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CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND DOUBLE MARGINALIZATION IN MAHASWETHA DEVI'S *AFTER KURUSHETRA*

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi is a Bengali writer, who often raise voice for voiceless subaltern and marginalized people in most of her works. Mahabharata is a great Indian Epic. Every Indian look at the epic as a holy book and celebrate each and every characters of it. In *After Kurushetra*, she discover agonies of Janavrita and differentiate it with sufferings of Rajavrita. Mahaswetha Devi mentioned 'Kurushetra war' is not at all righteous war but greedy and cruel war to hold the crown between Pandavas and Govravas. She reveals hidden and unknown truths about Royal society and Subaltern people in this novel. She explains how subaltern people abused both physically and mentally by the hegemonic royal society. Subaltern women face double marginalization in the hands of: androcentric - patriarchal society and gynocentric – royal women in hierarchy. This paper tries to trace out how Rajavrita with their hierarchy and cultural hegemony control over subaltern group.

Key words: hegemony, cultural difference, subaltern, identity

Mahasweta Devi is one of the prolific Bengali novelists, political and social activist. She keeps working for welfare of tribal, dalits and marginalized communities with the focus on their women. She received the Jnanpith award in 1996 and the Ramon Magsaysay award in 1997 for her 'compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal peoples a just and honorable place in India's national life'. She also received India's civilian awards like Padma Shri and Padma Vibhshan awards. In most of her works, she often sketch the brutal oppression on tribal people and low caste people by powerful authoritarian upper caste landlords, money-lenders and government officers. Her notable works are *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084), *Rudaali* and *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right of the Forest). On her death Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal tweeted "India has lost a great writer. Bengal has lost a glorious mother. I have lost a personal guide" (The Hindu).

'Subaltern' meaning "Of inferior rank", is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. The concept of the 'subaltern' gained prominence with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article "Can the Subaltern Speak". After *Kurushetra* is consist of three short stories based on ancient epic *Mahabharata* and the battle of Kurushetra. They are *The Five Women* (Panchakanya), *Kunti and the Nishadin* (Kunti o Nishadi) and *Souvali*. AnjumKatyal, translator of this work mention thus about Kurushetra War: "This Kurushetra is not the legendary Dharmayuddha of the popular imagination but a cold-blooded power game that sacrificed countless human lives". Mahasweta Devi narrate this story from the view of women those who are marginalized, suppressed and exploited by royal society. They furiously condemn the cruel and inhumanity of war. Mary Lucas observes

After Kurukshetra is a gynotext, narratives of the colonized subaltern that "write back" to superimpose and obliterate the grand narratives of colonialism, patriarchy, monarchy, dogma and

class division. It presents a multiplicity of discourses whereby marginality and perpetrated "otherness" are sources of energy and potential change. (101)

The five women in title of the story represent widows of five foot soldiers. They are Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta, and Vipasha. They are on their way back home after the end of the Kurushetra war that has destroyed the lives of innocent soldiers including their husbands. The battle ground of Kurukshetra, was hard and heated by the funeral pyres. The five widow women can't walk anymore through the tough battle ground so they decide to stay for few days. The maid servant of the royal household, Madraja, who decides to recruit them as companions of the widowed and pregnant Uttara. They raise question to Madraja about Kurushetra War thus:

Disaster? What disaster? Huh, old woman? Was this some natural calamity? So many great kings join 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).

Uttara becomes senseless with grief and stuck dumb. She pregnant with the child of Abhimanyu and that child is only heir of Pandavas. The accompaniment of the five women make Uttara console and ease. She felt that their way of life totally different from royal life. The five women describe their lifestyle to Uttara. Even during pregnancy they have to do light chores in home like walk bare foot on the grass, fold clothes and water the tulsi plants. Uttara can't sleep at night because her dreams were filled with Abhimanyu's bloodied body. The five women sleep beside her on the floor peacefully but their husbands too died in the war.

The five women and Uttara discuss about the different cultures between Janavritta and Rajavritta. In Royal society, naming a child has a long process. They have pujas, yagnas, offering to Agni. Elders of the family sit together and discuss about it with priests. Finally decide name with the help of horoscope and astrological signs. But Janavritta's naming ceremony is simple because the name of the newborn baby will decided by grandparents. In their tradition all are treated equally. Vitasta says, "Not just the men, the women also guard the fields. Once my mother speared a deer to death. My mother is really strong. She can lift a stone grinder all by herself" (13). So these words clearly explains men and women have to guard their fields. They are strong enough to use spear like men. When the men go off to war, women have to protect her homes.

Uttara can't marry any other person in her life time. She has to wear plain white and not allowed to wear ornaments and dress her hair. Her child will stay with her a year. After that, wet nurse will begin to take care of that child. Royal offspring are not raised by their mothers. She lost her husband in very short time. Throughout her life she has to mourn for her husband. This is not just state of Uttara, all the widows those who have lost their husbands in Kurushetra war including all Kaurava widows because they are all belongs to royal family. Janavritta custom allows widow women to marry their brother-in-laws. So they can start their new life and lead a happy life. The five women said

As long as there is life, that life demands fulfilment. Our widows remarry, are respected by their families. They work alongside their husbands cultivating the land, harvesting and storing the crop. They never deny the demands of life in order to exist as mere shadowy ghosts, shrouded in silence. Once we had husbands. Now we don't. Crying won't bring them back to life. Also our husbands fought and died in the king's war... This was not our dharmayuddha. Brother kills brother, uncle kills newpew, shishya kills guru. It may be your idea of dharma, it's not ours. (25-26)

Madhraj try to console Uttara and said "All those who lost their lives to the righteous war have gone straight to divyalok!" (17). so these words explains that those who are take part in Kurushetra war will definitely reach heaven after their death. Godhumi give a reply to this statement thus: "No chariot came down from Divyalok. 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 (18). Foot soldiers are none other than farmers in rural area. They are take part in war but they not allowed having armor, bow and arrows. The foot soldiers only weapon is the spear. Subaltern group suffered a lot because of Kurushetra war. Farmers lead a happy life in their village with their families. But war ended their happiness.

Second story *Kunti and the Nishadin* had a different view on the House of Lac episode of the Mahabharata. This episode begins with kauravas murder plan. Kauravas wanted to set a trap to kill pandavas so they built a palace made of combustible materials. Vidura knew about this trap and advise pandavas to dig a secret tunnel from the palace to the forest to escape. One night a Nishadin with her five sons come to sleep in

the palace. Suddenly the palace catch fire and Pandavas escape through the tunnel. The Kauravas mistook the burned bodies of the Nishads for the dead bodies of Kunti. The Pandavas escaped safely from the disaster and start to live in woods.

The story *Kunti and the Nishadin* begins at the point where Kunti along with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari live in forest after Kurushetra War. Kunti blames herself for her sins committed throughout her life. Kunti asked permission from her husband and got children with the aid of gods. Before her marriage, Karna was sired by Suryadeva. She afraid about society and abandoned that child. She said "I am pandu's wife, my husband is not the father of my sons, yet you are all pandavas. But Karna will never be any more than a carpenter's son" (37). She sacrificed him after birth and carry out none of the responsibilities of motherhood. But Karna obeyed all her orders and wishes and become a filial son of Kunti. She only concerned for Pandavas. Death of Karna burns her heart and she felt guilty for abandoned him. But in Lokavritta, they have different values and ideas. If a young Nishad girl makes love to the boy of her choice and gets pregnant, they will celebrate it with a wedding. Nishadin considered it as a Nature's law - when a man and woman happily together and create a new life.

One day Kunti encounter with Nishadin who is unforgiving Kunti and the Pandavas for death of the innocent Nishads in the Jatugriha. The group of Nishadin is none other than daughter in-laws of old Nishadin died in Jatugriha. They all lost their mother in law and husbands. But with the lokavritta customs they are no longer widows of dead husbands. They got married and even have children of their own. The Nishadin calls Kunti by her name and complains

Drunk on so much wine, that Nishadin mother and her five sons lay their senseless. You knew this, yet you escaped through your secret tunnel... you couldn't even remember this sin. Causing six innocent forest tribal 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. (42-43).

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari after their loss of a hundred sons, were waiting for death. Kunti felt guilty and return to the ashram and waiting for forest fire to approach her place. Mahasweta Devi in her story has looked upon the forest fire that burnt Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra to death, as Nature herself punish them for their oppression against subaltern people.

In the third story Mahasweta Devi focuses on Souvali, a dasi in the royal household, impregnated by Dhritarashtra and the son born of this union denied their rights. She lived in outskirts of the town, it's a place for marginalized people. She brought up in Vaishya family and took to serve as dasi from her very childhood. She got pregnant and give birth to Souvalya. When he was five they sent him to gurugriha there he treated as a slave for Kaurava's children. From childhood he was constantly ignored and humiliated by Kauravas. Souvali left the palace and waiting for her son in outskirts of the town. She really enjoyed the life of common people now she far off from humiliation and suppression of royal society. She said "I was nothing but a dasi in the royal household but here, amongst the common people, I'm free woman" (54).

After the death of Dhritarashtra, Souvali refuses to observe the rites of widowhood in defiance of the dead king who only fathered her son but denied them their rights. She argues "I am 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..." (53). All through, her son Souvalya was denied princely rights, who performs the last rites of his father, all the Kauravas being dead and thus becomes the liberator of his father's soul.

CONCLUSION:

In *After Kurushetra*, Mahasweta Devi focused on women characters in suppression. For the sake of Panchali's pledge the Kurushetra war happened in Mahabharata. But how many people suffered because of this war is uncountable. Devi want to clarify that Kurushetra war is not at all a righteous war. It's only happened for power not for welfare of the people. The dharama of the royal people simply torment thousands of subaltern people. There are many difference between the customs and practices between Royal and Subaltern society. Subaltern society gives importance to law of nature. Royal superstructure can't survive without the hard work of subaltern base.

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