

Resisting Resistance: The Interplay of Janavritta and Rajavritta in Mahasweta Devi's "Souvali"

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi's short story "Souvali" is a momentous reflection of *The Mahabharata* where epic meets the farthest margin as a subaltern woman is drawn into the central tapestry from the fringes of society. It is a poignant tale about a *dasi* named Souvali who is forced to be a sexual companion to king Dhritarashtra while his wife Gandhari is with child. She is the mother of Souvalya or Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra, thus a Kaurava, a truth known but never acknowledged. He is the only son of Dhritarashtra to join the Pandava army and the only Kaurava son alive after the war. The paper focuses on the agony and anguish of a son who performs last rites or *tarpan* for his dead father although he was never acknowledged. The study tries to analyze the triumphant contentment of a prostitute-mother who standing within *janavritta*, confronts and defeats imperial *rajavritta* heroically. Being marginal, she remains deserted and neglected the whole life even nameless in the epic but her prolonged silence is a prevailing critic to the royal dynasty. The silent query is, can an elite father get *moksha* by the *tarpan* done by a subaltern son?

Keywords: Subaltern, resistance, liberty, bliss

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is acknowledged for her pioneering and prolific legendary work focusing on the predicament of the cast out tribes and other marginalized people. She has assessed the gender correlation in the context of 'subaltern' as she was motivated by a sense of history. Her writings are the reflections of past and present as she says, "I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history. The social-economic history of human development has always fascinated me." (*The Plays* 16) So her vast literary works depict the bequest of brutality of the elite group and the pathetic plight of the tormented. Tharu and K. Lalitha say: "Women's subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppressions of class and class. But in the best of her writing she quite brilliantly, and with resonance, explores the articulation of class, caste and gender in the specific situations she depicts." (*Women Writing in India* 235) She has reopened the pages of Indian epic and traced the flow of pain of a mother

who gave birth a son of the king Dhritarashtra but excluded from the pages of the epic because she did not belong to royal dynasty and her son Yuyutsu remained unacknowledged till the death of the king. “Souvali”, the short story is taken from the anthology *After Kurukshetra* where Mahasweta has exposed the differences between the center and margins of society and the vigor of a subaltern woman who ignored and discarded the bondage and liberated herself to lead a precious and peaceful life. The story revolves around history with inquisitiveness, as Edward Said says, “better to explore history rather than to repress or deny it.” (*Culture and Imperialism*: xxx)

The Mahabharata is a historic Sanskrit epic that forms a crucial element of Hindu mythology. The war of Kurukshetra is the focal point of this epic but Mahasweta ponders and examines largely the repercussion of this fray. Since unbounded time, even in the time of *The Mahabharata* or in present time, the androcentric patriarchal society has taken benefits and oppressed and battered the female body for the corporal indulgence. But illegitimate offspring have never been acknowledged by their fathers and the women or the mothers have been declared as outcaste. The same flow is here in the story “Souvali”. The story is about a *dasi* (maid servant) named Souvali who is strained to be a sexual partner to King Dhritarashtra at the time when his wife Gandhari is with child. The subaltern woman bears Dhritarashtra a son who gets the royal name as Yuyutsu but remains unacknowledged by his father. Even more, Souvali and her son are callously thrown out of *Rajavritta*. Mahasweta has distinctly pointed out the innate distinction between the *Rajavritta* and the ‘Other’ but Souvalya focuses how the *rajavritta* and *janavritta* may actually merge.

The story begins when Dhritarashtra died in the forest-fire along with Gandhari and Kunti, Souvalya completes the cremation rites for his father and arrives to meet his mother Souvali who lives as Mahasweta tells, “On the margins of the town live the marginalized. Their settlement is a lively, noisy place. The alleys are narrow, the houses small. Cattle shed beside the huts. There, on the stoop of a large hut, sat Souvali.” (*After Kurukshetra* 41) Souvalya was suspicious to perform the last rites or *tarpan* because until his father was alive, he had never been acknowledged. As recompense he was allowed to be the servant of his half-brothers. So he matures up with a bemused and awful complexity as he is in search of his position in society all the time. He finds himself swinging between catering his royal links and abhorring them for abusing and wounding him and his outcast mother dismally.

Souvali did never feel ashamed for his subaltern status rather she felt liberated when she left behind the royal periphery. In reality, it is the marginalized woman who acts as an archetypal driving force for the royal women and teaches them the truth of existence. When the *rajavritta* becomes the oppressor, it forgets about the co-existence of the *lokavritta* and the need of that crowd. There is always an evident space between the *rajavritta* and the *lokavritta*, the royals and the ordinary; the owner and the owned; the tormenter and the tormented. Souvali is truly subjugated, marginalized and battered but she never stoops to her fate or to the royal mercy, she rather tries to establish her individuality in the middle of an unkind, patriarchal order. So when her neighbours advocate her to do the necessary rituals on Dhritarashtra’s death, Souvali says:

I'm 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...observe *ashucha*, the contamination rites? Do *tarpan*? Wear white cloth, fast? Why? ... I'll feast on sweet *kheer*, *laddoos*, *ghee-rich jowar pithas*, golden honey. And after I'm full, I'll sleep peacefully, holding my son in my arms." (48)

She rings a bell declaring that she would never lament for the man who pulls off happiness from her life and compels her to live her entire life within a ring full of disgrace and ignominy. Souvali is reluctant to accept the fact that the *dasis* do follow the after death rituals at the demise of the so called owners who own them, exploit, subjugate and throw them out of their lives when their gratification is over. She does not trust in the fruitless reason of punishing herself when she was in reality an unknown to the dead. She even does not have any fear of 'after life' as she tells herself "I left that place of my own free will. Today too I'll let my own *dharma* tell me what's right." (49) Souvali is not a confined soul rather a liberated spirit and is directed by her conscience alone. She is capable enough to identify her right to choose and she has chosen freedom. She has even rendered an acute memorandum for Vyasa who as she hears, is going to write on the rectitude of the war of Kurukshetra "So let him! Souvali doesn't want even a mention of her name anywhere." (49) and undeniably, she remains unidentified and unnamed in the *The Mahabharata*.

In reality, Mahasweta has effectively drummed up the past, and rendered the opening to the subaltern to articulate their unheard, atrocious and throbbing tales and their aching sagas are the estuaries where history meets the farthest periphery of a written past. She explores the intricate correlation amid the classes, the effort for recognition, and lonesomeness and cohesion. Returned after performing the *tarpan* for his dead unlawful father Dhritarashtra, when Souvalya meets Souvali, his outcaste mother, after a long separation, she says "In this house he is Souvalya. Not Yuyutsu. At the sound of that name, his mother flares up. Yuyutsu Indeed! Give the boy a name and that's the end of all responsibility". (43) Souvali's motherhood is unappreciated and annulled; her son was snatched away from him, she sacrifices her whole life in waiting to meet her son. She refused to live her life in *lokavritta* which is confined compellingly within the fringe of claustrophobic *rajavritta*. She chose to live with freedom. So she rejected the courtly name, refused to live in royal courtyard and renounces, the "force of ambivalence" ('The Other Question' 37). "I was nothing but a *dasi* in the royal household but here, amongst the common people, I'm a free woman" (49) The hope to have her son back out of *rajavritta* supports her solitary struggle and becomes the root of her endurance. She lives with self-esteem and decorum away from the burdened life as *dasi*.

On the other side, Yuyutsu (in *rajavritta*) or Souvalya (in *lokavritta*), is touselled to a dual life because he is nonentity in *rajavritta* and he cannot come to the *lokavritta*. He was with the Pandavas for the 'righteous war,' Kurukshetra because it was a righteous war for him for his own right, acknowledgement, acceptance and social identity. His revolt against the injustice of royal dynasty makes him a 'voice' in *The Mahabharata*. His is like another unacknowledged sufferer Karna, both

have spent lives perplexed, in search of social recognition. He did the *tarpan* for his deceased father but he has a crucial question at the same, “Never went near him, never called him ‘father’, and today I did the *tarpan* for him.” (43) Yuyutsu still has an expectation to be merged with royal *rajavritta*. Souvali predicts it as unattainable because his mother is a *dasi*, out-caste and subaltern but she finds the worth of life and proud to have justice when her son gets social recognition even after his father’s death. An out-caste sloughs off a dead elite saying, “Dasiputra! Slave child! It’s because of this *dasiputra* that you got water from a son’s hand!” (43)

Each generation has its own way to interpret the great epics. “Souvali” is a testimony of the gap and confrontation of *rajavritta* and *lokavritta* which is persisting in society since long back but the story is different from other oppressed subaltern because here, an outcaste dares to resist the propel of the privileged and teaches the royal women that the life can be spent without regal majesty but with emancipation. As Madhu Singh says:

The Mahabharata has received a great deal of exegetical and explicatory attention over the years, yet the voices of the oppressed in the great epic have remained a somewhat neglected field of critical enquiry. Devi's obvious intention is to underscore the contrast between the *Rajavritta*, in which one becomes ‘cunning and treacherous’, and the *Lokavritta*, in which one ‘honours’ and celebrates life. (Journal 7)

Conclusion:

Souvali criticizes chauvinism of the royal clan, who emphasizes on righteousness and *dharma* which will lead one to attain *moksha* but in reality they tread the reverse. Mahasweta Devi skillfully relocates the subaltern woman like Souvali. She embodies them as self-assured who do not accept and adhere to the dogma of hostility. They rebel against existing morals and become martyrs. Devi says, “When they (the oppressed) rise, get organized and fight back, only then history can be changed.” (*Rakasi Kora* foreword) So Souvali is with her son but her realization is her son’s search of self and his assimilation with the royal kin is a utopia. She hopes that Souvalya too will accept the bleak legitimacy, recognize the two farthest conflicting poles of existence, comprehend the extensive gap between *lokavritta* and *rajavritta*, resist the resistance truthfully, and come across the peaceful path through which he can get his deliverance.

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