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DISSENT, DIALOGUE AND RESISTANCE IN MAHASWETHA DEVI'S *THE FIVE WOMEN AND KUNTI AND THE NISHADIN*

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ABSTRACT

The non-inclusiveness and inadequacies in “metanarratives” has been a subject of long-standing debate in the postmodernist era. It has initiated a paradigm shift in reading strategies, world view and cultural interactions. Voices from below are surfacing steadily and surely, prompting the power-wielding, visible groups to pay heed and acknowledge. Incorporating Marxian, Subaltern, gender concerns in her literary works, Mahasweta Devi’s poetics has established itself as the narrative of the marginalized. Her complex works offer radically innovative perspectives and challenge patronizing attitudes that look down upon the subalterns as people without knowledge and power. The short stories “The Five Women” and “Kunti and the Nishadin” translated by Anjum Katyal and collected in *After Kurukshetra* portray tribal women who speak their mind and refuse to feel intimidated by the royalty and their dictates. The paper traces the trajectory of their dissent and resistance to hegemonic ideologies and their fierce assertion of agency and identity.

KEY WORDS:

Subaltern, power, hegemony, grand narrative, little narrative, dissent

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of post structuralist thinking has long since rattled the notion of absolute and fixed meanings and structures. When Jacques Derrida presented his ground breaking observations in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” at the John Hopkins International Colloquium in October 1966, a new theoretical paradigm was launched that questioned the very existence of the ‘center’. To Derrida the desire to have structures with fixed centers, or rather “logocentrism”, is problematic since it is exclusionary and negates the voices of all those who do not form the center – it represses and marginalizes those who dwell on the periphery. It is thus in ‘deconstruction’ or ‘decentering’ that myriads of structures and meanings arise leading to a healthy ‘free play of signifiers’. As he famously postulates: “The center is not the center” (352). Derrida insists that with the ‘rupture’ it has become “necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the

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center could not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center had no natural locus....a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (353). Derrida attributes this initiation of the process of decentering "to the totality of an era, our own" (354).

Thus, it entails that the center can be shifted to infinite loci to bring multiple perspectives into play and in this endless 'play' between the center and periphery, new structures evolve thereby making every text a 'pretext' for another. Drawing upon these possibilities, Post Colonialism, Subaltern studies, gender studies, Marxian readings, historiography, mythological revisionism and many such discourses from the margins have gained added theoretical impetus.

Along similar lines, Postmodernism indicts and challenges the totalitarianism of the "metanarratives" of authority, duty and responsibility and celebrates the history of the present moment. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) elaborates on the breakdown of the oppressive "grand narratives" (*le grand récit*) of knowledge and power and the emergence of the "little narratives" (*le petit récit*). He calls this "postmodern knowledge" which he defines as follows: "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy" (Lyotard xxv). According to Lyotard the "little narrative", which foregrounds dialogue and creativity, "remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (60).

A confluence of all these ideas can be identified in the corpus of the doyen of Bengali literature, Mahasweta Devi. Alongside engaging in an illustrious literary career spanning over six decades, she is also committed to the cause of ameliorating the living conditions of the tribal communities in West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Her visit to the impoverished district of Palamau in Bihar brought her face to face with the dismal and subhuman existence of tribal people, who grapple with bondage, administrative indifference and exploitation. This experience was to mark the body of her writings ever since, bringing the submerged voices of the marginalized and needful to the mainstream. It was the translation of her works by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that brought Mahasweta Devi to the forefront of the Anglophone literary pantheon. Mahasweta Devi has explored extensively the local oral histories of the marginalized and thereby re-visioned and broadened traditional narratives of history and mythology through vital additions of "little narratives."

Fiercely subaltern in her concern, Mahasweta Devi has reiterated time and again her mission of challenging traditional, religio-mythical historiographies in her revisionist works to offer space and voice to the 'Other'. She unequivocally claims in an interview with Nandini Sen that her endeavor has always been to translate "the white spaces between the lines in Ramayana and Mahabharata ... the potent gaps in history" (Sen), the 'silences' wherein lie the real stories. The three short stories "The Five Women" ("*Panchakanya*"), "Kunti and the Nishadin" ("*Kunti o Nishadi*") and "Souvali" ("*Souvali*") collected under the title *After Kurukshetra* delve into the space of the '*lokavritta*' (general public) who are rendered nearly invisible in the master narrative of the Mahabharata. While the grand epic celebrates the figure of the elite male warrior of the '*rajavritta*' and tales of his valor, prowess, and machoism, Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* zooms into what remains of Hastinapur and its women in the wake of the glorified *dharmayuddha*. Both "The Five Women" and "Kunti and the Nishadin" are postmodern texts which re-think and re-vision the privileged grand narratives and center the little narratives from the periphery.

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An explication of both stories reveals how Mahasweta Devi investigates the dialectics of power and resistance by foregrounding tribal women endowed with remarkable self-assurance and rationality. Their potent questions to the elite women of the royal household challenge accepted hegemonic ideologies that justify war and butchery in the name of *dharma*. A recurrent tendency in the aftermath of war is the eruption of dissenting voices that, despite a threat to time-honored power structures and value systems, offer room for pluralist perspectives and dialogue. The five Kurujangal women and the Nishadin apparently confiscate agency and represent the voice of rebellion and threat of subversion, indicating how power is vacillating and inconsistent.

Power is identified as a process whereby the composition of the powerful and the less powerful groups is dynamic and keeps shifting. Hegemony itself is seen as re-negotiable and re-adjustable. Raymond Williams points out:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. (Williams 112)

Hegemony, however, is maintained by coercive and consensual control which entails both the exercise of threat and the voluntary assimilation of the ideology of the dominant group. Gramsci defines hegemony as:

... a cultural and ideological means whereby the dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class. This is achieved by the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups. (Strinati 153)

Gramsci also observes how the subordinate classes themselves amalgamate different social minorities evolving into a non-homogenous group based on 'alliance'. The event of any disruption or disintegration of the hegemonic leadership offers an opportunity for the subordinate alliance or coalition groups to transcend barriers and challenge the existing order. Thus, the emergence of dissenting voices in the context of socio-political turbulence is not a sudden and spontaneous occurrence but rather one that has been seething and formulating itself beneath the layers of ruling hegemonic structures.

The key to 'revolutionary' social change in modern societies does not therefore depend, as Marx had predicted, on the spontaneous awakening of critical class consciousness but upon the prior formation of a new alliance of interests, an alternative hegemony or 'historical bloc', which has already developed a cohesive world view of its own. (Williams 27)

However, even within the 'alliance', there exists a power play that offers greater visibility to certain factions as against certain others creating 'subalterns' even within the subordinate group. It is here that Mahasweta Devi positions her narratives: in women who are thrice marginalized by class,

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caste and gender.

Space and time assume remarkable dialectical significance in the stories since they provide the setting for the exchange between the 'ideally' more visible and powerful women of the *Kshatriya* clan and the less privileged tribal women. The sequential arrangement of the three stories in *After Kurukshetra* delineates a progressive assertion of the subaltern space or *lokavritta* eventually leading to the complete absence of the voice of the dominant group or *rajavritta* in "Souvali". While in "The Five Women" one discerns the possibility of dialogue and interaction between the two, "Kunti and the Nishadin" progresses like a judicial interrogation wherein the queen mother is reduced to articulating in monosyllables.

In "The Five Women" featuring the wives of the Pandava clan, Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra and the young Uttara on one hand and the recently widowed *panchkanyas* of the Kurujangal on the other, the distinction between the two worlds is conclusively delineated. When Kunti affirms that "They are from a totally different world" (Devi 5) and Subhadra rhetorically exclaims, "How can subject and ruler be the same?" (Devi 9) the 'otherness' of the common man's world and identity is established. Even their languages are different. Eventually, in a master stroke of subversion, Mahasweta Devi pictures the seemingly insignificant realm of the *lokavritta* as more progressive, desirable and life-affirming than the effete and futile realm of the *rajavritta*.

At a time when Hastinapur is still reeling from the mindless carnage of the "holy war", the five women and the Nishadin rupture the grand narrative of war itself. The Kurujangal women vehemently cut off Madraja when she tries to euphemize the war as a "disaster":

Disaster? What disaster? Huh, old woman? Was this some natural calamity? So many great kings join in 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! (Devi 3)

The *rajavritta* women are conditioned into accepting the throes of war, loss and widowhood with the consolation that the martyrs of the holy war attain *divyalok*. This sole pretext on which the royal wives surrender to a lifetime of grief and distress is pooh-poohed by the five women – yet another instance of their resistance to coercive and consensual exploitation. Their retort to this hegemonic assumption is scathing and virulent: "Oh yes! Seen the chariots from heaven with your own eyes, haven't you? Heard the joyful ululation with your own ears? [...] They did not go to heaven. The foot soldiers died fighting in the very same dharmayuddha. But no funeral rites were held for their souls" (Devi 17-18). Exercising their reasoning, the five women thwart all platitudes employed to defend war and martyrdom.

It is the young wife of Abhimanyu, Uttara, who expresses the *rajavritta's* sense of wonder and surprise at the richness of village life, weighing it against the bleakness of royal mores and customs time and again. While the widows of the royal households stare into a life of meaningless rituals – "endless fasts, pujas, offerings of cows to the brahmans" (8) – the tribal widows remarry and lead respectable lives working in fields and guarding their homes alongside their male counterparts. This regenerative potential is directly inspired from Nature itself that affirms life and abhors waste:

We worship the earth. After a terrible calamity, the sun always rises. Even after this dreadful war, Nature has not stood still. [...] The village needs to hear the sound of

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chatter and laughter. We will... create life. That's what Nature teaches us... As long as there is life, that life demands fulfillment... [Our widows] never deny the demands of life in order to exist as mere shadowy ghosts, shrouded in silence. (25)

When thus the subaltern speaks of her world and its profoundly empowering philosophy, the dominant group listens in amazement. "Who has ever really looked at them? Nothing more than insignificant presences. But now, suddenly, those presences have been granted form, granted notice" (25). And here Mahasweta Devi has established the very purpose of writing from and about the margins.

The inextricable interweaving of Nature and man that permeates and empowers tribal life is underlined throughout right from the subtle naming of the five women after food grains and rivers to the Nishadin's instinctual awareness of the language of Nature that alerts her to an approaching forest fire. Contrary to the first story that is almost exclusively set in the space of the *rajavritta*, "Kunti and the Nishadin" unravels in the forest of Hastinapur, the abode of the Nishad people. Tending to Dhritarashtra and Gandhari during the final chapter of their life, Kunti awaits death and expiation and leads a bare minimal existence – a form of penance for her sins and those of her sons.

One encounters in Kunti, a woman who fails miserably to live up to her own expectations and is eternally awed by the stature, "true piety and righteousness" (31) of Gandhari. She laments her incapacity to speak and act like Gandhari and the selfish motives that plagued her interactions with Karna, her eldest son. Resolving to unburden herself, Kunti speaks to the "trees, the river, the birds, the murmuring leaves, the wind, even to the Nishadins. Who, even if they hear her, won't understand. Won't ask any questions" (29). The very act of equating the Nishadins to inanimate entities is proof for the exclusive and hegemonic world view of the queen mother. She is impervious to their presence and has no qualms about it. The author categorically states: "Kunti has never tried to learn the language they speak" (28). Her world shrinks within the confines of the *rajavritta* and she refuses to acknowledge even the existence of the tribal women:

... those eyes register nothing about the Nishadins moving about in front of her, not even by a look. How could they? Her life had been the *rajavritta*, the gods, serving the brahmans. Had she ever spoken to a *dasi*? Had she developed any genuine bond with *Hidimba*? Life outside the *rajavritta* had not touched her at all. (29)

As Kunti pours her heart out to the forest, addressing Devi Vasundhara, she indulges in an elaborate confessional regarding the bloodbath of the *dharmayuddha*, the desertion of Karna at birth, her invitation to Karna to join his brothers spurred not by her affection towards her first born but rather by her fear for the lives of the Pandavas, Gandhari's magnanimity as she wept for the martyrs of both clans and out rightly cursed Krishna Vasudeva for instigating the war and so on. Little does Kunti realize that her vapid platitudes evoke nothing but laughter and pity from the observing Nishadins.

Soon enough though, Kunti is violently jolted out of her ivory tower when amid the turbulence of the forest one afternoon, she is affronted by the Nishadin who launches a tirade against Kunti in the language of the *rajavritta*. As Kunti stands paralyzed with shock and disbelief the Nishadin says: "I've heard you day after day, waiting to see if you will confess your gravest sin... We've waited years for you Kunti" (39-40). What follows is a courtroom-model of accusation and interrogation in the language of the tormentor who is rendered defenseless and speechless in the space of the subaltern. The Nishadin uses the language of the dominant class to turn it against them and articulate the subaltern

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predicament.

In a powerful iteration of voice and identity, the Nishadin rules: "... to sacrifice or harm innocents in one's own self-interest is the most unpardonable sin. You are guilty of that sin" (41). She forces Kunti to jog her memory and admit the one sin that the latter does not even acknowledge – how, while staying at the town of Varanavata, in the house of lac (*Jatugriha*) Kunti had craftily invited an elderly Nishadin and her five young sons to feast on food and wine rendering them senseless and escaping through the tunnel as the lac house was set fire to. The *vratya*, the outcastes, were a red herring to convince the Kauravas that the Pandavas and their mother had been killed. While the laws of the elite, dominant class condones and trivializes the murder of the less powerful, the laws of Nature hold them guilty of a heinous crime. Tongue-tied Kunti wonders how to absolve herself, as the forest-fire rages and engulfs her in an instance of true poetic justice.

The subversive poetics of Mahasweta Devi offers a new perspective of viewing the subaltern, not as passive groups assimilating the ideologies of the dominant class but rather as actively engaging in and questioning their master narratives. Empowered with identity, voice and agency, the stories seem to suggest that the subaltern indeed, can speak.

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