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PORTRAYAL OF THE “OTHER” IN MAHASWETA DEVI’S “THE FIVE WOMEN”: A  
SUBALTERN STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The research attempts to make a critical subaltern study of Mahasweta Devi’s short story “The Five Women”. The researcher analyses how Devi deconstructs the grand narrative of the Mahabharatha and decenters the epic. She writes about characters who have been deprived of their basic rights, and who have not been represented in the epic : “the other”. Her stories function as a counter-narrative to the mainstream understanding and reverence to the Mahabharatha.

Key words: subaltern, other, dharma, counter-narrative, grand narratives, agency

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Subaltern studies and writings is an important field of study, especially in the South Asian countries. It functions as a counter- narrative historiography to the popular versions, which only propagates the ideologies of the dominant group of people. These narratives try to voice out the opinions of the “other” which otherwise, gets sidelined.

Mahasweta Devi addresses the problems of caste and gender in a very subversive manner. She subverts the stereotypes by putting these five women in a much more powerful position than Uttara who has been condemned to a life of grief. It relates the aftermath of the *dharmayuddh* and questions the idea of *dharma*.

The proposed research, attempts to analytically and comprehensively study the portrayal of the “other” in Mahasweta Devi’s short story “The Five Women” and the idea of agency as seen in the story.

The research analyses the short story “The Five Women” written by Mahasweta Devi. It points out the irony of the situation where women from *rajavritta* laments the loss of their husband in the Kurukshetra war and at the bleak futures they have, while the tribal women are much more liberated and not bound by the rigid rules of the patriarchy.

This text, along with the others in the collection, tries to re-write or add on to the epic. “The Five Women” examines the position of the *rajavritta* and *lokavritta* women and how their status in society liberates/ confines them in a deeply entrenched patriarchal society. Even though, it is set spatially in the past, its approach and interpretation by Devi makes it contemporary.

Through the deconstruction of the grand narrative, one understands that history is merely subjective. The different subject positions occupied in the story by the five women lend them a sense of agency. It attempts to study different versions of history and not just adhere to the ones popularized by the dominant

class. It also aims to gain an understanding on Devi's portrayal of women in the story with respect to the subaltern theories. Hence, it aims to add on to the existing body of knowledge and research on the subject with a fresh perspective.

A review of the collection of academic articles based on the story "The Five Women" by Mahasweta Devi, her collection *After Kurukshetra*, her other writings and the subaltern theories are presented here. It attempts to critically study and analyse these articles, and identify its relevance to the research conducted on the subaltern study of the portrayal of women in "The Five Women" written by Mahasweta Devi.

The journal article, "Counter- Narratives – A Discourse in Contestation" written by Ishleen examines through the works of Devi how "mainstream Indian historiography has ignored and blanked out tribal history"(1). She specifically looks at the collection *After Kurukshetra* and studies the struggles of the tribal women, without "romanticising"(5) them. She points out that Devi's "versions not only reveal unsettling counter-narratives but also lay bare the fact that grand narratives are similarly fashioned"(1). Using subaltern theories and adopting discourse analysis, Ishleen succeeds in presenting a critical study of grand and counter-narratives. It provides insights to deconstruction of the epic, and also as to the depiction of tribal women, which is relevant to the proposed research.

The literary review of the book *After Kurukshetra* by Kala Krishnan Ramesh, "The Other Great War", describes us the ""other" women as vibrant, strong-willed, strong-charactered, "common" women, alive with purpose and capable of doing, as the royal women are not"(Ramesh). The contrasts and the different perspectives are brought out by Krishnan in this review clearly by using the method of textual analysis. It is different from the research as this review merely looks at the textual implications and not the subaltern theoretical frameworks as such.

RK Sharma is his work on "Gender-Based Violence In The Dynamics Of Caste And Class In Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories" deliberates upon the "sense of comprehension, compassion, and rationality to one of Bengal's most turbulent times"(163,164). She records victimization, reprisals, subjugation, potential emancipation etc. The stories in *After Kurukshetra* reveal the "bigotry of the royal men and women who talk about piety, righteousness and dharma and the qualities that can help one attain "moksha", but treat anyone below the like dirt"(167), according to Sharma. He adopts the method of textual analysis and concepts of feminism and subalternity are applied. This is relevant in the understanding of the dynamics of gender and caste in Devi's works, which are prominent in *After Kurukshetra*.

"Living on the Edge: Women in the Writings of Mahasweta Devi" by Madhumita Chakrabarti and "Tribal Women In The Selected Works Of Mahasweta Devi" by Savita Goel does a feminist study of Devi's writings. Devi's discussion on the motherhood, and about "feminism" which is different from that of the Western ideals is also discussed in detail. Multiple levels of oppression in the form of caste, class and gender is discussed by Devi in her works. Chakrabarti notes that women's body becomes an "agent of commodification"(210), which is an "inherent part of the socio-economic order as well as the hegemonic patriarchal order"(210). The idea of "space" as a domain of "hegemony and identity"(Chakrabarti, 214) has been a part of her works and also reflects upon the other post-modernist and post-structuralist discourses. Chakrabarti talks about the contrasts posited between women in the concerned short story, and the crumbling of the walls between the two sets of women. Goel, meanwhile, interpret women as "quite vulnerable to injustice, but most of them endure and resist the brunt of social oppression and violence with indomitable will and courage and even try to deconstruct the age-old structures of racial and gender discrimination"(Goel, 203). These works can act as an example of analysing the primary text using concepts, and it is definitely different from the research as the works used in them, are different. While a feminist approach is by both of them, the research attempts to use a subaltern interpretation of women.

"Journeying With Mahasweta Devi" by Joshy Joseph is a review of the documentary made on Devi, which helps us understand the mind of the writer, and where the urge to write about the tribals come from. The review becomes a visual analysis of the documentary. The writer is quoted as saying, "In my writing, there

is a *mukti*, a liberty. They (the characters) are acting on their own.” (Joshya) The processing of thoughts by her mind is neatly captured without turning it into an interview, and it is important in interpreting her writings.

“A Literal Representation Of The Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Stanadayini’” and “Woman in Difference: Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Douloti the Bountiful’” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak studies the two writings by Devi from a subaltern perspective. Spivak says that Devi “has always been gripped by the individual in history” (Spivak, 224). In the former, she studies the text from different perspectives, of Marxist Feminism, Liberal Feminism etc., and in the latter she looks at the “space of displacement” (Spivak, 107) and the position of a woman’s body within that space. These are two very important critical interpretations of Devi’s writings by Spivak and are very focused. The researcher could use this a good example to organise and structure the arguments.

“Contesting Polarities: Creating Spaces—Reading Myths in Mahasweta Devi’s Stories” by Subha Chakravorty Dasgupta and “The Poetics and Politics of Space: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi’s Subaltern Stories” by Rekha both study the idea of space in Devi’s works. Rekha elaborates upon the “salience of space as a value-loaded presence within principal- subaltern inter-locked existence manifests itself with different foci in her subaltern stories”(Rekha, 143). Physical space becomes a manifestation of the dominant class’s order and ideology. While, Dasgupta deliberates upon the idea of myth as constructed and deconstructed by Devi through the use of past and present. Both use textual analysis and it is relevant to understand these ideas and techniques used by Devi and its various readings to gain a more informed understanding of her works.

“Gender, Caste and Fiction: A Bahujan Reading of Mahasweta Devi’s Rudali” written by Ajay Sekher reads the text from a Dalit’s perspective. “So caste and gender affiliations were the decisive elements of social/human status and identity and were the material reality of the Indian village”(4422). Gender and caste become the issue of contention in the proposed research of Devi’s “The Five Women”, therefore this article assumes importance of study. He uses textual analysis and uses postcolonial and subaltern framework to study it.

Written by Vrinda Nabar, “Whose “Mahabharatha”? A Point of View” discusses various renditions of the epic in literature and performing arts. Devi’s “Draupadi” is taken up by Nabar and says that it is more “realistic indicator of the local tribal variant of the name”(182) and uses her body as a challenge to the patriarchal order. Though, she maybe tagged as a “victim” by the society, Devi never attributes the status of “victimhood” to Draupadi. Though, it could have been more focused it uses Devi’s work to show how the epic can be deconstructed to include various narratives.

“Re-reading Mahasweta Devi” by M.N. Chatterjee is a review of *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology Of Recent Criticism*. It is helpful in understanding the tribals from an outsider’s point of view. He says the work “demonstrates how she uses the aesthetics of literature while articulating the multiple oppressions and the hypocrisy of political lip service”(241).

“The Subaltern Numen: Making History in the Name of God” by Christian Lee Novetzke in his analytical piece explores the dialectic between the study of religion and the study of the subaltern using various subaltern theories to prove his point. He tries to prove that religion is very much a part of subalternity and cannot do without it. It becomes essential in understanding the reason why Devi chooses Mahabharata, which is a vital part of a Hindu psyche.

Imanol Galfarsoro’s article “The Notion of the Subaltern” gives a brief introduction to the topic, its concerns and its prominence in the present scenario. It is descriptive essay, which elaborates on the theories of Spivak, Ranajit Guha etc. It is relevant as it gives an insight into the development of the theory and the idea of various historiographies.

The research tries to describe, interpret and analyse the primary text comprehensively using the various theories of subalternity. The various arguments, which will be put forth, will provide an in-depth insight into the topic.

The text is analysed using the Subaltern theories compounded by the likes of Gayathri Spivak, Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Shahid Amin etc. They attempt to read history from below, i.e., from the point of

view of those who are considered as “inferior” in society because of the race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc., and also brings in the idea of agency for the “other”. Antonio Gramsci came up with term “subaltern” to refer to the proletarians, and the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) formulated the theory around this idea.

The research restricts itself to the treatment of women by Devi in this story in particular; also drawing references from some of her other works. So the scope is that it tries to explore how Devi uses the subject position of women in her story to build counter-narratives to the history of the mighty. As literature students, it becomes imperative to study the “other” side to every story and question the mainstream propagandas.

Mahabharatha and the Kurukshetra war is an integral part of our psyche as a nation. *After Kurukshetra* revises the epic and narrates the aftermath of the war that has remained untold and unwritten. Devi presents three stories, which look at the epic from entirely new perspectives. It becomes her duty as a writer to negotiate history with the circumstances of the present. She says, “...To capture the continuities between past and present held together in the folk imagination, I bring legends, mythical figures and mythical happenings into a contemporary setting, and make an ironic use of them...”(Bose 133). In the story “The Five Women” Devi ironically, replaces the Pandavas with five women from Kurujangal. Their role and identity as women from a tribal region called Kurujangal places them in a very crucial position in the story. One of the other stories in the anthology “Kunti and the Nishadin” also uses this position of the “other” in a significant manner. Their lives are petty and insignificant in the eyes of the royalty, and therefore their deaths are never questioned or taken up after that episode of the House of Lac where Nishadins’ husbands and mother-in-law are killed. It is not considered a sin and no sign of remorse or guilt is shown on the part of any character when six lives were so casually sacrificed.

“The Five Women” critically questions the idea of *dharmayudha* and the purpose of a war so destructive. Devi asks how a war where brothers killed each other could be a war fought in the name of *dharma*. The royalty to suit their convenience fabricated the idea of a holy war. The text points out that Kurukshetra war was not a war of the masses, but only of the *rajvritta*. One of the five women from Kurujangal says, “So many great kings join in 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) The idea of dharma or righteousness as perpetuated by the upper class is only a means to suit their need and not holy, according to Devi. It becomes an act of power construction when the *rajvritta* claim that those who die in the holy war will attain a place in the heavens. It only becomes a means to control the subjects in the name of God’s will and divinity in death. Defying these orders would be considered as blasphemous. At one instance where Madraja comments that there is no need for mourning the death of those who died in the war as they “have gone straight to *divyalok!*”(15), Gomudhi retorts saying, “No chariots 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”. It clearly points at the double standards in the treating of the dead bodies of the dead too. These foot soldiers are expected to fight for the *rajvritta* in all the battles to come too. She indicates that it does not end after the *dharmayudha*. It becomes a vicious cycle where the same fate awaits each of them. R K Sharma in his essay says that the story reveals the “bigotry of the royal men and women who talk about piety, righteousness and dharma and the qualities that can help one attain “moksha”, but treat anyone below like dirt”(167).

Devi deconstructs the notion of a “holy war”. For her, the word “*dharmayuddha*” is a contradiction in itself. A war so destructive and violent cannot be virtuous. The reader starts to question “the *dharmayuddha*, its senseless violence, its bloody aftermath, leads to a radical interrogation of the concept of dharma as well as of the canonical grand narrative of the nation”(Ishleen n.p.). One begins to understand how the text has been used by the dominant order to create and maintain patriarchal power structure. It can be compared with how the society has appropriated the idea of *lakshman-rekha* from The Ramayana. It is interpreted as that a woman needs constant protection and regulation that can only be provided by a man. Any action on the part

of the woman to disobey the restrictions around her, lead to the unpleasant chain of events. These are ways in which the hegemonic order, patriarchy here, exercises its control on the "other".

Ranajit Guha examines the relevance of elitist historiography as it gives us an insight into the dominant class' mindset as well. He says:

It helps us to know more of the structure of the colonial state, the operation of its various organs in certain historical circumstances, the nature of the alignment of classes which sustained it; of some aspects of the ideology of the elite as the dominant ideology of the period... Above all it helps us to understand the ideological character of historiography itself (Guha 38,39).

*The Mahabharatha* thus, can also be studied as an instance of elite historiography. That grand narrative becomes a means of understanding the functioning of the upper class, the dominant ideologies, means and ways of establishing power, position of upper class and lower class women in their society and the "character" of view too. However, it fails to represent the "*politics of the people*" (Guha 40), which has always remained as a parallel discourse to this. Elite historiography also becomes the reference point against which counters are written. Devi's deconstructed version of the epic functions due to the very existence of the huge presence of the grand epic. Acknowledging and studying the elite historiography assumes an important role while the reading of a deconstructed subaltern narrative.

The author deliberates upon the widespread destruction caused on nature and humanity. The songs sung by the five women stand as a testimony to that loss. They sing "the huts are dark, no lamps are lit/ See the grief in the children's eyes/ In the eyes of the mothers, in the eyes of the wives/ This war's turned villages into cremation grounds, hai hai!" (10). She paints a very bleak picture of the land after the war where there is "reek of rotting flesh", "decomposing bodies" and "eerie wailing" of the *chandals*, and not about the glorious victory of the Pandavas. The actual history that is left behind is only of death and destruction, and not of victory and glory. The women seen crying by the burning pyres are all family members of the *padiks* (foot soldiers). The real sufferers of the war are the ones who are left behind rather than the dead. Subhadra laments thinking that "the sons are dead, their fathers are alive. Daughters-in-law have lost their husbands, while their mother-in-laws are still married" (8).

At one level, both the women of *rajvritta* and *lokavritta* can be read in the subaltern position. Devi presents the voice of women from these strata to debase all the stereotypes and dominant narrative. Mainstream narrative projects a certain stereotype as a means of control. Tribal women are projected as illiterate, uncultured and uncivilized. They have never been given a space in the mainstream historiography to tell their version of the story. Meena Radhakrishna writes that most historians have never considered tribals to be a vital part of India and therefore, has refrained from writing about them.

Since the history of India has always been written by historians who were and are still reluctant to see the tribals as part of India, a true history is yet to be written that will give tribals their place in history.

It is not apathy. The historians are generally oblivious of tribal existence. If this be the situation it is quite expected that they do not know that denotified tribal existence. (Radhakrishna xiii)

Devi challenges these notions by using *rajvritta* women like Uttara, Subhadra and others as foils. The five women appear more liberated and sophisticated than the others who lead a restricted life, physically as well as mentally. They appear more relatable and close to real life to the reader than Uttara who has always lead a secure and confined life. Small things like mothers combing, oiling and braiding their daughter's and daughter-in-law's hair, and grandmothers telling stories, which seem normal to most of the readers is very unnatural for Uttara. Mahasweta Devi has been quoted in one of the interviews saying:

The tribes are very civilized people. Men and women are treated as equals in their society. Widow remarriage is common. Girls and boys interact with each other freely. The woman presides over all the major ceremonies. In our society, these are considered to be modern but these are actually the traditional values of tribal communities. You won't find such progressive values in today's mainstream societies also. (Ray 2008)

The elite "civilized" life does not allow a mother to raise her own child. The wet nurses rather than its own mother raise newborn baby. Royal offspring don't receive their own mother's affection and warmth, while tribal women are fiercely independent. She does not even have a say in the naming of her child. It is decided by the "elder males of the family", priests and *acharyas* who decide after elaborate rituals. It is contrasted with the tribal rituals where there the birth of a new life becomes a matter of celebration for the whole community where every member of the household has a voice to opine and it becomes a treat for the village as a whole. One of the nishadins in "Kunti and the Nishadin" says:

"The *rajvritta* folk and the *lokavritta* folk have different values, different idea of right and wrong. If a young nishadin girl makes love to a boy of her choice and gets pregnant, we celebrate it with a wedding...Nature abhors waste. We honour life. When a man and a woman come together, they create a new life."(36)

Kala Krishnan Ramesh in her review in *The Hindu* describes "'other" women as vibrant, strong-willed, strong-charactered, "common" women, alive with purpose and capable of doing, as the royal women are not"(Ramesh). In the story "Kunti and the Nishadin" too, the nishadin women take control and do not refrain from accusing Kunti of her past mistakes. The world of the subaltern becomes equal and just as compared to that of the oppressor's. Spivak's idea of "emergent collective consciousness"(Landry, Maclean 215) among the subaltern is seen here. These five women share a very strong bond of sisterhood. Uttara sees them together and realizes that she has never shared that friendship and probably never will. This sense of oneness is absent in the relationships shared in the *rajvritta*. It never goes beyond the designated roles. Mothers braiding their daughter-in-laws' hair is unheard of in the palace. One can also notice that these women are efficient and productive in the way that they never sit still. They are constantly doing some work like "weaving baskets, mats and ropes while they sit and talk"(6). They educate the young widow on matters of worldly wisdom and she soon realizes that they are far more experienced and worldly than anyone who is confined within the four walls of the royal palace. Uttara's dependency on these women is also a way of shifting power structures.

Widowhood as an institution has been established by the patriarchal hegemonic structures, only to be strengthened with the clever appropriation of religion and religious texts. Christian Lee Novetzke points the dialectic or rather nexus between the study of religion and the study of the subaltern. He says that "the idea that religious sentiment and the prospect of divine intervention condition to a great degree "subaltern consciousness" is cast throughout the work of those associated with Subaltern Studies"(101). He points out a crucial link between these aspects, which has been conspicuously overlooked by many theoreticians. The very presence of a social institution like *Vrindavan* where widows are cast away and ostracised from the rest of the society stands as an evidence of this nexus. One is constantly reminded of their pathetic situation where expressing signs of happiness is strictly not allowed.

Widowhood is institutionalised as a social structure. The only feelings prescribed for widowed women are grief and sadness. There are a lot of prescribed rites and rituals for women whose husband has passed away. Few of the rituals followed by the Hindu Brahmin community, for instance, shaving of head, breaking of bangles and *mangal sutra* in public, manage to reinforce this idea that widows are never supposed to be happy. Only white clothes are to be worn, they are not to be present in auspicious functions and be in self-denial and penance. Their life in essence, becomes dead from within with the death of the husbands. Many women volunteered to kill themselves in their husband's burning pyre (practice of *sati*<sup>1</sup>) than lead a lifeless existence. In the story, Uttara is terrified of the word 'widow':

...When was it that she laughed, played, learned dance from Brihannala? Who was she who threw tantrums, demanded fine silk clothes to dress her doll in? ... That Uttara dressed in brightly coloured *cholis, ghagras and chunnis*. This Uttara wears plain white, no ornaments, her hair hangs heavy on her shoulders. This Uttara's eyes and mouth have forgotten how to smile, her footsteps are timid, hesitant...(14).

Women without the protection of a male partner are further oppressed in the society. They are seen as helpless and weak. Devi gives these women a sense of agency through her works. Uttara after being in the

company of the five women from Kurujangal is seen laughing merrily and tending for herself and the baby. These women are liberated from the grief imposed by the society. While the other widows like Uttara from the elite class has nothing to look forward to in life, these women realize that they cannot afford the luxury of being arrested in time. "Moving on" becomes a priority for them rather than being literally enclosed and trapped by grief all around them.

Spivak argues about the concept of "space" saying, "A deconstructionist approach would not to reverse the hierarchy but rather to displace it, a displacement that "marks a shifting limit""(Shands 65). Devi makes use of this space of a royal chamber, which can be put in parallel with *Vrindavan* as a space of liberation for the widows. Rekha also studies the politics of space in Devi's works. She elaborates upon the "salience of space as a value-loaded presence within principal- subaltern inter-locked existence manifests itself with different foci in her subaltern stories"(Rekha, 143). Physical space becomes a manifestation of the dominant class's order and ideology. Devi subverts this repressive place into a space where there is scope for dialogue for change and agency.

Gomudhi and others have no qualms about re-marriage, an idea, which is not uncommon now but was a matter of shock for the royalty. Gomudhi explains,

"When we are widowed, we marry our brothers-in-law. That is the custom in our *janavritta* community... We worship the earth. After a terrible calamity, the sun always rises. Even after this dreadful war, Nature has not stood still... We will... create life. That's what Nature teaches us"(22).

They understand that the law of nature is not to be static in time. They take charge of their own lives and refuse to be tied down only because there is no male partner in their life. Uttara, who was married for a brief period of only six months at a tender age, has nothing to look forward to. The happier time in her life is nothing more than a dream for her. Even though, Devi portrays it as a means of survival for them the tribal community, which is looked upon as uncivilised allows women their space and freedom. In the story "Kunti and the Nishadin", a nishadin says, "We don't deny the demands of life. If we are widowed we have the right to remarry. Those who wish to can marry again. We did so. We have husbands, children"(38).

Mahasweta Devi through her writing has managed to deconstruct the epic to include the subaltern and tribal narrative. Devi has "always been gripped by individual in history"(Spivak 224). "The Five Women" and other stories in like "Kunti and the Nishadin", "Dopdi", "Rudali", "Stanadayini", "Douloti the Bountiful" all takes up women in history who have not had a chance to voice out their stories. Though, these characters maybe labeled as victims of patriarchal oppression by the society, Devi never attributes this status of "victimhood" to any of these characters. She portrays their struggles and the way they deal with the oppressive circumstances without "romanticising"(5) them. Their struggles are real. She never tries to glorify their way of living, as it is a means of survival for them. Devi says, "In my writing, there is a *mukti*, a liberty. They (the characters) are acting on their own"(Joshy *n.p.*). Her writing "not only reveal unsettling counter-narratives but also lay bare the fact that grand narratives are similarly fashioned"(Ishleen 1).

There are various other facets to Mahasweta Devi's story, which cannot be explored thoroughly in this working paper, as there is a lack of sufficient time and money. Although, other works of Devi's and other writings can be referred to, a comprehensive study is not possible at this level. Also, there is a lack of first-hand knowledge about the tribal lifestyle thereby, limiting the researcher's understanding of their real-life struggles<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Sati or self-immolation of widows on their bereaved husband's pyre was an ancient ritual, which was deemed as illegal by the colonial administration. Spivak termed this phenomenon as an example of "White men saving brown men from brown men"(Spivak 93). It helped the British portray Hindu customs and rituals as barbaric and inhumane, and build a larger spiteful historical narrative around the Hindu religion and India

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