



# THEMES IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *AFTER KURUKSHETRA*

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## Abstract:

research paper explores Mahasweta Devi's novella *After Kurukshetra*, a postmodern retelling of the aftermath of the Mahabharata war, through the perspectives of marginalized voices. Devi, a renowned Bengali writer and social activist, rewrites the epic from the vantage point of women and the oppressed, raising critical questions about power, caste, and gender. The analysis delves into how the text addresses social inequities in post-war societies, specifically focusing on the experiences of Dalit and tribal women who are often left out of mainstream narratives. This paper situates *After Kurukshetra* within the larger scope of Devi's work as an activist and writer committed to giving voice to the voiceless.

**Keywords:** Caste, Gender Discrimination, marginalized , resistance , dalit, tribal

## Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* (2005) is a significant departure from traditional renditions of the Mahabharata. Devi, an acclaimed Indian writer, challenges the grand narrative of the epic by focusing on the lives of marginalized women in the aftermath of war. The novella is a critique of caste and gender discrimination, drawing attention to the overlooked lives of women, particularly Dalit and tribal women, in ancient and modern societies.

Devi's reinterpretation is significant for two reasons. First, she uses the well-known framework of the Mahabharata, a revered text in Indian culture, to question the societal structures that have remained unchanged for millennia. Second, she brings the voices of the marginalized—those silenced by history and dominant discourse—to the forefront. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how Devi's *After Kurukshetra* critiques these entrenched systems and offers an alternative lens to view the aftermath of war.

Mahasweta Devi's entire body of work is deeply rooted in her commitment to the underprivileged. As a writer and activist, her focus has consistently been on the struggles of tribal communities, Dalits, and women. Devi's works highlight the exploitation and oppression that these groups face, often drawing parallels between historical and contemporary injustices.

Her choice to reframe the Mahabharata in *After Kurukshetra* aligns with her broader mission of challenging hegemonic narratives. By rewriting the aftermath of the great war, Devi questions the glorification of war and the suffering it causes to the most vulnerable sections of society—women, particularly those from marginalized communities.

*After Kurukshetra* consists of three interrelated stories: *The Five Women*, *Kunti and the Nishadin*, and *Souvali*. Each of these stories presents a unique perspective on the aftermath of the Mahabharata war, focusing on the lives of women who are not part of the main heroic narrative. *The Five Women*: This story centers on five tribal women who find themselves tending to the wounded and dead on the battlefield. Devi shifts the focus from the *Kshatriya* warriors to the Dalit and tribal women who, although absent from the grand narrative, play a crucial role in dealing with the consequences of war.

**Kunti and the Nishadin:** In this tale, Kunti, the mother of the *Pandavas*, encounters a Nishadin woman whose sons have died in the war. The Nishadin woman confronts Kunti, forcing her to reflect on the sufferings of women outside the royal and warrior classes. Through this encounter, Devi critiques the complicity of upper-caste women in upholding the structures of power. **Souvali:** The last story deals with Souvali, a servant who was once forced to bear a son for Dhritarashtra. After the war, Souvali, a Dalit woman, reflects on her son's death, questioning the societal norms that devalue her existence. Devi uses Souvali's voice to critique patriarchal exploitation and the forced subjugation of Dalit women.

The Mahabharata, as a cultural and religious text, has been interpreted in multiple ways over centuries, often highlighting the heroic exploits of its male protagonists. In *After Kurukshetra*, however, Devi subverts this tradition by giving voice to the marginalized—especially women from the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. By focusing on Dalit and tribal women, Devi challenges the upper-caste, patriarchal narrative that dominates Indian culture.

The Dalit women in *The Five Women* are not mere survivors or passive recipients of charity; they are active participants in their reality, voicing their own suffering and resilience. Devi provides a platform for these women to speak, undermining the silence imposed on them by history. This is a radical act in itself, as it resists the homogenization of women's experiences in literature and offers a more intersectional perspective on war and its aftermath.

A key aspect of *After Kurukshetra* is its focus on caste discrimination. The Mahabharata is often seen as a text that upholds *Kshatriya* values and justifies caste hierarchies. Devi, however, brings the suffering of Dalit and tribal women to the center, critiquing the exclusionary nature of caste.

In *Kunti and the Nishadin*, the confrontation between Kunti and the Nishadin woman symbolizes the unacknowledged suffering of lower-caste women in a war driven by the ambitions of the upper castes. Kunti, despite her suffering as a mother, is still complicit in the violence and oppression that the Nishadin woman endures. This interaction reveals the complexity of gender and caste dynamics in Indian society, highlighting how even those who are marginalized by gender can be oppressors due to their caste privilege.

Mahasweta Devi's depiction of women in *After Kurukshetra* is notable for its emphasis on agency and resistance. The women in her stories are not passive victims; they challenge the structures that oppress them. Souvali, for instance, is a powerful symbol of resistance. Though her son was fathered by Dhritarashtra, she rejects any claim to power or recognition that might come from this relationship. Instead, she chooses to remain outside the royal family, asserting her independence and dignity. This act of resistance challenges the notion that women are mere pawns in the political and social games played by men.

Another major theme in *After Kurukshetra* is the devastating impact of war on the most vulnerable sections of society. Devi does not glorify war; instead, she highlights its brutal consequences for women, particularly those from marginalized communities. In *The Five Women*, the tribal women are left to pick up the pieces after the war, tending to the dead and the dying, a task that brings no glory or recognition. The physical and emotional toll of war on these women is immense, and Devi uses their experiences to critique the glorification of martial heroism in traditional narratives.

*After Kurukshetra* is a powerful reimagining of the Mahabharata that brings marginalized voices to the forefront. Through her focus on Dalit and tribal women, Mahasweta Devi critiques the social structures of caste and gender that continue to oppress women in Indian society. Her work is a testament to the resilience and agency of these women, who resist the forces that seek to silence them.

Devi's novella is not just a retelling of an ancient epic; it is a commentary on the present, drawing parallels between the historical oppression of marginalized groups and their continued exploitation in contemporary times. *After Kurukshetra* invites readers to reconsider who gets to tell history and whose stories are left untold, making it a vital text for understanding the intersections of caste, gender, and power in literature and society.

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