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GENDERED SUBALTERNITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *AFTER KURUKSHETRA*, CONTEXTUALIZED IN HER WIDER ACTIVISM AND WRITING

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on a collection of short stories by writer and activist Mahasweta Devi, *After Kurukshetra*. The three stories borrow sub-narratives from the famous Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, but are rewritten around identities that the mainstream marginalizes. The protagonists of "Kunti and the Nishadin", "The Five Women", and "Souvali" are placed in subordinate positions in society as depicted through the epic. These women characters of women of lower castes and lower classes remain unspoken for in mainstream versions of the mythology.

The essay untangles the complexities of the fictive characters' identities with these markers of gender, caste and class, understanding the intersectionality of their identities. It also analyses them as gendered subalterns, using and questioning Gayatri Spivak's conceptualization. The thesis also contextualizes the analysis of the stories against the larger background of Devi's literary oeuvre and activism with tribals and Adivasis in India. It does so by attempting an intertextual reading of the epic contrasted with Mahasweta Devi's retellings with emphasis on the narration and elements such as folklore and oral tradition.

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 into a family of scholars, writers, intellectuals, creative artists, and rebels. Her mother Dharitri Devi was a well- known writer and social worker whereas her father Manish Ghatak was a popular poet and novelist. He was one of the many known pioneers of the Kallol movement, a prominent modernist movement in Bengali literature. Devi's maternal and paternal side of the family were scholars and popular figures. Her paternal uncle Ritwik Ghatak was a famous film director whereas her maternal uncles Sankha Chaudhury and Sachin Chaudhury were noted sculptor and the founder- editor of *Economic and Political Weekly*, a still-leading forum for progressive academic writing, respectively. Mahasweta Devi established herself as a prominent activist and writer, following an independent trajectory.

Most of Devi's works are focused on the marginalized, especially the tribal and Adivasi[1] communities in India. She lays special focus on the women belonging to these communities as they often bear the brunt of structural oppression. It is important to note that Devi was not just a writer, but also one of India's foremost activists for tribal rights. Various texts written by Devi are direct products of this activism and engagement. While Mahasweta Devi's involvement with the tribals can be traced far back, her writing about the same surfaced much later. Her interaction with the tribals of Palamau started around the year 1965. She travelled extensively in tribal areas in Bihar and West Bengal. Speaking of these experiences she says, "I have covered all of the district[s] by foot. I walked miles, stayed somewhere overnight, went from place to place" (M.Bhattacharya 1003). Documenting her experiences, she sent them to journals and newspapers (M.Bhattacharya 1003). Devi was an active participant at local tribal groups such as the Palamau

[1] Indigenous tribes in the Indian subcontinent

District Bonded Labour Organisation. Participating in agitations and mobilizing them for political action, she writes about her involvement,

> On a broken mud wall of Seora village, I wrote with a piece of chalk: Palamau District Bonded Labour Liberation Organisation. The next year at the heart of Palamau, in its head town of Daltongunj bonded labourers came in thousands. I led the streets of Palamau, we went to the District Commissioner. The women led the procession, shouting slogans…(M. Bhattacharya 1003).

We have established Devi's significant presence in the sphere of activism, and will trace her transition into an activist writer. Devi's career as a writer began when she started to document her experiences with the tribal communities. The first work of hers to be published was a biography on the Rani of Jhansi, who was one of the leaders of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 against the British colonial state. As part of her research, she travelled extensively on her own in order "to retrace the historical memories" (M. Bhattacharya) to aid her writing. The trip Devi took was of utmost significance as, in the process of gaining access to archival resources, she became aware of oral traditions. Her research led her to many oral histories which had been transmitted generation to generation. It was this element of documenting oral traditions, folklores, songs and poetry that became a recurring element in her works. In the preface for a Bengali book titled *Shrestha Galpo* (an anthology of selected stories), she writes "I have a reverence for materials collected from folklore, for they reveal how the common people have looked at an experience in the past and look at it now.... 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 these" (Bhattacharjee).

It is evident that Devi made use of all the resources available to her, and reconstructed a literary sphere where social realities were represented and critiqued. Devi's statement also showcases her creative capacity and boldness in writing as she does not shy away from intertwining various narratives in her retellings of the history as it were. This leads us to the choice of texts we engage with in the following chapters. *After Kurukshetra* is a collection of short stories written by Devi, these being stories which initially appeared in Bengali magazines. They were later translated by Anjum Katyal from Bengali to English and compiled by Seagull Books to form a collection. As the title indicates, the stories are set against the background of the great Kurukshetra war[2], from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The stories are retellings of specific sub-narratives within the epic. While there have been many such retellings of Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, Devi's works are distinct from the others owing to her stylistic manner of reworking oral traditions such as folklore and folk songs in her narratives. It is in this manner that they also provide an insight into the lives of the marginalized which the epics haven't engaged with.

Devi constructs and reinvents marginalized identities such as women, lower castes and lower classes. In *After Kurukshetra*, she reinvents female characters borrowed from the *Mahabharata* as resistant figures. She sets these female figures against the aftermath of the great war which has destroyed most of mankind. This thesis, as its research question, analyses these female identities as gendered subalterns and recognizes the multiple identities we see in these fictional characters, with gender, class and caste the most prominent. This leads us to ask, regarding Devi's creative constructions of these characters, how the narration enables an imaginative construction of intersectionality amongst its characters? Devi's characters within the

[2] A war which took place in the *Mahabharata* between the two ruling clans and cousin groups, the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

collection of *After Kurukshetra* have been recognized and analyzed as gendered subalterns in the field of academic writing, with little work having been undertaken on this collection so far, that too focused on one story (A Bose 2016). There has been analysis on the collection but from the sociological standpoint with emphasis to the distinctions made between the oppressor and the oppressed (Rai) and the short stories have been analyzed as retellings of the *Mahabharata* (Sharma). This paper analyses more of the stories in the collection in the frame of understanding of gendered subalterns, and argues that Devi's construction of these characters can be further seen as representations of intersectional identities. The thesis does so by engaging in close reading of the stories, laying emphasis on the narratology and narrative techniques, on characterisation and elements such as focalization and so on. We explore the scope of these elements through the close readings we attempt and aid this process by viewing the characters through the lens of subalternity. Viewing the characters through the lens of subalternity enables us to unravel the complex layers of identities they possess. The situation and recognition of gendered subalterns is accompanied by an analysis of Devi's reconstruction of these subaltern figures as resistant and empowered identities. It is here that the thesis critiques Spivak's theories and notions of subalternity. This is further aided by an intertextual reading of Devi's works with the English translation of the *Mahabharata* by Kisari Mohan Ganguli and an analysis of the main characters of the epic by Irawati Karve. The thesis argues that Devi's dissident writing arises from her activism and comradeship with the lower castes, lower classes and the tribal communities, which allow her to construct similar social realities. It also enables her, a privileged, upper caste and class woman, who chose to make dissenting, de-classing choices in her own life and writing, to navigate through the confines of identities such as class, caste and tribe, opening out spaces for voices of gendered subalterns that we can also classify as

representations of intersectionality. We will trace this development in the following chapters, and classify Devi's writing as a form of activism in itself.

This section will set up the theoretical framework that we will be using in the thesis and explain its academic relevance. In order to explicate the term 'gendered subaltern', we begin with the historian Ranajit Guha's definition of a subaltern. Guha is a leading historian around whom a loose grouping of scholars formed a collective, bringing out many edited volumes with the title *Subaltern Studies*. Spivak was also a member of this collective. Spivak's role as a translator for Mahasweta Devi's works becomes important to our research as she engages with the texts closely and attempts academic re-readings and provides scholarly introductions for some of Devi's texts, which are included in some of the books published by Seagull[3]. It is to be noted that the stories that this thesis analyses were translated by Anjum Katyal, a Kolkata-based figure, not Spivak. We progress to Gayatri Spivak's theories of subalternity and use them to situate the female as the gendered subaltern. It is here where we begin to critique Spivak's theories on whether the gendered subaltern has a voice and can speak. Along with analyzing the female characters as gendered subalterns, we also situate them as imaginations of intersectional identities using theories and terms proposed by Anna Carastathis and Kimberle Crenshaw. Caste, class and gender stratification are the three elements which contribute to the establishment of the social order in India and contributed to the formation of the Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravati). While Crenshaw and Carastathis propose the triad of gender, race and class to unveil intersectionality, in the Indian context intersectionality takes the form of intersections amongst gender, class and caste. We explore these structures and classify how oppression operates on multiple levels. Using intersectionality as a framework helps us unveil the complex layers of

[3] Spivak provides an introduction and theoretical analysis of selected works such as Draupadi, Breast-giver and Behind the Bodice compiled as a collection titled *Breast Stories* published by Seagull Books.

identities the characters possess and multiple layers of oppression they face in Devi's stories. We refer to Judith Butler's theories on gender and performativity, as we analyze the gendered subalterns and the roles and positions they occupy due to their gender. Butler also provides us insights through her comments on third world literature and Devi's writing.

The retellings by Devi are modeled on specific characters and incidents borrowed from the *Mahabharata* and to methodically understand these situations, it becomes necessary to refer back to the original text. We use Indian translator Kisari Mohan Ganguli's English translation of the Sanskrit version of the *Mahabharata* in order to decipher the contrast between the original text and Devi's retelling. To aid our intertextual reading of the epic we also refer to Indian anthropologist, sociologist and writer Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The end of an Epoch* (1991). Irawati Karve studies the major characters depicted in the great epic and attempts an analysis of the society as constructed within the epic. We have attempted to stay true to Anjum Katyal's translation of Devi's stories and hence have retained the non - English words and they will be italicized in this thesis.

We have also employed the post-classical narratological approach in order to understand how specific themes and thematic elements are responsible for personal and collective identity formation (Rigney 160). This approach attempts an analysis from the perspective of cultural criticism enabling the readers to situate them in a global space and how it reshapes their worldwide views (Rigney 196).

Devi and Mythology in India

Understanding the social and cultural significance of mythology in Indian society is an important preface before we delve into the stories. The *Mahabharata* is often used as a keyhole to glimpse into ancient India. The great Indian epic engaged with mythology and mythical characters, and these characters later on occupied a space in religious spheres as various Gods. As for the myths, they were soon turned into norms, rituals and codes of conduct of Indian culture that individuals had to conform to. "All cultures have been built upon myths. Each nation has its own peculiar epics and every society derives its cultural ethos from its myths, legends and folklore" (Jha). It is in this manner that Indian culture is interwoven and derived with mythology in the *Mahabharata*.

Myths then prove to be living and breathing entities rather than dead artefacts of the past and are constantly rewritten and negotiated into the present. Romila Thapar, a prominent historian, explains, in an interview, "When an epic captures public attention, bits and pieces are always added on and bits and pieces are subtracted. It's a growing kind of rolling stone, gathering and dropping as it goes along" (Jebharaj). We arrive at how myths and epics contribute in the formation of a cultural memory as well as a collective unconscious. Carl Jung explains the term 'collective unconscious' as an innate part of an individual which isn't individualistic in any manner but contains contents and modes of behaviour that exist everywhere and amongst most individuals (Jung). He further adds the contents of collective unconscious can be explained through 'archetypes', a well - known expression of archetypes are myths and fairy tales (Jung). The archetypes found in myths often reveal a collective unconscious of a culture or a civilization (Jha). It is through the recurrence of archetypes in a myth that make it possible for its readers to associate with them till date. The aspect of universality that these myths carry often help anchor

societies and cultures and yet allots us the space for interpretation, evaluation and extrapolation (Jha).

The *Mahabharata* evokes a sense of nostalgia and familiarity amongst its audience. It is often accompanied by the other major Indian epic, *Ramayana*, both of which we have consumed in many forms and styles. As a child, we would gather around our grandparents to hear stories about them and while we grew a little older we read them in simplified forms. They have also been visualized into comics published by *Amar Chitra Katha* and televised by a national channel *Doordarshan* into a series of episodes. The contemporary phenomenon of epics in various forms of media can be explained through the inherent quality of epics which makes them intrinsically 'retellable' (Jha). Devi creatively uses this inherent quality to enable a narrative that provides us with flexible points of views. This thesis attempts an intertextual reading and lays emphasis on the folklore and oral tradition present in Devi's works. It is in this manner that the thesis invites its readers to unlearn stringent narratives and make space for creative retellings.

Kunti and the Nishadin

"Kunti and the Nishadin" is the first story amongst the trio, from the collection *After Kurukshetra*. The narration lays emphasis on a pivotal character from the *Mahabharata*, Kunti, and a marginalized character, the Nishadin. The story takes place after the great Kurukshetra war in the *Mahabharata*; we see Kunti along with her blind brother-in- law Dhritarashtra and his wife Gandhari leave the palace and its luxuries behind in order to observe penance in the forest. This chapter analyses Devi's narration in order to understand the power struggle between Kunti and the Nishadin. While doing so we also situate them as gendered subalterns. We further construct the Nishadin as a representation of an intersectional identity. It becomes imperative to understand the term 'Nishadin' before we delve into the chapter.

The term 'Nishadin' is explicated by the translator of the story, Anjum Katyal as "women of the nishad people, one of the 'uncivilized' races of ancient India chiefly living by hunting; swineherds, fisherman or fowlers by caste" (Devi 27). In Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of the *Mahabharata*, the Nishada is described as "the lowest of the mixed orders" (281). Nishadas were known as the tribal castes who occupied regions filled with forests and the ocean as their abode. They were described as dark skinned, covered with filth, dressed in black rags (281). In the caste system in India, the dominant upper castes perpetuate the system through ideologies of purity and pollution, which get translated into everyday practices. Many lower caste groups are visualized and treated as if they are polluted. This is evident through the description and portrayal of a Nishada in the *Mahabharata*. The title, "Kunti and the Nishadin" depicts a stark difference between the two characters which is imitated in the story as well. Kunti is the mother of the Pandavas, and she belongs to the royal sphere, known as *rajvritta* in the story, whereas the

Nishadin belongs to *lokvritta*, the world of the tribal castes or the marginalized. It is interesting to note that the Nishadin has no name in the story, and hence the term can be seen as representative of the entire tribe. The story showcases differences in terms of customs, beliefs and practices between the two spheres through the respective characters.

Devi borrows an episode from the *Mahabharata* and constructs the narrative to foreground the perspective of characters with marginalized identities. The episode borrowed from the epic is from the chapter titled *Jatugriha Parva* which translates to 'the burning of the house of lac'. The Pandavas are warned of Duryodhana's[4] deceitful plan to construct a house of inflammable materials, trap them in it and set it on fire. To outwit him, the Pandavas set the house aflame, with a Nishada woman and her five sons within it. The plan was successful, as everyone is then convinced that the burnt bodies belong to the Pandavas and Kunti.

> Then on the occasion of an almsgiving, O king, Kunti fed on a certain night a large number of Brahmanas. There came also a number of ladies who while eating and drinking, enjoyed there as they pleased, and with Kunti's leave returned to their respective homes. Desirous of obtaining food, there came, as though impelled by fate, to that feast, in course of her wanderings, a Nishada woman, the mother of five children, accompanied by all her sons. O king, she, and her children, intoxicated with the wine they drank, became incapable. Deprived of consciousness and more dead than alive, she with all her sons lay down in that mansion to sleep. Then when all the inmates of the house lay down to sleep, there began to blow a violent wind in the night. Bhima then set fire to the house just where Purochana was sleeping. Then the son of Pandu set fire to the door of that house of lac. Then he set fire to the mansion in several parts all around. Then when the sons of Pandu were satisfied

[4] Dhritarashtra's son , the eldest of the Kauravas.

> that the house had caught fire in several parts, those chastisers of foes with their mother, entered the subterranean passage without losing any time (Ganguli 311-312).

The above passage describing the incident makes only a passing reference to the Nishada women and her five sons who died in the fire, as though their lives were of no value. Devi's narrative allows a space to explore this aspect, as discussed later in the chapter.

The Rajvritta versus Lokvritta

The story explores the differences between the two spheres through its characters. It becomes important for us to understand these settings in order to understand their implications on the characters. The *rajvritta* refers to the royal sphere, situated away from the commoners and the town. This is where the Pandavas and the Kauravas reside in palaces and royal quarters. The *rajvritta* is upheld by the notion of *dharma* which each individual has to abide by. The term *dharma* can be understood in two different manners. First, it refers to the actions, duties and responsibilities performed by an individual such as performing sacrificial rites, studying the Veda[5], generating offspring, offering hospitality to guests, honoring one's parents and seniors, fighting in battles, observing fasts, speaking the truth, and so on. The king or the ruler has added responsibilities to his subjects, ensuring their welfare (Fitzgerald). "His dharma included a series of activities - the administration of justice, the conduct of foreign policy, the management of his ministers and officials, the building and maintaining of various elements of regional and local infrastructure, and so on" (Fitzgerald). Dharma is also understood as "the abstract quality of the correctness, tightness,

[5] A body of religious texts

goodness, or justice of an action" (Fitzgerald). The actions dictated different duties and responsibilities for men and women. The notion of dharma functioned as a set of norms and regulations upheld and exercised by the *rajvritta*. Thus, it becomes evident that the *rajvritta* as sphere of the ruling class exercised power over the other classes.

The *lokvritta* translates to the 'people's world'. It is generally situated far away from the royal quarters or palatial grounds. Karve makes this evident in her analysis, "each ruling family was located in a capital city for generations" (187). People belonging to the *lokvritta* often belonged to lower castes and engaged in menial occupations, hence belonged to lower classes as well. The Nishadins belonged to the *lokvritta* and as we observe in the next few sections, their norms, notions and principles vary from the *rajvritta* in many ways. The story is constructed in a manner to depict a classic power struggle between the two worlds.

Devi's narration identifies Kunti as the focalizer, the narration traces her stream of consciousness which gives us a glimpse of her life in the *rajvritta*. It is through Kunti's interior monologue that we are transported into her past. We come to realise that she had to abandon her first born, Karna, as she was unwed. An act of consummation before marriage went against the *dharma* women had to uphold and hence Kunti was left with no choice but to abandon her child. The characterisation of Kunti in Devi's retelling is that of a remorseful mother who repents her treatment towards her son. Having carried the burden of this action, she resorts to confessing them out loud and holds Mother Nature as her witness. Devi captures the subtleties of oral tradition through Kunti's monologues and uses them to move back and forth between Kunti's past and the present.

Kunti leaves the royal household, leaving all her comforts behind to lead a simple life in the forest and repent for her sins. However, she still upholds values and beliefs of the *rajvritta* and

is unable to unlearn the rigid practice of discrimination against lower castes. This is evident through the following lines, “Kunti’s eyes are the only things about her still alive. Yet those eyes register nothing about the Nisadins moving about in front of her, not even by a look” (Devi 29). She has internalised notions of pollution, as seen through her thoughts, “Would they come closer? Their shadows may fall on the firewood for the sacred rites and defile it” (Devi 33). Kunti sees no difference between the rocks that surround her and the Nishadins who move about the forest; this ability to reduce humans to mere inanimate objects arises from her privilege and is an aftermath of living amongst the people in the *rajvritta* for years together.

Kunti and the Nishadin as Gendered Subalterns

While one traces the power struggle between the two characters, it becomes important to situate Kunti and the Nishadin as gendered subalterns. Before we begin to analyse them as gendered subalterns, it becomes important to explicate the term ‘subaltern’. Ranajit Guha, in the preface of his works has defined the term as: “The word ‘subaltern’ in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, ‘of inferior rank’, it will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (35).

Kunti and the Nishadin can be seen as gendered subalterns. Kunti occupies a subordinate position in a patriarchal society. In Irawati Karve’s *Yuganta*, a study and analysis of the main characters from the *Mahabharata*, Kunti is analyzed as occupying a subordinate position within the *rajvritta*. Kunti is seen as a devout *Kshatriya* woman but one who has also endured a lot of sorrow. Karve comments on how Kunti’s biological father willingly gave her away to a friend who

was childless and her adoptive father employed her to serve a Brahman sage. The word service in this context meant "personal service being at the beck and call of the sage, doing his bidding, even sharing his bed if he so desired" (Karve 44). Kunti performs all the duties she is supposed to — as a wife she bears sons[6] despite her husband being impotent[7], and as a mother by caring for her stepchildren after her co-wife Madri dies[8]. Karve argues that in patriarchal and polygynous society, such as the *rajvritta*, "a woman's status depended entirely on the position of the man who was either her father or husband or son" (49). Being widowed with five young sons was not only arduous but also made Kunti vulnerable and dependent. The one occasion Kunti derails from her *dharma* is her sexual intercourse with the Sun god which results in the birth of her first born, Karna. Being unwed, she refuses to acknowledge this son's presence until many years later. Kunti's encounter before marriage is seen by her as giving into her sexual desires whereas her giving birth to the royal, legitimate princes, the Pandavas is a mere duty she performs. It is through Kunti we observe how the female body is treated as an "instrument of labour production" (Bose). A certain binary exists as we observe Kunti recalling her past and present. Having internalized social connotations of her body, she is caught between the erotic, unlawful, unwed and pleasure-seeking body versus her de-eroticized, lawful and marital body (Bose). This conflict also serves as a major difference between the *rajvritta* and the *lokvritta.* As the Nishadin recounts and comments,

> The rajvritta folk and the lokvritta folk have different values, different ideas of right and wrong. If a young girl makes love to a boy of her choice and gets pregnant, we celebrate it with a wedding.

[6] Kunti is blessed with a boon wherein she could call upon any god she liked and bear a child.
[7] According to the Mahabharata, Pandu is cursed by a sage that any attempt at a sexual union would kill him.
[8] Overcome by desire, Pandu attempts to have sex with Madri (his second wife), and immediately dies. As a wife is required to jump in the husband's funeral pyre (sati), Madri follows him.

> What kind of law is that?
>
> Nature's law. Nature abhors waste. We honour life (Devi 40).

Kunti's narration also makes us aware of the fact that the female body can also be sexually exploited by powerful males, from the Brahmin sage to the Sun god, in Kunti's case. The Nishadin occupies a subordinate position as she belongs to a lower caste which dictates their economic position in society as well. Their occupation is often to serve the *rajvritta,* their service included supplying timber, animal hides, ivory, venison, medicinal herbs, resin and honey which they would exchange for salt, clothes and rice (Devi 41- 42).

It is through Spivak's works that one comes to explore the subaltern as a female figure. She believes that in a space where the object of colonialist historiography and the subject of insurgency is discussed, "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak and the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (288). She reiterates this idea again while saying "the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the non-representing intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved" (289). We understand from Spivak's notions that a gendered subaltern has no space and no voice, hence cannot speak and cannot be heard.

Devi's narration does quite the contrary. The actions performed by the Nishadin challenges their position in the society. Customs and traditions dictate that outcasts or lower castes refrain from any sort of close proximity with the royal clan, yet we see the Nishadins moving about closely while Kunti is making her confessions. In one such instance we notice the Nishadins, laughing at Kunti's expense, "The elderly Nishadin said something to the others, who knows what. They fell over each other laughing. Kunti was trembling, terrified" (Devi 33). The power struggle undergoes a significant shift when Kunti is seen as the one in fear.

The denouement of the story witnesses a conversation between the Nishadin and Kunti, making the differences in their respective realities even more distinct. We notice a significant shift in the focalization of the characters, as the focalizer in the denouement is the Nishadin. Kunti assumes her greatest sin while living the *rajvritta* life, to be that of bearing a child out of desire without being married. Yet this is no sin in the *lokvritta*. Instead, the Nishadin reminds Kunti of her "unpardonable sin" (Devi 41), alluding to the burning of the house of lac which Kunti never felt guilty of to begin with. The *lokvritta* considered harming and sacrificing lives for one's own gain as the gravest sin of them all, and Kunti was guilty of committing such an act. This is where we witness the plight of subalterns; their loss of lives held no value in the *rajvritta*. The *Mahabharata* never held Kunti or the Pandavas accountable for the death of six innocent lives, not even in an afterthought. Devi's rewriting of these events depict the Nishadin holding Kunti solely responsible for the death of the Nishada mother and her five sons who served as mere "irrefutable proof " (Devi 41) that the Pandavas had died, while the Pandavas escaped through a passage.

> "Tell me, who knew of a certain elderly Nishadin and her five young sons? Who invited them to her feast for brahmans? 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 invited any Nishad-Kirat-Sabar- Nagavanshi forest tribals? And did you serve wine every time?" (Devi 42)

The Nishadin reveals that the Nishada woman who had died with her sons in the fire was indeed her mother- in- law.

> Drunk on so much wine, that Nishadin mother and her five sons lay there senseless. You knew this, yet you escaped through your secret tunnel,didn't you?
>
> Yes, I did.
>
> That Nisadin…
>
> Not you!
>
> No, my mother-in-law. I am her eldest daughter-in-law. These women with me were married to her other sons.
>
> But...you aren't widows…
>
> The Nishadin said with pride, 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 (Devi 42-43).

As seen through the course of their confrontation, Kunti is made aware of social realities other than her own. As someone who has internalized restrictions such as prohibition of widow remarriage, the Nishadin's attack on these discourses leaves her baffled. Not only does it act as a personal mockery of Kunti, but also as a powerful social commentary on the differences between their worlds. Devi reimagines the narrative in a manner that not only does the subaltern as a female step out of the shadow, she also speaks, questions and attempts to hold her oppressor accountable.

The Nishadin as an Intersectional Identity

As defined by Anna Carastathis in her works, "intersectionality originates in social-movement discourses that identified the manifold manifestations of oppression, discrimination, and violence" (16). Devi constructs both the characters of Kunti and the Nishadin to show oppression faced by

women. Kunti within the *rajvritta* is discriminated against for her gender, and her individuality is overpowered by the performative roles she needs to play, as seen in the following lines,

> Kunti can now look back. She never knew that she carried within her such a burden of unspoken thoughts and feelings . Life in the rajvritta 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 that while -amazingly- she never felt that anything was hers, hers alone (Devi 28).

Carastathis speaks of "double jeopardy", which she refers to as two axes of race and gender used to construct distinct and discrete systems of oppression (34). For the purposes of Devi's stories, caste rather than race is relevant. Although Kunti endures gender discrimination, she enjoys certain benefits as an upper-caste woman. The Nishadin's oppression on the other hand, operates at multiple levels. She not only suffers as a woman, but also due to her lower caste position. In a society where occupations and economic positions are dictated by caste, the Nishadin people inevitably occupy the lower rungs in terms of class as well. Therefore, the Nishadin faces a unique "triple jeopardy", a complex system of structural oppression influenced by the combination of gender, caste and class.

It becomes important to understand the concept of identity politics before we explore the notion of intersectionality. Crenshaw explains that identity politics is seen operating within dominant conceptions of social justice. Social constructs such as race, gender and other identity categories are treated in mainstream discourses as vestiges of bias and domination. They are treated as "intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different" (1242). In response to this political framework, arises the notion of

intersectionality as proposed by Crenshaw: "Intersectionality has, since the beginning, been posed more as a nodal point than as a closed system—a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities" (Cho 788).

Crenshaw argues the objective of intersectionality is to empty identity categories of any social significance. While this seems like an unrealistic notion, she redefines the implications of social differences that dictated power of domination or hegemonies. They can instead be seen as the source of social empowerment and reconstruction (1242). Devi's narration creates a space for reconstruction of her characters as both gendered subalterns and as intersectional identities. Not only do the stories allow us to understand the complex layers of her protagonist's identities, Devi also gives them power in the narrative as empowered, resistant figures.

The story makes us aware of this disadvantaged position of the Nishadin, and explores how an authoritative text like the *Mahabharata* disposes of the Nishadins' presence at its convenience. They are seen challenging the political and social power struggles. The Nishadin's resistance can be analyzed as Devi's response to the ancient text itself. The denouement of the story showcases how Devi rewrites the death of Kunti and her companions, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra. While the original text suggests that they died in a forest fire, Devi alters the narrative and provides a new perspective altogether. Their deaths are weighted with the consequences of their actions. The Nishadin with her final words warns Kunti of the forest fire,

> We can tell, from smelling the air, just as the other creatures of the forest can, that a fire has started. That's why they are fleeing. Like we are.
>
> Where to?

> Far away, beyond the reach of the forest fire. Where there are mountains, lakes and winding rivers.
>
> Forest fire!
>
> Yes. 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 the three. You can murder innocents and then forget all about it (Devi 44).

The Nishadin, unlike the Pandavas, does not directly kill Kunti and her other royal companions. But she makes it clear that three blind and infirm people will not survive the fire. The Nishadin's comment on Kunti's metaphorical blindness is a powerful statement. According to Kunti, her biggest sin is abandoning her child born of wedlock, but not aiding in the murder of five innocent lives. The Nishadins' social position renders their lives invisible to her consciousness, and she shows no guilt for their deaths. The comment of the Nishadin provokes Kunti to think, both at a personal as well as a political level. An inner conflict between her conditioning and the new reality exposed by the Nishadin ensues, as she embraces death in the fire.

It is striking to note how the Nishadin occupies the upper hand in this narrative. While her position in the social hierarchy leads to her disempowerment in many other instances, her identity empowers her on this specific occasion. Spivak recounts in her work how often the subject of exploitation cannot speak or recount experiences of female exploitation even if there space for her to speak, and hence "the female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). Mahasweta Devi's engagement with the lower castes and tribal communities allows her to construct an artistic retelling which challenges Spivak's notion. She does so by not only creating a space for a

feminist retelling of the *Mahabharata*, but creating space for tribal identities, reconstructing a narrative that reallocates them agency and power.

The Five Women

As the title *After Kurukshetra* suggests, this story is set in a space after the *dharmayuddha*[9] or the great war at Kurukshetra has come to an end. The term *dharmayuddha* translates to the war of *dharma* and it becomes evident that the war was positioned normatively in the *Mahabharata* as leaning towards those in favour of upholding *dharma* or the righteous order. While the end of the great war at Kurukshetra, the culmination of the conflict at the heart of the *Mahabharata* between the cousins the Pandavas and the Kauravas, sees the victory of the ones following the righteous order, the Pandavas, as the narrative positions the story, it also witnesses many, many deaths. The story, "The Five Women" observes the life of Uttara as a young widow in the *rajvritta*. Having lost her husband, Abhimanyu[10], she experiences the trauma of being a widow at a young age. In this chapter, we explore the differences between the two spheres, *rajvritta* and the *lokvritta* as we situate Uttara and the five women in them respectively. We observe that the female characters are subalterns in their own designated spaces, and as we explore their identities we begin to construct the five women as intersectional identities.

Kisari Ganguli's translation of the *Mahabharata* records the lamentation of Subhadra over the loss of her son Abhimanyu,

> After the fall of that hero, this my sister Subhadra stricken with grief, indulged in loud lamentations, when she saw Kunti, like a female osprey. When she met Draupadi, she asked her in grief,--O reverend lady, where are all our sons? I desire to behold them. Hearing her lamentations, all the Kaurava ladies embraced her and wept sitting around

[9] The righteous war
[10] Son of Subhadra and Arjuna

> her. Beholding (her daughter-in-law) Uttara, she said,--'O blessed girl, where has thy husband gone? When he comes back, do thou, without losing a moment, apprise me of it. Alas, O daughter of Virata, as soon he heard my voice, he used to come out of his chamber without the loss of a moment. Why does not thy husband come out today? Alas, O Abhimanyu, thy maternal uncles--mighty car-warriors--are all hale. They used to bless thee when they saw thee come here prepared to go out for battle. Do thou tell me the incidents of battle today as before, O chastiser of foes. Oh. why dost thou not answer me today--me who am weeping so bitterly?' (111-112).

While Subhadra's plight and grief as a mother is highlighted, it also overpowers the plight of the young Uttara, Abhimanyu's wife, as a young widow. Devi constructs a space for Uttara to express her grief and loss through her narration.

The story brings to light the plight of widows in the royal sphere or the *rajvritta* where they are bound by rules, regulations and protocols. As deemed appropriate by her mothers in law, Subhadra and Draupadi[11], she is accompanied by five women belonging to the Kurujangal region. The five women are seen looking for their husbands, who functioned as foot soldiers in the great war, when they come across the head *dasi*[12] Madraja, who employs them to serve Uttara through times of sorrow and grief. The story also explicates a strong contrast between these two classes, namely the ones belonging to the royal sphere versus the common people from Kurujangal, through conversations between Uttara and the five women. While we explore these differences between the two, we start to unveil the female characters as 'gendered subaltern'

[11] Wives of Arjuna
[12] Handmaiden or maid to the Queen

figures. In this chapter, we trace how the notion of subalternity can be applied to upper class and upper caste women despite their privileges.

Rajvritta versus Lokvritta

The story is constructed so as to lay emphasis on the customs, beliefs and traditions of the two classes, the *rajvritta* and the *lokvritta*. We analyzed these differences and nuances in the previous chapters. The *rajvritta* are bound by certain 'prescriptions', and exercise authority so that the prescriptions are followed. We see the prevalence of *dharma* through the eldest of Pandu's sons, Yudhishthira who is also known as Dharma which literally translates to the 'righteous' one.

It is evident from Karve's work that the social order in the *Mahabharata* was male-dominated and class oriented, to be precise the focus lay on the "Brahmanical - Kshatriya" classes (Karve 190), these being the two uppermost castes. The *rajvritta* consisted of the ruling classes such as the two uppermost castes, the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas* and we explored in the previous chapter how these classes occupied space and lived in the capital cities. While Karve situates the *rajvritta*'s location, she also comments on the kind of social values followed by them,

> The patriarchal family was the mainstay of the social order. The social values of those days, too, were such as to support this social order. The ideal virtues for men were devotion to one's father and good fellowship for one's brothers. These were the virtues that would protect and promote the welfare of the patriarchal family. The women who became part of such a family were brought from outside. They were expected to be devoted to neither their

> fathers nor to their brothers. They were to cultivate the virtues of devotion to their husband and take pride in his family (190).

In Devi's stories, the people of the *lokvritta* often belong to the tribal or the peasant communities. The definition of *dharma,* as we saw earlier, bound the *rajvritta* by certain restrictions based on purification and rituals and upheld social patriarchal values, whereas the *lokvritta*, in areas such as women's work outside the home, the right of widows to marry, and a more unconstrained expression of female sexuality, often observed less restricted practices. Karve's interpretation of the *Mahabharata* recognizes a category of people whom she refers to as "jungle people" and they share their clan names with those of different birds and beasts (187). The women of Kurujangal represented in Devi's story bring such populations to mind. The term 'raj' in *rajvritta* means to rule and represents the ruling classes. This leads us to the understanding that they are also the ones to impose hegemony over the lower classes or the common people. The differences between the two classes are evident in the story through the characters of the five women and Uttara, which we will discuss in the next section.

Uttara and the Five Women

We come across Uttara as the young widow grieving the death of her husband, Abhimanyu, who is killed in the great war. She is pregnant with the only heir to the Pandavas. The five women namely Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta and Vipasha accompany her through her grief and loss. Uttara seeks comfort in the company of the five women,

> Uttara cannot spend a moment without them. She bathes only after they fetch river water for her bath. The mothers-in-law say, A healthy custom. Good for the growing baby in

> the womb. So many different kinds of advice. The expecting mother is supposed to listen and obey (Devi 5).

The above lines, while indicating Uttara's dependence on the five women, also depicts the upper - caste feminine customs and rules she needs to abide by as an 'expecting' mother.

Uttara and the five women experience the aftermath of the war in distinct ways. The five women faced death and destruction and their plight and grief are expressed through their songs of lament,

> The fields of golden wheat lie unploughed, hai hai!
> Who will go there with ox and plough, hai,hai!
> Seeds of wheat and sesame lie waiting in store, hai hai!
> They want to be sown
> They want to sprout green leaves
> Bear rich harvest, hai hai!
> Who cast a shroud over the village, hai hai!
> 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! (Devi 10-11)

These songs reveal their occupational patterns and provide us a glimpse into their lives. These five women belong to the world of people who make the fields bear harvest. The war unleashed by fraternal conflict in the *rajvritta* has destroyed this world of farming and fertility. They cope by finding solace in each other's company and by moving forward with their lives. Devi captures

oral tradition of the peasant and tribal communities through these folk songs. The focalization shifts from the five women to Uttara, as we observe her grief and loss. On the other hand, Uttara experiences sleepless nights filled with gory dreams of Abhimanyu's bloodied body.

> The word 'widow' terrifies her. It scares her, the thought of white - clad *kaurava* widows. She can't recognise herself in the mirror. When was it that she laughed, played, and learned dance from Brihannala? Who was she who threw tantrums, demanded fine silk clothes to dress her dolls in?
> That Uttara had long unbound tresses hanging loose about her as she danced in the wind. That Uttara loved to spend hours on her swing, played in the garden for hours with her companions. That Uttara dressed in brightly colored 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. How long will that strange reflection haunt her in the mirror? (Devi 15)

The narration is constructed to depict the dichotomy between Uttara as a young bride and a newlywed wife and Uttara as a widow. As a widow, Uttara follows norms and rituals dictated by the *rajvritta*. The five women also assume the role of widows, yet they are not shy or timid and are seen engaging one another with riddles and laughter. There are clear distinctions in the manner the widows dress as well, while the widows of *rajvritta* dress in white to signal their mourning and loss, the five women are seen dressed in black cloth throughout the text indicating no such sign of mourning or change in attire, "Their skin is the colour of ripe wheat, their eyes bluish, their coppery hair tightly braided, They dress only in black" (Devi 7).

The five women's values and beliefs are in sharp contrast with that of Uttara's. Taking into account the fact that Uttara is pregnant, they urge her to do chores such as "fold clothes and water the tulsi plant" (Devi 9) as amongst the *lokvritta*, " pregnant women don't just lie down and rest. They keep busy doing light chores. They say that it's a law of nature for women to bear children. Just because a woman is pregnant doesn't mean she should indulge and pamper her body" (Devi 9). This reiterates the fact that the five women are indeed labouring women and the act of performing labour has been internalised and ingrained in them.

The ceremonies and rituals followed by the *rajvritta* and *lokvritta* seem to differ as well. Uttara's response to the five women after being asked what she would name her child, gives the readers a glimpse of the cultural differences of both spheres.

> What will you call your child?
>
> That's not up to me.
>
> Then who'll decide?
>
> Oh, it's an elaborate process! Pujas, yagnas, offerings to Agni, the elder males of the family will sit together to discuss it, the priests will study the signs, the acharya will draw up the horoscope. It's they who'll choose a name for the child.
>
> Goodness! Your ways are so-o different!
>
> These are rituals. Don't you have them too?
>
> Of course we do. The baby is weighed against food grains. One of the grandparents chooses a name. Its head is shaved. Then it's bathed in water warmed by the sun. Musicians play and the women sing. Then its maternal uncle feeds it a bit ghee-payesh with the little finger of his right hand.
>
> And then? The baby feeds and falls asleep. The villagers are treated to a feast. We all sing and have a good time.

> Even the women?
>
> Of course! The women, the men , the old people! (Devi 12).

The above passage demonstrates the rituals practiced by both the *rajvritta* and the *lokvritta*, and we come to observe how natural cycles and the practice of farming serve as influencing factors amongst the people belonging to the *lokvritta*. It also makes us privy to the sharp contrast between the two spheres. Uttara's astonishment over the fact that the *lokvritta* women sing and celebrate alongside men in a public sphere depicts that was not the case in the *rajvritta*. The agency to be able to express themselves is denied to the women of the *rajvritta*. One of many differences between the two spheres are the designated gender roles. Through the many conversations between Uttara and the five women, we also learn that women of the *lokvritta*, guarded fields and their homes while the men were away and even mastered the art of using a spear, which Uttara referred to as the "man's weapon" (Devi 13). This leads us to another difference between the two spheres. Men and women are less constricted in the *lokvritta* by patriarchally defined gender roles. Women can fight as well, using weapons.

The *lokvritta* also believed in the notion of remarriage, it was a part of their custom to marry their brother-in-law if they were widowed (Devi 24). They believe in the creation of life as that is what is Nature teaches them, as Godumi claims,

> "As long as there's life, that life demands fulfillment. 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" (Devi 25).

In contrast, widows in the *rajvritta* were stripped of all liberties and joys, some at a very young age such as Uttara. The plight of the widows in the *rajvritta* is seen contrastively through freedom and joy of the women of the *lokvritta*.

In Karve's observations, she notes how the women's quarters in the *rajvritta* were set apart from men's and the women usually weren't a part of male assemblies. In fact, even among the women, there were separate quarters for the married women, brides and the daughters of the house respectively (188). While there is so much detail in the allotment of spaces, there is no mention of the widows. This glaring absence of space for widows needs to be acknowledged. Devi constructs a space for the widows in this story, and refers to this space as "the chamber of silence" (Devi 19). This becomes the designated space for widows of the royal clan, wherein they forsake their right to happiness. This is depicted when Uttara pleads to Godhumi and the four women to stay with her, to which Godhumi responds,

> Godhumi shakes her head sadly. Says, these are chambers of silence.
>
> Silence?
>
> Everything happens outside the women's quarters, here. Pujas, ceremonial sacrifices, yagnas. There, the world is full of bustle and activity. Here, you white-clad widows float around like shadowy ghosts. We wonder, won't you ever laugh, talk loudly, run outside on restless feet? (Devi 19).

The Women as Gendered Subalterns

Mahasweta Devi through this story reconstructs the consciousness of subaltern figures such as those belonging to the marginalized or lower classes, specifically women of these groups. The

narration reveals how the five women occupy a subordinate position and are often seen as serving the ruling classes. This can be traced through Madraja's monologue,

"We're the ones they always get. Dasis[13] for the royal households, courtesans for the palace, prostitutes for the soldiers" (Devi 17). We notice how the royal households depended on these farming classes to fill their royal granary and offer their service as foot soldiers. The *Kshatriyas* (the ruling class) were offered a choice to fight or not fight in the war, whereas other classes or mercenaries were given no such choice (Karve 185). The legitimate victims of the great war are the women from the tribal and peasant societies, whose husbands, brothers and sons had no choice but to contribute to the war. Through the narrative voice of Godhumi, the reader is exposed to their plight as women and wives, and then as widows.

> "Our husbands were sent for during the war. We knew the foot soldiers would die in huge numbers. We'd watch the fighting from afar. At the close of each day's battle we'd search for our husband's bodies in the heart of that awful darkness" (Devi 17).

According to feminist theorist Judith Butler, "gender entails performativity, whereby 'performative' means both 'acting out' and 'having an effect' (Butler 95). Anyone 'playing' the role of a woman or a man in accordance with convention is performatively reaffirming the image and helping to spread and validate the model" (Rigney 196). Similarly we situate Uttara as a gendered subaltern within the *rajvritta* as she is oppressed by performative gender roles, restrictions and regulations imposed on her due to widowhood. Although she does enjoy certain privileges as a princess, as a widow all these privileges are stripped away from her. Uttara is

[13] Hand maidens or servants to the Queens/princesses

analysed in this thesis as a gendered subaltern as she occupied a subordinate position in a patriarchal society and as a widow she loses the limited agency and authority she once had. Despite being subjected to oppression while being a widow, there is a clear distinction between her and the five women. Uttara, situated in the *rajvritta*, enjoys certain benefits and privileges. Devi constructs a space for Uttara to be able to undo these privileges which brings her close to understanding as she remains ignorant and oblivious to the people of *lokvritta*, their practices, customs.

According to Spivak, locating the subaltern's voice can prove to be a difficult task, as one has to be able to trace the consciousness of the subaltern while taking into account the class and race differences (286). She observes that "within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced" (286). Dominant discourses and patriarchal notions and norms make tracking the female's consciousness an impossible task. Spivak argues the notion that "the subaltern as a female cannot be heard or read and eventually cannot speak" (308). Spivak's critique is challenged by Devi's narrative in this story. We see on various occasions how the subaltern not only speaks but retorts. They refuse to serve or live as *dasis*, are even seen challenging and questioning Uttara. For instance, Gomati comments on the lack of attention paid to their villages, "Who bothers to find out what our villages are like ?" (Devi 13).

Another instance is Godhumi's response upon being asked by Uttara if they visited the town; she replies saying,

> "No dear. The town doesn't know us, and we don't know the town. And now… no one will come here anymore.
>
> Why?
>
> Such a savage war, so much destruction, who will come to town after this? (Devi 22)".

Her response at first glance seems to sync well with Spivak's notion of the existence of the subaltern being dismissed. But the gendered subaltern *is* speaking of her experiences, bringing to the forefront the lack of attention and dismissal women like her face. There is a constant and consistent shift in focalization between the five women and Uttara, this insights the reader to contemplate on the social differences amongst the two spheres and yet highlights their plight as widows. It also enables the reader to apply Spivak's notion of the gendered subaltern to upper-caste women such as Kunti in the previous chapter and Uttara in this chapter. Our knowledge of Devi's committed work as fellow activist in struggles of marginal peoples, delineated in the introduction to this thesis, with her simultaneous exercise of the creative imagination, allow us to read stories such as the ones analysed in this thesis as opening up spaces in which we can hear different gendered subalterns speak.

Five Women as Intersectional Identities

We have so far situated and analysed oppression faced by the female characters in the story and have explored the agency of the five women. It has been a complex process to trace the various levels of oppression that the five women face. While situating them in terms of intersectionality, it becomes important to conceptualize a few terms.

The concept of "triple jeopardy" as discussed in terms of the Nishadin woman seen in the first chapter applies to the five women as well. The triad of caste/ tribe, gender and class are explored within this term (Carasthathis 29). It is in this sense, we can conclude that the five women can also be seen as intersectional identities as they face "triple jeopardy". They experience oppression on the basis of their class, gender and caste/ tribe. In the Indian context,

caste oppression also needs to be included. It is fascinating as to how Devi combines her own activist engagements with the lower classes of the society such as the tribal and peasant communities and reconstructs a creative narrative around them.

Souvali

"Souvali" is the last story in the collection *After Kurukshetra* written by Mahasweta Devi. It is perhaps the most interesting one, as it depicts the gendered subaltern claiming a space for herself in the narrative most articulately. Devi indicates that she has borrowed the name Souvali[14] from regional translations of the *Mahabharata*. The story gives us a glimpse into Souvali's life after the *dharmayuddha* and lays emphasis on her position in the *Brahmanical* society. We explore Souvali's position in the *rajvritta* versus the place she occupies in the *lokvritta* much later. The differential treatment also implicates the way her son Yuyutsu is treated in the *rajvritta*. Souvali in this chapter can be analysed as a gendered subaltern, but that doesn't hold her back from speaking her mind and reclaiming her identity. Through this reclamation, we also construct her identity as a representation of an intersectional one.

In Ganguli's English translation of the *Mahabharata*, Souvali has no name and she is often referred to as the *vaishya* woman:

"And unto the wise Dhritarashtra were born a hundred sons, viz., Duryodhana and others, and another, named Yuyutsu, who was born of a vaishya woman" (130).

"Thou hast merely said that over and above the hundred sons, there was another son named Yuyutsu begotten upon a Vaishya woman, and a daughter" (244).

"And over and above these hundred, Dhritarashtra had one son named Yuyutsu born of a Vaisya wife" (143).

[14] While Gandhari is pregnant, a handmaiden was in the service of Dhritarashtra and she bore him a son named Yuyutsu. The handmaiden went by the name Souvali.

The reader is privy to the fact that the son she bore was with Dhritarashtra but the details are not given. It is interesting to note that neither Dhritarashtra nor Gandhari acknowledge her existence. While there is a mere mention of Souvali as the *vaishya*[15] woman, it is often relational. Her existence is validated through the two men in her life: her son and the son's supposed father, as she is known as Yuyutsu's mother or as Dhritarashtra's wife. Yet again, while she is titled as the wife, there is no indication of their marriage and neither is she given the status of a wife in the *rajvritta*.

Karve explicates the position usually given to illegitimate sons or *dasiputras*[16]in the *Mahabharata*. While she does not lay the focus on Yuyutsu, she draws similarities between him and various others who happened to be born to a lower caste, such as Vidura[17]who was also born to a maid servant, "Yuyutsu born of a vaishya woman and publicly acknowledged as Dhritarashtra's son, was kshatta or suta; so was Vidura" (66). Various others such as Karna, although born into the royal clan, were abandoned at birth and were raised by a suta. She then defines the role of a suta in the *Brahmanical* society,

> The sutas were charioteers, warriors, and the repositories of the lore and genealogies of the kingly families. In this last capacity, they were also storytellers and were greatly in demand at all social gatherings. The Kshatriyas had a feeling of closeness and kinship with the sutas. Within the enclosure of the palace, the sutas lived in their own houses. From the Mahabharata's description, it seems that they never lived in the palace itself. In many cases the Kshatriyas and sutas were actually half-brothers, like Dhritarashtra and Vidura,

[15] According to Hinduism, the third caste amongst the four tier caste system. (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras).
[16] Son of a maid or handmaiden (dasi).
[17] Pandu and Dhritarashtra's brother.

> Duryodhana and Yuyutsu. Not only were the sutas near-equal of the Kshatriyas, some were actually a threat to the power of the king (67).

Having discussed the role the *sutas* played in the society, she also explains the injustice and inequality faced by the sutas in terms due to the subordinate position they occupied,

> Duryodhana gave a kingdom to Karna, but never married into Karna's family. He called Karna his friend, but their relationship was never one of complete equality; to the end it was that of patron and retainer. Even at the end, Krishna's grandson Vajra got Indraprastha[18]; Arjuna's grandson Parikshita got Hastinapura; Yuyutsu the suta— Dhritarashtra's own son— got nothing. This was the whole sorrow of the sutas. Extremely near to the Kshatriyas, of the same blood as the Kshatriyas, in a position to advise them without fear[19], they could never become their equals (68).

The only instance in which Yuyutsu is considered equal to Duryodhana, or is given the status of a son is when he is required to perform the final rites for Dhritarashtra, after he, Gandhari and Kunti were consumed in a forest fire.

> Then that lord of Earth, that foremost of men, that upholder of the burthens of the Pandavas, went out, accompanied by all his brothers as well as the ladies of his household. The inhabitants of the city as also those of the provinces, impelled by their loyalty, also went out. They all proceeded towards the banks of Ganga, every one clad in only a single piece of raiment. Then all those foremost of men, having plunged into the

[18] Indraprastha and Hastinapura are names of kingdoms inherited.
[19] Vidura served as the royal advisor

> stream, placed Yuyutsu at their head, and began to offer oblations of water unto the high-souled king[20] (63).

While Ganguli's *Mahabharata* records this event, we see that it is only a matter of convenience that Yuyutsu is called upon to perform the duty of a son[21], as every last one of the *Kauravas* have perished. Devi in this story highlights these inequalities through Souvali's and Yuyutsu's narrative voices. She also constructs a space and a narrative for Souvali, who in her story has a name and place to live away from the *rajvritta*, "on the margins of the town" where the marginalized lived (Devi 45).

Life in the Lokvritta versus the Rajvritta

The story records the aftermath after Gandhari, Dhritarashtra and Kunti have been consumed by the forest fire, and the town is holding a *mahatarpan*[22]. Souvali is seen awaiting her son's return after having performed the *tarpan*. Souvali's life took place in two phases, the initial phase she lived in the royal quarters and the second phase was spent while she lived with the *janavritta*[23]' on the outskirts of the town. While we have defined these terms in the previous chapters, we see their implications in the lives of Souvali and Yuyutsu.

We see how Yuyutsu is not called by that name, while he enters his mother's house. Souvali addresses him as Souvalya, which means son of Souvali. "In this house, he is Souvalya.

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[20] Refers to Dhritarashtra
[21] According to Hindu customs, it is the son who is required to perform the final rights for his parents.
[22] An offering made to the deceased as part of the dead rite. Water, milk and sesame seeds are usually offered.
[23] Refers to the common people, another term for Lokvritta

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 the responsibility!" (Devi 47). As we observed customs of the *rajvritta* in the story of "The Five Women", we see how Uttara is not the one to name her child, but it is the *Brahmans* who do so after various rituals, sacrifices and horoscopes. Similarly, Souvalya born to the mighty Dhritarashtra receives a name seen fitting to the *rajvritta*. It is through Souvali's narrative voice we realize that naming the son was the only duty performed by his father and his kin. Dialogues between the mother and son reveal that the duo had been separated and placed in two different spheres. Souvali recounts

> "In the rajvritta, male offspring aren't left with their mothers for long. They are suckled by wet nurses, they stay with the dasis. I showered you with care and love, kept you safe. Why did you leave, Ma?
>
> Because they sent you off to the gurugriha, to the home of your teacher, when you were barely five. How I cried and wept, Souvalya! But even little boys aren't allowed to stay in the royal women's quarters" (Devi 48-49).
>
> "That's when I asked Gandhari to release me from my dasi status. She didn't say anything. Then, in desperation I told the head dasi, Dhruva, I'm going to live on the outskirts of town" (Devi 49).

We see how the *rajvritta* customs tend to separate the sons from their mother at a very young age. Souvali experiences an alienation, of having her identity erased from that of her child's.

In line with typical roles of *sutas*, Souvalya's occupation is that of charioteer in the *Mahabharata*. While his occupation is providing his services to the *Kshatriyas*, it situates him in the *rajvritta*. The *Kauravas*, would taunt him for this, saying "Only dasiputras suffered such

unmanly needs, cried for their mothers" (Devi 52). His masculinity is ridiculed and subjected to questions because he visits his mother, whereas in the *lokvritta* such a stereotypical 'masculine' approach towards emotions is not necessarily the norm. As Souvali comments,

> "It's in the janavritta, amongst the common people, that we are in touch with our natural emotions. Tenderness, caring, compassion, romance, love, anger, jealousy, but in the rajavritta, you know how they keep such natural emotions in check" (Devi 52).

Yuyutsu - the Dasiputra

We observe in the story the injustice that Yuyutsu faces in the *rajvritta*. He recalls how as a *dasiputra*, he was sent to a separate *gurugriha*[24]. But he was soon transferred to the same one as the *Kauravas*. While one might observe that this meant Yuyutsu was treated like a *Kaurava*, this was not the case. He wasn't there to be trained or learn but to do menial tasks such as "retrieve the Kauravas' arrows" (Devi 49) or to "fetch the birds they shot down" (Devi 49).

Yuyutsu's sorrow indicates how he is robbed of his rights and status as a son because he was never given the same status as a *Kaurava*. It is suggested by Bhisma in the Mahabharata, that "a son of a Kshatriya by a Vaishya woman would be a Kshatriya" (Brodbeck), although this is challenged by Vaisampayana[25] who calls Yuyutsu *karana* which translates to half-breed (Simon). However, in Ganguli's translation of the Mahabharata, *karana* refers to a class which "has sprung from the intermixture of the four original classes[26]" (360). The implication of this

[24] The house of the Guru. Young boys were sent to their Guru's houses to master the art of weaponry.
[25] The one who narrates the Mahabharata
[26] The four original classes being : Brahmanas, Kshtriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras.

notion is evident in the name Karna, Kunti's first born that she abandons, as we observed in the first chapter. Yuyutsu fulfilled his duties by participating in the war as a brave warrior and charioteer, he fulfilled his duties as a son by serving Dhritarashtra and being by his side after the war had ended. He even insisted on accompanying Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti while they gave up their life in the *rajvritta* and wished to do penance by living in the forest. He adhered to *dharma* in the *rajvritta* and yet he was never treated as an equal and was deprived of the status of a *Kshatriya* and a *Kaurava*.

Devi's narration sees a shift in focalization as Yuyutsu becomes the focalizer. The narration then records Yuyutsu's bitterness at not being granted the benefits of being a son to Dhritarashtra, and not being acknowledged as an equal *Kshatriya* or *Kaurava*. Through the dialogue with his mother, Yuyutsu narrates, "Never went near him, never called him 'father', and today I did the tarpan[27] for him" (Devi 47). He claims how he has "never known a father's love" (Devi 49).

Souvali as the Gendered Subaltern

Souvali herself faces a lot of injustice and inequality due to her position in society. While she was often known as the *vaishya* woman or the *vaishya* wife, the story indicates how she occupies a subordinate position due to her caste. "Born into a vaishya family. They took us to serve as dasis from our very childhood" (Devi 48). Indian historian Uma Chakravarti, through her findings on the Vedic societies, elucidates how the first group to be enslaved, according to the Rig Veda, were women who were known as *dasis* (580). According to her findings, "the 'dasis'

[27] Final rites performed for the dead primarily by the son

or the enslaved women's labour and sexuality were to be used, this was under the overall control of the men of the conquering clan" (580). Souvali assuming the role of a *dasi*, offering her services to Dhritarashtra is seen as a part of the means of production in terms of labour.

Belonging to a lower caste, which dictated her occupation, Souvali is placed at lower rungs of the society. As a woman, her position in society is in jeopardy. This aligns with the notion of a gendered subaltern proposed by Spivak. Spivak shows how the consciousness of the natives or the peasants is not recorded in much of the archive that historians work with, and that hearing the voice of a gendered subaltern, that is the woman in a male-dominated society is a near-impossible task (285-287). Devi's "Souvali" is an approach to creating a space for this gendered subaltern. An interesting notion is that while Yuyutsu is never given the full position and advantages of being Dhritarashtra's son, in Souvali's experience, she faces alienation from her son as well. Souvali, fearing that she would once again lose her son to the *rajvritta* refuses to call him by his given name when he comes to visit her, and calls him by her namesake.

Spivak's understanding of a woman's position in society through a Marxist approach uses various Marxist concepts to theorize how women are exploited and placed at a disadvantaged position. She uses the concept of use, exchange and surplus values to suggest that women have been performing and producing more than required, creating a surplus for the man who owns her or by her employer. Spivak uses the notion of alienation of the labour process, where both the labourer and what they produce are seen as commodities, but the labourer is often alienated from their own product of labour. Spivak equates this notion with childbirth,

> I would argue that, in terms of the physical, emotional, legal, custodial, and sentimental situation of the woman's product, the child, this picture of the human relationship to

> production, labor, and property is incomplete. The possession of a tangible place of production, the womb, situates women as agents in any theory of production (56).

This leads Spivak to a conclusion that most societies hand over the legal possession of the child to the man as he 'produces' the child. In this manner, the man retains "legal property rights over the product of the woman's body" (57). This alienation is faced by Souvali in this story as well. Yuyutsu being Dhritarashtra's son is given a name and is expected to serve his father and brothers. The *rajvritta*'s norms of masculinity also actively work to separate the mother and the child. Souvali on the other hand, shuns every association with the *rajvritta* and its culture, seeking to connect with her son at any possible instance. Renaming her son, Souvalya is one way of reclaiming her 'product of labour' and what is truly hers. She also wishes for him to embrace her way of living, the culture of the *lokvritta*, which will provide him more acceptance and love than the *rajvritta* ever would (Devi 54).

In this manner, Devi transforms the injustice faced by Souvali as a gendered subaltern into a resistant voice. Souvali is seen as celebrating the death of Dhritarashtra by consuming sweets and looking forward to a good night of sleep. On a few occasions she is seen cursing Gandhari, accusing her of dismissing Souvalya as mere *dasiputra*. She refuses to observe life as a widow after the death of Dhritarashtra,

> "I'm just a dasi. Was I his wedded wife, that I should undergo death rites? In the royal household, so many of us dasis come and go, so many bear children… observe ashaucha, 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. It feels good to have defied the dead Dhritarashtra" (Devi 53).

Souvali's monologue reveals to the readers that Devi's construction of Souvali does not adhere to Spivak's notion of the gendered subaltern, as we see that the gendered subaltern not only speaks but remarks and retorts.

Souvali viewed in terms of Intersectionality

Devi's story can be analysed as revealing the complexities of Souvali as an intersectional identity. We see Souvali as a member of the *vaishya* caste who is attributed a lower class due to her occupation as a servant or *dasi*. Caste, class and gender determine her standing in the society. Unfortunately all three structures place her in a subordinate position. She is seen as a woman, often considered the weaker sex, is seen belonging to a lower caste which dictates a menial occupation, inevitably placing her at a lower class. Her construction as an intersectional identity through Devi's narration is complemented, by giving her voice to comment on oppressive behaviour and by showing her making life decisions for herself. Depicting a certain level of empowerment, Souvali leaves the *rajvritta* by her own will to lead a life free of rigid social order. Amongst the *janavritta* and in the town of the marginalized, she gains respect, authority and the liberty to lead life as a free woman.

Devi cleverly inserts the writing of the actual epic within her story, and reclaims Souvali's absence in it, giving it intention and agency. In the story, Souvali hears that Krishna Dwaipan Vyasa, author of the *Mahabharata* would be writing about the righteous war and the events

surrounding it and hopes that she is never mentioned in the same. “It is said that krishna dwaipan vyas is going to write about this righteous war… So let him! Souvali doesn’t want even a mention of her name anywhere” (Devi 53). Her absence is an act of protest, of not willing to be a part of the narrative that oppressed her and severing all ties with the royal sphere.

Devi's Works Contextualized in her Activism

A common strand in Mahasweta Devi's works is the exploration of the lives of the marginalized. Devi explores the female characters as gendered subalterns and captures the injustice and violence they face, simultaneously reconstructing them as figures of resistance. An operative element in Devi's oeuvre is that of sexual exploitation of female tribal identities. This chapter argues that Devi's construction of her characters imaginatively represents her real life experiences with the oppressed communities. We highlight a few of Devi's works where she infuses her writing with elements of her activism. It becomes worthwhile to explore Devi's activism, to understand how her works don't stand alone as literature but often act as a representation of these communities. While doing so we also situate her works in the publishing sphere. Devi incorporates the issue of sexual exploitation in her works as she believed "sexual exploitation always forms a part of a much larger pattern of exploitation" (M. Bhattacharya 1003). "Draupadi", one of her many works, depicted the plight of a tribal woman victimized by the state. Devi showcases the injustice and exploitation that tribal communities experience through her protagonist Dopdi. Dopdi is not shown as a shy or timid figure; she is a fierce woman who challenges the authority of the state. Devi imaginatively delineates a struggle between the state and the tribal communities, where Dopdi represents the tribals, and the male officers who sexually exploit and rape her represent the state and its authority.

Another such work by Devi is "Choli ke Peeche" (Behind the Bodice), the title borrowed from a famous Bollywood song which created much controversy. It is a story about a tribal woman named Ganghor. After being photographed by Upin, a freelance photographer, Ganghor's breasts become mere objects of desire, often fetishized by men around her. Ganghor's body and breasts serve as a site of injustice and sexual violence to which she responds by getting

her breasts removed. This served as a form of resistance towards her oppressors. A similar work which observes breasts as both objects of desire as well as a commodity is the story of Jashoda in "Stanadayini" (The Breast Giver). Jashoda serves as a wet nurse to a rich Bengali family, in order to perform her job of weaning children she keeps bearing children. Jashoda suffers from breast cancer and dies alone abandoned by her own children and the ones she has weaned, her adoptive children. These narratives not only question the exploitation of the working class by the upper classes but also question the notion of motherhood as valorized by patriarchy. These may be said to arise from Devi's close knowledge of such lives through her activism.

Devi engages with a politically inclined narrative in "Hajar Churashir Ma" (Mother of 1084) as it deals with the Naxalite movement against an urban setting. The Naxalite movement in India refers to a peasant rebellion, based on Maoist views, in the Naxalbari area in West Bengal. The movement turned into an insurgency between various Naxal or revolutionary Maoist groups and the government. Violence from these ongoing clashes have resulted in more than 12,000 deaths, as of 2019 (TNN). Involvement with the movement is not condoned by the government, and can even lead to imprisonment. The term Naxalite has interestingly extended to those who are critical of some actions of the state. In 2018, five leftist social activists were put under house arrest and termed as 'urban naxals' ("Define"). The story explores a mother's journey after the death of her son, as she discovers his involvement with the Naxalite movement and begins to understand oppressive state ideologies he was against. While investigating the tribal communities and their plight, Devi herself was branded as a Naxalite, as her works depict a sharp dissent towards the state authorities who exploit these communities mercilessly. Devi writes in an interview:

> The concern for the poor and tribals has led to my participation in the seasonal

> protests or people's protests and justice has been permitted to them on several occasions. I have been very active and have covered remote and inaccessible areas of tribal inhabitation or areas where people don't have the courage to venture. People have regard and belief in my writing; they are convinced that my writing will include their views and ideas and hence provide them with justice (Asokan 156).

Devi's activism and writing, as we have noticed, functioned in a codependent relationship. It is from her activism that her writing arises and research for her works drove her to engage and help communities who aren't equipped to help themselves. One such work would be "Doulati the Bountiful", based on her interaction with the tribal communities in Palamau. Doulati is sold in bondage to a brothel owner in order to repay a debt of Rs.300 that her family owes. In order to raise money for her employer, Doulati has to sell her body again and again. Although she manages to raise money, she dies at the young age of twenty seven, due to a venereal disease and tuberculosis. Devi represents and critiques the system of bonded labour in the story of Doulati and through her activist experience she provides us a glimpse into the reality of such a system in an interview:

> During the 1980s I came across illiterate debt and bonded labourers. They have a small patch of land to cultivate on and if they don't have money they approach the moneylender. The moneylender takes the labourers for granted and gives a loan by taking their thumb impression. The person who forfeits his signature becomes a bonded labourer for the incurred amount and is indebted since the debt mounts from year to year. If you borrow fifty rupees at the end of the year you have to pay five hundred rupees and then it exceeds

> a thousand rupees. In Palamau, I went walking from village to village especially those regions where it was prevalent and started fighting against it (Asokan 156).

We have illustrated some of Devi's works wherein she has combined activism with fictive elements to create narratives which appeal to her readers and yet address the harsh realities that exist in society. These realities are often demonstrated through the struggles that her protagonists face in her stories. From the point of view of colonialism and imperialism, it becomes hard to recognize the peasant's voice or to track peasant insurgency (Spivak). It is here that Butler raises a pertinent question, "feminists must ask whether the "representation" of the poor, the indigenous, and the radically disenfranchised within academia is a patronizing and colonizing effort, or whether it seeks to avow the conditions of translation that make representation possible: to avow the power and privilege of the intellectual along with the links in history and culture which make an encounter between poverty, for instance, and academic writing possible" (87). We will explore this in the next section.

An Advocate for the Marginalized

Devi played the role of an advocate when it concerned the tribal communities and the marginalized. She fought for their rights, conducted campaigns, documented their struggles and portrayed alternate realities through fiction. Devi constructs her characters as resisting subaltern figures, but a concern that is on the reader's mind is how 'true' are these narratives? Are they legitimate constructions? A more appropriate question would be if Devi's activism takes the form of appropriation of tribal culture and their struggles to create literature ? Devi's response taken from an interview addresses these concerns. She explains how her writings act as a form of

activism as they reflect and capture the struggles in a raw, unembellished manner. The purpose of her writing is to rectify the ignorance displayed by mainstream discourses and not to place attention on her own identity. This is evident in an interview where she states,

> I have been highly praised in West Bengal for the interest I take in the tribals. Tribals are not my personal property. No one has been prevented from going to the tribals and to see how they live. If one observes how tribals, the non-tribal poor and the middle class survive and live in the villages, their condition is noticeably terrible. There are some Achutha communities (or untouchables) such as the cobblers and doms, who cremate dead bodies and help in the cremation. There are many such deprived caste communities with whom no one is concerned, that's what surprises me. When I write about the tribals I am being acclaimed for being great owing to my devoted work among the tribals. Who asked you not to go to the tribals? There are many families where parents can't send their children to be educated and yet many rights have been given on paper by the government for the tribals and the non-tribals (Asokan 160).

Her work "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha", is metaphoric to her struggles as a writer/activist. The story explores the multiplicity of interpretation through the narratives of the characters. Set in a village, it draws contrast between how the illiterate and the literate interpret cultural histories. Puran who is a writer and a journalist documents the activities that the villagers engage in but he is never a part of the activities. The story draws a parallel between the position of Puran in the story, and Devi's own position as a writer, "Puran can be read as a metaphor for Devi herself. Through Puran, Devi explores the constant struggle of the writer/outsider to represent without doing harm, to speak, but not to speak for those suffering

from misreading and neglect" (Shelton). While I agree Devi has occupied the role of a writer as well as the outsider, yet she has also taken it upon herself to make the effort to interact and engage with the communities she works with. As Spivak recounts, in order to speak to the muted gendered subaltern figure instead of listening to or speaking for , the postcolonial representing subject must systematically unlearn female privilege (295). Devi made de-casted and de-classed choices as she refused to live according to class and caste codes set by the Indian society. Instead, she chose to participate and engage as an activist in movements and as an activist writer, both which fought for and aimed for the betterment of the lower caste, lower class and tribal communities. It is through this that we realize that Devi was not only committed to highlighting the struggles of the downtrodden but emphasized the experiential truth of her literary works as well.

We have established the gendered subaltern in Devi's works and have observed how Devi borrows these figures from mythologies. She then constructs a space for them outside the dominant narrative which excludes their voices. Spivak argues that there is no space from which the gendered subaltern can speak, or be heard or read, and believes that "within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced" (287). Spivak while addressing the issue of tracing the subaltern's consciousness, describes the act of documenting the peasant's utterance as a "social act" (287). She labels the peasant as the 'sender' and questions, "As for the receiver, we must ask who is 'the real receiver' of an insurgency? The historian, transforming insurgency into 'text for knowledge', is the only 'receiver' of any collectively intended social act" (287). She further adds how the historian must suspend their own consciousness in order to trace the subaltern's consciousness and their utterance, so that it doesn't function as a mere imitation or "object of investigation" (287). There

is no dearth of works by various privileged writers who claim to have fully captured the realities of oppressed people. In these instances, we would be obliged to agree with Spivak's notions of subalternity, that an attempt to trace the subaltern's history and consciousness serves as a mere appropriation or an imitation. Their lives are treated as an object, to be observed and commented upon. By no means are these pursuits purely superficial, they have provided gateways to deeper understandings.

I believe Devi's works, on the other hand, do not deserve to be cast into the former category. To begin with, she is under no delusions about her position, she does not equate herself to the oppressed, nor does she claim ownership of their experiences. Although she dedicated and contributed her entire life to these oppressed communities through her activism, she did not place herself in the position of a saviour. As indicated by her response in the interview above, she criticized and redirected attention from her identity and her work. She instead deflects the attention towards a larger social responsibility towards these communities and critiques our silent participation in a system which disprivileges them in every way. Aided by her own comradeship and fellowship with the lower castes and tribal communities, she is able to effectively use her upper-caste privilege as a catalyst for transformation. She attempts accomplishing the task of tracing a subaltern's consciousness without reducing it to a mere appropriation or imitation.

While I agree that tracing a subaltern's consciousness is an extremely difficult task for a privileged individual, it is not an impossible one when there are personal histories of working as a fellow activist in marginal people's struggles. Devi's works have successfully attempted and have come very close to reconstructing the gendered subaltern's voices. In addition, while working with Devi on translating her work, along with engaging in academic readings and

providing insights on the same, Spivak has paradoxically helped to show how Devi's writing can open out space for subaltern and gendered subaltern voices.

Situating Devi's works in the Publishing/Commercial sphere

While Devi is known for fictional literature, she is also known for her non-fiction activist writings. *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi* is one such work which has risen from her early days of activism. It is a compilation of all the reports based on interaction with various tribal communities she sent out to journals and newspapers. Devi worked for a Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* as a reporter and had also written for many Bengali dailies such as *Aajkal, Dainik Basumati* and *Bartaman* as well as investigative reports for English papers such as *Economic and Political Weekly, Business Standard* , and *Frontier*.
As she gained popularity as both an activist and a writer, situating her works in a commercial space proved to be a difficult task. Seagull Books, a well- known independent publishing house translated, compiled and initially began publishing her works in 1997. Until then, her works had appeared in journals and little Bengali magazines. Some of her works namely "The Five Women" was published in *Proma*, a little magazine run by a publishing house and some others were published as part of collections. A few of her stories had even found a place in an entertainment magazine, *Binodan Bichitra*. An interview with Surajeet Ghose, founder of *Proma* gives us a glimpse into what little Bengali magazines look like. Ghosh claims the goal for their magazine was to publish a bi-monthly journal which would carry articles on literature, linguistics, anthropology, sociology and economics, and sometimes even political philosophies, but not day to day politics (Fruzzetti 103). He reveals how the little magazine, an established

literary term and niche in Bengali publishing, works on limited resources and funds and is often unable to pay its authors (Fruzzetti 102). When questioned on what kind of content *Proma* focused on, Ghose revealed that any work that was not claimed by a commercial publisher would serve as a work they could publish. He recounts how *Proma* redirected its focus towards "a rich culture of Bengali short stories and poetry" (Fruzzetti 104) which no publisher wanted to take on. As we discover the working of little Bengali magazines, we situate Devi and her works in the publishing sphere. It becomes evident that Devi's writings weren't commercialized to begin with and were often set apart from mainstream discourses as well.

Ganesh Devy, close associate of Devi in the sphere of activism, reveals, in one of his pieces, how according to Devi the monetary value attached to a written piece of work was of value only when contributed to a social cause. He recounts,

> In the early 1980s, I had launched a journal of literary translations and was keen to have a Mahashweta Devi story for it. I wrote to her, and she sent her own translation of 'Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant' and 'Seeds'. The manuscripts looked uninviting: close type in the smallest possible font size on sheets smudged with blue carbon. The stories were great, for their authentic realism and sharpness of political analysis. I knew that she had written about the kind of India that is mine. After they were published, I sent her two money orders of Rs 50 each as honorarium. She promptly returned the money requesting that it be used as 'donation for whatever work you are doing' (Devy).

Devi was not keen on commercial benefits nor did she believe in commercialization of her works. Creating literature, according to her, came with a lot of responsibility as she recounts in one of her interviews, "It is necessary for a writer to have social responsibility.

Yes he has an obligation towards society. He must write from his sense of responsibility" (Devi). She herself took on such a responsibility when she occupied the role of the editor of a quarterly, *Bortika* in which tribals and marginalized people would themselves document issues and trends they faced at a grassroot level (Bhattacharjee). Activism existed in every sphere of Devi's life. Ganesh Devy reiterates this in his obituary for her, when she died on July 28, 2016. He writes, "The writer Mahasweta Devi breathed her last in Kolkata on July 28 but the activist in her wanted to live forever " (Devy).

Conclusion

This thesis has analysed three short stories and has situated the principal female characters represented in those stories as gendered subalterns and has analysed them as representations of intersectional identities. The thesis also analyses how Devi's works arise from her own activism and comradeship with the tribal communities while situating her works in both an academic and publishing sphere. Even her writing in fiction, appropriating elements such as mythology, pointedly reflect to a larger living reality of marginalized communities. It is through our analysis that we have also made distinctions between the two operative spheres, *rajvritta* and *lokvritta*, in Devi's world. Devi attributes different values, beliefs, cultures and practices to each of these spheres and explicates the *rajvritta* as the one that exercises dominant values and practices whereas the *lokvritta* is often the world of the oppressed and marginalized. The exploration of these distinctions helps situating these identities as gendered subalterns. Devi weaves in structures such as caste, class and gender in order to systematically explore oppression on multiple levels. This enables us to construct these identities as intersectional ones, showcasing the multiple levels and nuances of gender oppression that women have faced from times immemorial.

As we conclude this thesis, I would like to deliberate on my choice of *After Kurukshetra* as my primary source. During my undergraduate years, I came across "Kunti and Nishadin" as part of an elective on Subaltern Studies. Yet again I crossed paths with Devi when I did a presentation on "Draupadi" for an elective called Indian Literature in Translation. These electives have probed me to discover regional literature which was made available to us through translation into English. Regional literature incorporates folklore, songs, poems, Sanskrit verses and even retains regional phrases or words in its narration. My choice of *After Kurukshetra* owes much to the fact that the *Mahabharata* has been perceived and reinvented in numerous ways as it

has innumerable regional variations. Each variation observes different elements of progression, some introducing new details in the narration of certain episodes and some eliminating certain details or objects, even witnessing absence of characters. Devi made use of these diversities while constructing her retelling of the epic[28]. *After Kurukshetra* also happens to be a set of works neglected amongst Devi's vast oeuvre, with its significance to the cultural world of Hindu mythology, as well as in activist writing overlooked by many. In these stories, not only does Devi create a space and voice for those neglected by mainstream and dominant versions of the epic, she effectively critiques the hegemonic hierarchies presented in such versions of those narratives as well.

She aligns retellings such as her own with notions of marginalization and oppression, not only in the larger political sphere, but also in the personal. Her engagement with mythical, political and regional elements have given a unique literary quality to her works. Many of us in India have grown up listening to the stories of the *Mahabharata* and this kind of storytelling in our cultural memory is an intrinsic part of our childhood. In the previous chapters we analysed popular versions of the *Mahabharata*, such as the English translation by Ganguli. The values and notions derived from the *Mahabharata* have been passed on generation to generation and have been ingrained in us. Devi's creative retellings of these myths lay an emphasis on how we have been trained to look at these epics. Re-using and retooling these familiar, almost nostalgic narratives, she imbibes them with thought-provoking magic, attaching both a personal and political quality to her works. This allows the reader to gain insights in Devi's efforts to transform a political reading of a dominant discourse into an individualized and personal reading of such a text.

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[28] For example, Devi indicates in the beginning of *Souvali*, that a Bengali version of the epic, *Pournanik Abidhan* recognises Dhritarashtra's indiscretion with a handmaiden who goes by the name Souvali.

This unique quality contributes to what Judith Butler describes as "social trans-formation" (85). Butler comments on Devi's works, "If we read Devi closely, we see that she is making connections, living connections, between the tribal and the global, and that she is herself, as an author, a medium of transit between them" (Butler 87). While she wove her stories with utmost detail, vividly constructing these local and regional worlds, her works leave the reader wondering what exists beyond the literary. She sets up myths in a manner that invites the reader to question and evaluate larger structures that enable systematic oppression. Although the setting of the stories are regionally and culturally specific, they indicate a larger reality that all of us are a part of. These narratives stretch across time and space and lay focus on societal dynamics.

An interesting note on translation that also allows these characteristics of Devi's writing to carry through to their English versions. As Spivak reiterates, the role of a "third world" translator is to transform their texts into "metropolitan teaching texts" as "the implicit assumption is that all that "third world" texts need is a glossary" (95). Anjum Katyal, a translator of Bengali literature, herself an editor, publisher, and performer, too, engages in her own vivid translations, but without being inserted directly into the world of academia and pedagogy, as Spivak is. Devi's works are, it is important to remember, read by those who are not familiar with the language, Bengali in India, too, and are also read for entertainment by non-academic readers.

Edward Said comments on the existence of texts in society, how they are enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society. Their existence, both theoretical and practical, is therefore "worldly" (16). This 'worldliness' of Devi's writings, both fictional and non-fictional, is situated in how she addresses multifaceted issues within a political sphere. She remodels universally known mythologies into social texts while imbibing these narratives with strands of activist experiences. She draws in information from her own postcolonial activist experiences and her

engagement and interaction from having worked closely with the marginalized. These are factors which contribute in transforming her individual experiences as collective experiences of the marginalized. It is through her writing that Devi shifts the focus of narrative from the oppressor to the oppressed, in the manner that Said speaks of how writing systematically converts power from the controller to the controlled (16). This transition offers insights to the reader, enabling them to disengage from patterns of internalization of hegemony and privilege, which have been ingrained since birth. Her works extend across borders as they appeal against larger, rigid global structures in place.

Along with providing a deeper understanding of Devi's works, I hope that this thesis would be read with the intent of *unlearning* dominant ideas, values and practices. This process of *unlearning* would challenge our set notions, expand our perspectives to those we never considered, and would blur real experiences into fiction while reminding us that these ground realities still exist today. I believe and hope that contemporary readings of Devi's works should take place in a manner as to question and unlearn assumptions, beliefs and structures which have enabled oppression. The process of disabling dominant ideology and structures would help us acknowledge, tap into, and question the layers of identities we ourselves possess. Finally, I hope the thesis contributes to a larger investigation into Devi's writing, and the reflections and responses to her texts from the communities she writes about.

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