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When the Subaltern Speaks: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Kunti and the nishadin"

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's short story "Kunti and the nishadin" revolves around an imagined conversation between the Empress and a woman from the hunter-gatherer nomadic tribe, a woman of no significance to the rulers of the land. Kunti, the Queen Mother considers the nishadin to be akin to rocks and stones in the forest where she now dwells, who is unworthy of her attention or disdain. The conversation concentrates on the power structures of patriarchy which shape the *Rajdharma* or the polity of governance. The patriarchal take on parenthood, kingship and the evolution of power structures is integral to Mahasweta's retelling of the epic through this short story. It is a modern-day parable which questions the dominant power structures built on the edifice of religion. Mahasweta offers a gendered critique while also showing how patriarchy is internalised and perpetrated through marriage, kingship and succession.

This paper discusses the story as a contemporary postcolonial fable where the subaltern not only speaks but also dares to challenge the mores of the society by creating her own justice system which is in tandem with the natural laws of the society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender, Religion, Subaltern, Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi's "Kunti and nishadin" has been translated from the original Bengali story titled "Kunti o nishadi" by Anjum Katyal in a volume titled *After Kurukshetra* (2005). Talking about the translation Katyal writes,

> With the ancient epic *Mahabharat* as her source, and the battle of Kurukshetra as the central motif, Mahasweta Devi weaves three stories in which we visit unexpected alleys and by lanes of the traditional epic saga,

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> and look at the events from the eyes of women – marginalised, dispossessed, dalit. Their eyes condemn the wanton waste and in humanity of war. This Kurukshetra is not the legendary Dharmayuddha of the popular imagination but rather a cold-blooded power game sacrificing countless human lives. (*After Kurukshetra*, Blurb)

"Kunti and nishadin" is the second story in the volume where the focus is on the Queen mother Kunti who has proceeded to the forest as part of the *vanaprastha* (renunciation of worldly life) along with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. The story throws up multiple questions regarding female sexuality, motherhood and the hypocrisy surrounding childbirth and lineage in the royal households. The two women at the centre of the discourse are the royal matriarch Kunti and the nameless woman from a nomadic tribe – the nishadin.

Kunti, the royal matriarch is the mother of the five Pandav brothers who are known for their adherence to *dharma* (religion) and are celebrated for wiping out the haughty Kauravas and bringing back the rule of law to Indraprastha. Kunti is defined by her glorious widowhood and motherhood but alone in the forest, divested of her royal duties, she finally sits back and reflects on her life. She can finally shed tears for the son she was ashamed to call her own. Her self-questioning brings to fore the rigid stereotypes and hypocrisies of the royals which have defined her life till date. Away from the palace and her queenly duties, Kunti is finally able to pause and question the hollowness of her existence.

> Kunti can now look back. She never knew she carried within her such a burden of unspoken thought and feelings. Life in the *rajavritta* was so different. Mother of the Pandavas. Wife of Pandu. The role of daughter in law, the role of queen, the role of mother, playing these hundreds of roles where was the space, the time to be her true self? All the while – amazingly – she never felt anything was hers and hers alone. (*After Kurukshetra* 22)

The only time Kunti had ever acted of her own free will was when she had called upon the sun god which had resulted in the birth of her firstborn Karna. Yet, Kunti had forsaken him at birth and had never had the courage to claim him as her own. As she pours her heart out in the thick of the forest, she starts to feel lighter. She realises now that she had not only wronged Karna, she had also wronged the woman in her – a woman who had dared to love. As life ebbs away from her, she seeks atonement for her sins. The gravest sin which she remembers committing lies in her inability to claim her firstborn as her own as he had been born before she tied the knot with Pandu. Worried about the social stigma attached to an unwed mother, Kunti had placed the newborn in a basket and allowed it to sail away. Much later in her life she wanted to meet her son but had refused to recognise him fearing a scandal. She had allowed him to grow up and live his life in ignominy chided for being a charioteer's son, mocked and chastised by the royals. Young Karna had continued to suffer in silence when Kunti finally chose to reveal his identity to him not out of love but for the fear of Karna's wrath against the Pandavas. In the battle

that followed between Arjun and Karna, the latter was treacherously killed and all along his sole fault had been the tragedy of his birth which denied him Kshatriyahood and a royal existence. The Karna story points to a grievous fault in the society based on caste and the politics of birth but seen through Kunti's repentant eyes it brings to life the complexities of the patriarchal world where the woman is perceived merely as a vessel for perpetrating the dynasty - devoid of agency and existing merely as an appendage of her male counterpart. In Mahasweta's story, the patriarchal domination and hypocrisy is more visible in the royal quarters as opposed to that of the commoners. In the world of the nishads, it is nature which determines their course of action. They are seen to be more grounded, connected to mother earth, and their lives - easy and cohesive unlike the royal family which thrives on hypocrisy.

Burdened by age and the weight of a life misspent, Kunti seeks refuge in the forest where she chooses to unburden herself by talking about the sins committed by her. Her heart feels lighter as she converses with the trees and stones even as she imagines her worries diminishing. Far from the world of the *rajavritta*, Kunti seems to have found solace at last. It is at this point of time that she is joined by a nishadin who does not speak but seems to soak in everything Kunti is saying. Kunti continues to talk, allowing her cares to be spoken out loud just for once in her life, totally convinced that the nishadin does not speak or understand her language thereby successfully obliterating her presence and treating her like one of the lifeless stones in the forest – a classic postcolonial situation of erasure and obliteration. In the queer patriarchal space in which Kunti operates, a woman may beget children through other men if her father or husband mandates it and these children would be part of the lineage and carry forth their patronym even though they might not have been sired by the man himself. Questioning the tenets of patriarchy which has enslaved her throughout her life, she says:

> No, I never even thought of doing anything of my own. Pandu told me a woman can beget sons with the aid of another man. I got my lord's permission. I went ahead. The only time I took a man I wanted of my own free will, I got Karna. I was unmarried then. In today's society, Yudhisthira, if her husband should wish it, a woman can beget a child sired by another. But no young girl can become a mother of her own free will. Madhavi, the rishi's daughter, on her father's command, bore four sons sired by four different men. She was unmarried. But she was carrying out her father's orders, so society accepted her. (*After Kurukshetra* 33)

Kunti realises at the very end of her life that she has never known a time when she could make her own choices. Her sexuality is curbed but her womb is held sacred as she provides the heirs of Pandu since it was the duty of a Kshatriya woman to provide an heir to the husband. Much to her dismay, she realises that the only man she had taken as her lover and the son begotten through this union was lost to her forever. According to Arunabha Bose,

> The polyphony and heterogeneity of female voices in Mahasweta's story displace the omniscient narrative voice of Vyasa while recuperating the 'woman' Kunti who was contained in the self-reflecting representations of Kshatriyahood. Mahasweta delegitimises the patrilineality of the male kinship structures in the *Mahabharata* to show how 'Dharma' rationalises the Kshatriya state's prohibitions and regulations upon female sexuality through the polyvalence of power entrenched in structures of fatherhood, family formation and dynastic propagation. (Bose 5)

As Kunti laments the death of Karna whom she had been forced to forsake at birth, her confession is heard by a group of nishadins. Kunti is initially scared of them wondering if any harm will come her way but she soon obliterates them from her consciousness as in consequential.

> Earlier, my eyes could not see, my mind could not understand.
>
> But I have lashed my conscience over and over. And I have realized. If I do not speak now, it will be the ultimate sin.
>
> Suddenly Kunti lifted her head. Stone-faced, unmoving the nishadins were staring at her.
>
> Kunti was speechless.
>
> The elderly nishadin said something to the others, who knows what. They fell over each other laughing.
>
> Kunti was trembling, terrified. Would they come closer?
>
> Their shadows may fall on the sacred pile and defile it.
>
> Evening was approaching. Kunti stood up. Her thin fingers tightened on the grass rope as she dragged the bundle away….
>
> Talking before the nishadins was same as talking to the rocks and stones. To the earth. (*After Kurukshetra* 30)

For Kunti, the Empress, the nishadins are akin to rocks and stones: their language - unintelligible and their mannerisms childlike. The division of classes creates an impregnable wall around Kunti's consciousness which does not allow her to look at the nishad community as fellow humans. This nomadic tribe with its unique ways continues to remain in the fringes of the mainstream social framework. Needless to say, Mahasweta uses these stories as an allegorical rendition of the present times where even today a nomadic tribe is looked upon with suspicion and scorn by the mainstream. According to Bill Ashcroft, language is a way in which "social, economic and political discourse are grounded….it is incontestable that language is the mode of a constant and pervasive extension of cultural dominance- through ideas, attitudes, histories and ways of seeing- that is central to imperial hegemony" (Ashcroft, et al. 22). By denying linguistic skills to the nishadin, Kunti falls into the trap of the hegemonic dominance where she being the ruler has access to language which a woman from a hunter gatherer tribe is supposed to lack. While she can expiate her

sorrows through words, her presumption is that this unlettered poor woman will not be able to understand what she is saying. Hence it takes her completely by surprise when the nishadin calls her by her name and speaks to her in the queen's own language. The nishadin's speech is akin to that of Caliban's who masters Prospero's language in order to be able to curse him.

In the idylls of the forest Kunti feels free to articulate her opinion on the 'dharmayuddha' that the war at Kuruksheta had come to be known as. The senseless loss of lives is justified by the royals as preordained. The pious Gandhari sees death as "nothing but an epic of sorrow." (*After Kurukshetra* 30) She consoles other grieving women by asking them to be courageous as now grief will be their sole companions. Kunti, however, questions this in the privacy of the forest where she is sure no one will be witness to her confessions. She questions the unfairness of the war which seemingly makes heroes of men who lay down their lives and attain martyrdom; but the real victims are the women who are forced to live as pale shadows of their former selves – cursed into a lifetime of mourning. Kunti seems to have grasped the true essence of the war as she says, "This war was a battle for power. A war to wipe out the other and to establish oneself as all powerful. Did dharma triumph? Was dharma vanquished? The heartrending cries of women at the sight of all those bloodied, savaged corpses were a curse on the word 'war' itself." (*After Kurukshetra* 28-29)

As Kunti unburdens herself, the nishad woman sits and watches her intently. Even as Kunti talks, she feels her sorrow lessen as she is finally able to confess to Mother Earth. But interestingly her confessions merely record her own sorrows rather than focussing on others that she or her sons may have harmed. Even in the confessional mode she continues to remain the self- serving queen and articulates the value systems of the *rajavritta* (the royals). This truth is brought home to her when the nishadin confronts her. The nishad woman continues to remain nameless as if she were speaking on behalf of all her tribe. She addresses Kunti as an equal and dares to tell her how money and hunger for power have blinded the royals and how the women who perpetrate the *rajavritta* thought are actually doing a great disservice to womanhood and nature. The nishadin reminds Kunti that nature abhors waste. A woman's life doesn't deserve to be sacrificed just because her husband is no more. "We don't deny the demands of life. If we are widowed, we have a right to remarry. Those who wish to can marry again." (*After Kurukshetra* 38) The nishadin then goes on to remind Kunti of her crime against *lokavritta* (the commoner) which unfortunately does not figure as a crime in the eyes of the queen. She reminds her of the *jatugriha* (house of lac) incident where Kunti had been an active participant in the murder of six innocent people. Duryodhana had planned to kill Kunti and her sons by burning them alive in a house constructed of lac in his bid to usurp their share of the kingdom but the Pandavas had gained intelligence of this plot. For a whole year the Pandavas had planned their escape. They had invited a nishad mother and her five sons and had plied them with drinks. They had then

made their escape after setting fire to the house. Duryodhana had been fooled seeing the six charred bodies in the house. The *jatugriha* incident is recounted as a feather in the Pandava cap as they had managed to foil the assassination attempt made on them by the vile Duryodhana and the loss of six nishad lives has been treated as inconsequential in the dominant discourse. Mahasweta dramatizes the story by putting the ball in the nishadin's court as she interrogates Kunti, who drunk with power, can- not even remember this as a crime in her book. The death of a nishad is too inconsequential to find mention in a queen's confessions. The nishadin who had been listening to Kunti's confessions, now turns on her demanding explanations and Kunti, for once, is rendered speechless – she is shocked into silence as she does not expect her to know her language. The royals who signify the mainstream discourse accord the Nishads, Sobors, Nagavanshis, etc. sub human status. In Mahasweta's story it is the marginalized nishad woman who questions the mighty Queen. She even pronounces the latter's death sentence and the Queen is forced to accept it with humility.

> A scheme, right? A cruel plot? Only the *rajavritta* can do such a thing. You live there for one year, knowing full well that the place will be burnt to ashes, that you have to save yourself and your sons. You had to provide irrefutable proof that the six of you had been burnt to death. nishads and nishadins were regular visitors there, weren't they?
>
> But…
>
> Shut up. Listen. They (the nishads) would come from the forest. They supplied timber, animal hides, ivory, venison, medicinal herbs, resin honey. They both men and women would sell their wares in exchange for salt – clothes – rice. Then they would drink some wine, sing and dance arm in arm and return home…
>
> Yes.
>
> Tell me who knew of a certain elderly nishadin and her five young sons? Who invited them to her feast for brahmins? Who made sure that they were served with unlimited amounts of wine? You have held feasts for so many brahmans so many times Kunti. How often have you ever invited any nishad – kirat – sabar – nagavanshi forest tribals?... (*After Kurukshetra* 37)

She dismisses Kunti's plea for forgiveness by saying, "You couldn't even remember this sin. Causing six innocent forest tribals to be burnt to death to serve your own interests. That was not even a crime in your book. In our eyes, by the laws of Mother Nature, you, your sons, your allies are all held guilty." (*After Kurukshetra* 38)

The nishadin's punishment for Kunti is different from that of the *rajavritta*. Instead of resorting to the *rajavritta* way of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (38) the nishadin relies on Nature to take its toll. Having lived in forests all their

lives the nishad community knows and senses when a forest fire will break out. When the fire is imminent, they make their escape but not before the nishadin stops to tell Kunti that her end is near and she must atone for her sins. "Three blind, weak and infirm people cannot make it there. One is blind from birth, another has chosen to be blind, and you, you are the blindest of all three. You can murder innocents and forget all about it." (*After Kurukshetra* 39)

"Kunti and the nishadin" replaces the dominant male narrative of Vyasa by situating the text in the women's quarters. Seen from the women's point of view, the so called Dharmayuddha or just war is nothing but a sham to wrest political power. Kunti, the Rajmata, is glorified for her piety, wisdom and stoicism – all of which appear to be hollow and meaningless since all she had done was to propagate the patriarchal order of begetting heirs for the kingdom and standing on the margins watching the fratricidal war, unable to stop her own two sons from killing each other. At no point of time had she intervened or dared to go against the prescribed tenets of Royalty and Kshatriyahood. The only time she had sought audience with her first born was to barter a deal with him – by revealing his origins just before he went into war, Kunti ensured that she would have weakened him as part of a large conspiracy to see the Pandav brothers win.

> Living in the *rajavritta* makes one cunning, treacherous. I never visited Karna hungering to hold him to my bosom. For my son's sake, I told him to leave Duryodhana, join Yudhisthira. Now I feel, Karna knew that the clever trickster Vasudev Krishna would ensure that the victory to the Pandavas. Only the war of the victorious is known as dharmayuddha. The wars of the vanquished are never called thus…(*After Kurukshetra* 32).

The *Janavritta*, however, works very differently from the rajavritta as the common woman is seen wielding greater power and agency than her royal sister in Mahasweta's works. The nishads live in great harmony with the forest, their balance of life determined by the nature. Also, there seems to be a greater harmony between men and women. Dismissing the Brahmanical order the nishadin says, "Oh, we see plenty of rishis about. This is the land of our birth you know. Devi Aranyaka is our mother." (36) Mocking at Kunti's piety and her singular regret of not being able to claim Karna as her own, the nishadin explains the difference between the tribal community (read *janavritta*) and the dominant patriarchal world order of the royals which is bolstered by Brahminical religion.

> –The rajvritta folk and the lokvritta folk have different values, different ideas of right and wrong. If a young nishad girl makes love to the boy of her choice and gets pregnant, we celebrate it with a wedding.
>
> – What kind of law is that?
>
> – Nature's Law. Nature abhors waste. We honour life. When man and woman come together, they create a new life. But you won't understand. (*After Kurukshetra* 36)

Conclusion

By positing an alternative to the dominant discourse of patriarchy where the subaltern not only speaks but avenges herself, Mahasweta posits a parallel world view which exists in the society but is ignored by the mainstream. She also wishes to right the wrong where the current governments in collaboration with the business houses are in the process of taking away the forest rights from the tribal communities and force them to assimilate or to die of penury. Mahasweta's voice resonates with the dispossessed as she articulates a sharp critique of the dominant political narrative of Brahminical supremacy and gendered inequality. In the words of the noted critic G. N. Devy who was a close associate of Mahasweta Devi, "Her writing addressed one single word: injustice, wherever she saw what she thought was injustice, she plunged into the struggle and never looked back." (Devy 89)

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