. Hence there is no need on her part to have any kind of observance for the sake of that man. She enjoys a secret pleasure in defying Dhritarashtra if not in life, but in death. She left the palace, now she lives in her own place in the outskirts of the town and hence she has her own choice. There is no need of her to acknowledge a man who in his lifetime refuses to acknowledge the son who is born to him. "It feels good to have defied the dead Dhritarashtra. In the royal household, the other *dasis* would be roaming around in white widow's clothing, eating only the prescribed meagre fare." (Devi53). "I'll feast on sweet kheer laddoos, ghee-rich jowar pithas, golden honey. And after I'm full, I'll sleep peacefully holding my son in my arms" (Devi53). She has no regrets or longings about her life. She decided to live it according to her terms and she succeeded in it. She is not ready to waver at any moment.

When she came to know that her son was finally acknowledged as the son of Dhritarashtra, in order to perform his last rites, there is no sense of elation for her, just contentment only. She knows her role in the life of the *rajavritta* folk and she considered her own son as foolish for not recognizing it. She did not expect or like to have a mention of her name in the narration of Krishna Dwaipayana. After the war, since the Pandavas acknowledged him he thinks that he can be with them forever and maintain his individuality. Souvali who led a *dasi*'s life at the *rajavritta*, is a free woman at her own place. It is great to have a life on one's own terms. One could not lead such a life among the *rajavritta*.

A *dasi* in the royal household is a subaltern. A woman servant in the palace is a doubly marginalized situation. But, being poor and underprivileged doesn't prevent one from refusing to be a subaltern. Souvali proves it through the life she lived at her own terms. She is an emancipated and liberated woman and thus evolved to be an empowered one in the process. By refusing to live as a *dasi* in the royal palace, she regained everything that is lost to her- her own dignity, individuality, her freedom of choice and her own son who makes her life worthwhile and meaningful.

It is her rebellion to a system where sons are not acknowledged by fathers, but insulted and humiliated as they are born of subaltern mothers. Besides, the patriarchal system considers the sons as the property of the father, though they have no responsibility towards them. Hence they are taken away for arms training at a very young age as the *rajavritta* wants more people to protect them and to fight for them in their battles. As she faced all these injustices of the system, she could not conform to it. According to her, it is hypocrisy to acknowledge the son just to do the last rites of a father, but remain shamelessly unacknowledged throughout the lifetime of his own father.

The strength of mind, strong individuality and independent spirit of a woman belonging to the lower rungs of society are portrayed through the character of Souvali. She has righteous indignation to the king who fathered a son in her, but has not fulfilled the duties and responsibilities of a father. She is a true feminist who wants to establish the stamp of her individuality. She was not ready to observe the death rites of Dhritarashtra as she is not his wedded wife. She feasted on her with all the delicacies she has, as a sign of protest. It is the rebellion of an empowered woman against the hegemonic bonds of patriarchy which treats women of the lower rungs as mere objects. She represents her rebellion through her life and deeds as an empowered woman and as a feminist at heart. Through her actions, she openly declares her unwillingness to be victimized by a system which is glaringly unfair in their

dealings with the marginalized. Her gender does not deter her from asserting her individuality and her independence and leading a life of her own choice. Mahaswetha Devi's narrative of Souvali is a subversion of the subaltern narratives where the marginalized are mere victims of the established norms.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2025 by Dr. Sreekala.B Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Authors are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

Works Cited

Devi, Mahasweta. *After Kurukshetra*. Translated by Anjum Katyal, Seagull Books, 2005.

Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1979..