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From Epic Glory to Subaltern Ethics: Rewriting Myth, Memory, and Marginality in Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra*

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* critically revises the Mahabharata by foregrounding the lived experiences of women and marginalized communities, who are invisible in traditional epic narratives. This study applies postcolonial and subaltern theoretical frameworks, drawing insights from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of epistemic violence and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist universalism, to analyze how Devi's narratives disrupt dominant Hindu mythic history and reconfigure its authority. This paper demonstrates how subaltern voices articulate alternative ethical paradigms that contest patriarchal power, caste hierarchies, and necropolitical structures embedded in the epic tradition. The findings reveal that Devi's rearticulation of mythic memory functions as an act of narrative resistance that reframes the epic from aristocratic glory to marginal subjectivity and moral accountability, ultimately establishing the subaltern as a leading ethical actor rather than a peripheral figure in the epic's moral universe.

Keywords: Subalternity, Marginal Voices, Postcolonial Criticism, Epic Rewriting, Voiceless Women.

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Introduction

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) stands as one of India's most significant literary figures, renowned for her sustained engagement with marginalized communities, including women, Adivasis, and subaltern laboring classes. Her work consistently interrogates the structures of power embedded in history, literature, and social institutions. (Devi 1) *After Kurukshetra* exemplifies this commitment by revisiting the *Mahabharata*, not as a celebration of divine war but as an exploration of its human aftermath. This collection specifically amplifies the voices of those whom mainstream retellings often silence, especially female characters, thereby challenging the traditional epic's inherent biases towards elite, male perspectives (Sangharshee and Kohli).

The Mahabharata is traditionally recognized as a mythical dharmayuddha, a holy war fought to uphold dharma and sustain the cosmic order. Heroism, glory, divine intervention, and dynastic obligation have been staple elements of most epic interpretations at the expense of women, peasants, and tribal groups (Mathai and Das 9; Jena). In contrast, Devi's *After Kurukshetra,* a short story collection, deconstructs these presumptions by altering the historical narrative's perspective, focusing on those left behind by the course of history, and restoring voice to the voiceless women. Her writing prefigures the lokavritta, which denotes the ordinary habits of life, and stands against the Rajavritta, or the codes of conduct of the royals, reflecting the human and moral price of dynastic ambition. Devi's intervention challenges the hegemony of mainstream historical narratives by centering the voices and experiences of the marginalized, thereby functioning as subaltern historiography (Arockia). This approach correlates with postcolonial ecofeminist frameworks that aim to dismantle interconnected systems of oppression, linking the liberation of marginalized communities with ecological justice (Saha 26). Therefore, this study examines how Devi utilizes a revisionist narrative strategy to

deconstruct traditional epic interpretations, offering a critical lens through which to understand the often-overlooked implications of grand historical events on subaltern populations (Gopinath and Brueck 125).

Devi makes the Mahabharata a chronicle of subaltern suffering and resistance, with marginal voices taking center stage in the narrative. Her narratives explore grief, work, and the power of peasant widows, tribal groups, and women rendered invisible in the royal epic. The subaltern, as argued by critics such as Gayatri Spivak, cannot speak in dominant historical narratives. Her question is: can the marginalized truly have their voices heard, and who can give voice to the marginalized community? Their voices are often erased, manipulated, or misinterpreted by elites or the patriarchal community, and power shapes their experiences. However, Devi's work directly counters this epistemic violence by actively constructing narratives that allow these subaltern voices to articulate their own subjectivities and challenge established power structures, rather than having academics speak for them (Tiwari and Chaudhary 5). In the myth of the Kurukshetra War, the powerful voices were the rulers or the oppressors who dominated the whole kingdom, which is where Devi plays the role of providing these voices with literary and moral presence. In this paper, we look at three tales—The Five Women, Kunti and The Nishadin, and Souvali, among others—to illustrate how Devi reestablishes an ethical and emotional groundwork for the epic. While existing studies on Mahabharata retellings have largely focused on central female figures and narrative reinterpretations, limited attention has been paid to how subaltern perspectives reshape the ethical framework of the epic.

The critical inquiry of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* offers a useful theoretical framework for considering Devi's narrative strategy. Spivak asserts that the subaltern cannot truly speak within discursive systems of dominance because these systems mediate or appropriate their voices. Devi complicates this assertion by partially articulating it.

The widows and excluded women in After Kurukshetra do not speak autonomously; rather, their voices emerge through narrative forms that uncover the conditions leading to their silence. Therefore, Devi does not resolve the issue that Spivak identifies but rather dramatizes it.

This is in line with the project of Subaltern Studies by Ranajit Guha, which attempts to write history from an inverted perspective. Devi's text can be understood as an extension of this historical intervention in literature, where the subject matter shifts from elite and heroic accounts to the disjointed and frequently silenced lives of the oppressed. This reorientation aligns with Bakhtinian concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony, positing that a multiplicity of voices and perspectives is crucial for comprehensively understanding historical and social realities (Paul and Ganesan 2327). This literary endeavor not only democratizes the narrative space but also critiques the inherent limitations of hegemonic historical discourse, which often marginalizes or erases alternative accounts (Sam and Tewari 5). Furthermore, Devi's revisionist approach aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of recovering marginalized narratives, particularly those of women, to challenge androcentric historical and literary traditions (Amirthavarshini and Bhuvaneswari 582).

Feminist Interventions in the Third World.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminist paradigms for homogenizing Third World women. Devi's representation opposes such flattening because she places her characters in particular socio-historical situations defined by caste, war, and economic precarity. The women in After Kurukshetra are not impersonal victims; they are historically positioned figures who bargain for their lives. This nuanced portrayal aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques that advocate for understanding agency within specific cultural and material contexts rather than through universalizing Western frameworks. This approach also resonates with Spivak's call for discursive shifts away from master narratives that oversimplify the diverse struggles of

minority groups, advocating for a more inclusive representation that avoids strict categorizations (Kamlongera 56).

Moreover, Sen, in her writings about feminist retellings of epics, emphasizes that women's voices can be reclaimed in mythological narratives. This reclamation involves a critical re-examination of canonical texts, where authors such as Devi consciously amplify previously muted perspectives to create a more equitable historical and cultural record. This aligns with the broader academic effort to deconstruct grand narratives and question traditional elements that have historically impeded women's rights (Anjana and Savitha). However, Devi transcends the perspectives of elite women and focuses on lower-caste and marginalized women, further broadening feminist myth revision.

Reconstructing the Epic to the Margins.

Yuganta by Iravati Karve represents a significant change in the study of the Mahabharata by making the characters of the epic more human and by focusing on the ethical gray area. Devi takes this line of thought a step further by shifting the emphasis away from the central characters. In contrast to *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a retelling of the epic by Draupadi, Devi's story does not include canonical characters but instead foregrounds those who are not part of the epic. This approach fundamentally reconfigures the epic landscape, challenging the traditional hierarchy of narrative importance by centering on previously peripheral experiences.

Ania Loomba's analysis of the interplay between gender, class, and colonial power also highlights Devi's project. The text reveals the workings of structures of domination in colonial situations and patriarchal systems among Indigenous people. Partha Chatterjee's interpretation of the gendered nation is especially applicable in this case. Women tend to be materially

marginalized and merely embody cultural identity. In After Kurukshetra, this contradiction comes to the forefront, as women suffer the effects of war without featuring in romanticized accounts of war. The fragmentation and repetitive quality of suffering in Devi's stories can be explained by Cathy Caruth's theory (Pividori 15) of trauma as an unassimilated experience. The widows'sorrow is not linear and closed but permanent. Devi's text compels readers to look at the ethical issue of war by making them confront the issues of heroic abstraction versus the suffering body.

Theoretical Background

The analysis is based on postcolonial and subaltern theories to understand how Devi negotiates representation, voice, and power. The concept of the subaltern, developed by Antonio Gramsci, is an early approach to the structural study of groups excluded from hegemonic power relations. Nonetheless, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak significantly reinterprets this concept, explaining that the subaltern cannot simply speak within hegemonic discourses because of the widespread impact of epistemic violence.

This issue is not directly resolved in Devi's stories. Rather, they can be interpreted as literary efforts to challenge subaltern representation. Instead of transparently giving voice, her narratives create mediated spaces where marginalized figures engage in ethical critique that disrupts dominant historiography while simultaneously revealing the limits of narrative recovery.

Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist universalism is essential for understanding Devi's portrayal of women. Mohanty warns against the homogeneity of the so-called Third World women as victims. Devi cannot reduce her characters to widows, laborers, or servants. They are not idealized or victimized but appear as historically rooted

figures who strive to live, grieve, and act in certain socio-material situations. Therefore, Devi's work is not a mere statement of the subaltern voice but a highly negotiated element of representation, ethics, and narrative power.

Deconstructing Dharmayuddha

To the marginalized, the so-called holy war does not seem to have divine justification. The participants in the war after Kurukshetra are not so much the agents of dharma but rather of power, ambition, and cruelty. The women who are the subjects of the story, The Five Women, servants of the widowed Uttara, do not see the aftermath of war as a kind of rite but rather as an image of destruction.

> Disaster? What disaster? Huh, old woman? Was this
> some natural calamity? So many great kings join in a war
> between brothers. Some choose one side, some cross over
> to the other. It wasn't just brother slaughtering brother.
> We know of quarrels-jealousies-rivalries too. But such a
> war for just a throne? This, a holy war?! A righteous war?!
> Just call it a war of greed! (Devi 20)

The accounts of endless funeral pyres, burnt lands, and rotting bodies make the war a battle of greed and political expediency in which the moral dimension of dharma is removed. Devi emphasizes the human aspect of suffering to undercut the mythical heroism that has always surrounded the Pandavas and the Kauravas, making the war a tragedy and not a moral quest (Sreekala.B). By juxtaposing the grand narrative of the Mahabharata with the visceral experiences of its most vulnerable inhabitants, Devi meticulously dismantles idealized constructions of warfare and heroism.

In this case, the narratives bring out the invisibility of subalterns in terms of moral agency. While canonical accounts celebrate royal sacrifice, Devi highlights the sacrifice of people whose work, pain, and suffering canonical accounts often overlook (Sreekala B). The way women view war–pragmatically, grief-filled, and survivalist–challenges the ethics of the epic and criticizes both historical and literary traditions. This reframing aligns with scholarly efforts to reinterpret epic narratives, presenting marginalized female characters not as passive figures but as active participants whose struggles reveal the patriarchal structures embedded within these foundational texts (Priyadarshini et al.; Tyagi and Anand).

The narrative then shifts to the portrayal of subaltern labor and the everyday resilience of marginalized women. Devi contrasts royal rituals with subaltern pragmatism, emphasizing labor as a means of survival and a counterpoint to royalty (Sreekala B). While queens are depicted as white-clad figures existing on the fringes of endless rites, fasts, and symbolic acts, peasant women are shown as active contributors to sustaining life (Sreekala B). This distinction underscores how epics often marginalize the pragmatic realities of survival and labor in favor of idealized representations of aristocratic life and spiritual devotion.

The difference between royal lamentation and peasant work is evident. Unlike royal women, who are frozen, silent, and motionless, the five peasant widows are asserting their independence by going back to their villages to procreate and carry on with their farming activities. The fact that they disavowed the practice of royal mourning, that is, through the denial of excessive fasting or other symbolic practices, is a radical affirmation of agency. This defiance critiques the performative aspects of royal grief, foregrounding a more grounded and material engagement with post-conflict existence, which aligns with perspectives that challenge the idealization of women's roles in classical narratives (Praveena and Raju 331; Nisha 8).

They work alongside their husbands cultivating the

> land, harvesting and storing the crop. They never deny
> the demands of life in order to exist as mere shadowy
> ghosts, shrouded in silence. Once we had husbands, now
> we do not. Crying won't bring them back to life. Also, our
> husbands fought and died in the king's war. No Divyalok.
> for them. That's only for the Rajavritta (Devi 9)

This insistence on pragmatic and collective living situates the subaltern as a moral and ethical counterpoint to the aristocratic valorization of death and ritual. Devi presents labor not only as a means of survival but also as a form of moral engagement with the consequences of war. This perspective resonates with other scholarly works that highlight how marginalized women, particularly those from lower castes, utilize their labor and resilience as forms of resistance against oppressive societal structures and as a means of asserting agency in contexts of extreme vulnerability (Thenmozhi 1801; Kanno 1). Such narratives often serve as political interventions, channeling grief and anger into a broader critique of established power dynamics and societal norms (Ann et al. 48).

Kunti and the Voice of the Subaltern

The story “Kunti and the Nishadin” critically challenges the sanctity and unquestioned reverence traditionally afforded to mythic and royal figures by foregrounding the subaltern perspective and raising a voice for those historically marginalized and silenced. Through Nishadin’s confrontation, the narrative exposes how epic authority often obscures the lived realities of oppression and violence endured by the dispossessed. Kunti’s role is thus problematized not merely as an individual moral failing but as emblematic of the systemic injustices perpetuated by caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures. This interrogation reveals the ethical limitations of dharma as portrayed in dominant narratives, suggesting that the moral

frameworks upheld by the ruling classes frequently fail to account for the suffering they inflict on subaltern groups.

> An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, that's the
> way of the rajavritta. That's what Kurukshetra was all
> about. The lokavritta's ways are different…
> You couldn't even remember this sin. Causing six
> innocent forest tribals to be burnt to death to serve your
> own interests. That was not even a crime in your book. In
> our eyes, by the laws of Mother Nature, you, your sons (Devi 24)

Through this confrontation, Devi interrogates the moral authority of mythic figures, revealing the ethical blind spots inherent in royal and epic traditions in the process. Kunti's guilt is not simply personal but structural, reflecting the wider subaltern experiences of historical violence, caste oppression, and gendered subordination. By centering the Nishadin's voice, Devi enacts a powerful reversal of narrative power dynamics, aligning with Gayatri Spivak's concept that the subaltern must be represented authentically without being subsumed into dominant discourses. The story grants the marginalized a space to articulate historical grievances and ethical judgments, thereby destabilizing the traditional epic's monopoly on moral authority. This shift not only democratizes the narrative but also insists on a more inclusive ethical reckoning that acknowledges the complicity of revered figures such as Kunti in systemic violence. In doing so, Devi's work contributes to a broader postcolonial critique that seeks to recover subaltern subjectivities and challenge hegemonic historical accounts. This approach reconfigures the interpretative lens through which classical texts are viewed, emphasizing the importance of examining foundational narratives for their implicit biases and the deliberate omission of subaltern perspectives (Mathai and Das 9). Such re-readings of epic narratives

provide crucial insights into how marginalized voices, often silenced through "epistemic violence," can deconstruct dominant knowledge systems and foster a more pluralistic understanding of history and morality (Sinha et al. 2; Ghosal and Modak 187).

Souvali and the Rejection of Legitimacy

The narrative of Souvali, a serving woman who bore Dhritarashtra a son, profoundly critiques royal authority and its exclusionary practices. Despite her intimate connection to power through childbirth, Souvali remains marginalized and excluded from the rajavritta, the court's prescriptive normative code that governs legitimacy and social standing. Her explicit refusal to partake in the Pandavas' post-war rituals underscores a deliberate repudiation of what she perceives as hollow and performative royal legitimacy. Her pointed declaration, "It was power, greed, arrogance, and enmity that caused the ruin of the rajavritta," (Devi 8) serves as a powerful indictment of the corrupt and destructive forces underpinning the ruling order. By consciously returning to the domain of everyday life, or janavrita, Souvali emphasizes the enduring significance of human emotions, sustenance and individual autonomy. Her insistence on receiving kheer laddoos and caring for her child without the sanction of aristocratic authority affirms the inherent humanity and moral agency of the subaltern, challenging the hierarchies of power. This deliberate withdrawal by Souvali from the dominant discourse of power reflects a critical rejection of its underlying ethics, highlighting an alternative, more grounded moral framework centered on human relationality and self-determination, rather than inherited status or ritualistic adherence. This narrative choice mirrors themes present in other Mahābhārata subversions, where characters like Draupadi, Kunti, and Satyavati navigate and subtly challenge patriarchal structures and rigid dharmic norms through their actions and choices, even while operating within their constraints (Regmi).

Souvali embodies a radical ethical stance that valorizes survival, communal solidarity, and bodily autonomy, positioning her narrative as a postcolonial critique of the supersession and deification of mythic and royal figures. This perspective disrupts the traditional valorization of dynastic power by centering the lived experiences and moral claims of the historically marginalized. A significant contribution of Devi's collection lies in its nuanced interrogation of gendered suffering in the war's aftermath. Women, particularly widows and lower-caste laborers, inhabit a complex intersection of vulnerability and resilience (Shiny and Radah). The convergence of gender, caste, and social marginality, as articulated in stories such as "The Five Women" and "Souvali," reveals the multifaceted nature of oppression and agency, challenging monolithic representations of subaltern womanhood.

Moreover, Devi's women are not relegated to the passive role of private mourning but are portrayed as active participants in public and political spheres. Devi anticipates the concept of intersectional agency by depicting women who grieve, labor, and negotiate survival strategies that transcend the conventional portrayals of royal families and elite women. This portrayal aligns with feminist theoretical insights, particularly those of Chandra Mohanty, who cautions against the idealization of subaltern women and calls for grounded attention to their specific historical and material realities. Devi achieves this balance by rendering her female characters morally complex and conscious agents capable of ethical critique, resistance, and deliberation. Through this representation, the narratives challenge reductive victimization and instead emphasize the active and thoughtful engagement of subaltern women with their socio-political contexts.

By foregrounding Souvali's rejection of royal legitimacy and her embrace of alternative moral values rooted in everyday life and autonomy, Devi's work advances critical postcolonial feminist discourse. It exposes the limitations and exclusions perpetuated by hegemonic power

structures while simultaneously affirming the dignity and ethical authority of marginalized subjects. This expanded focus enriches our understanding of how subaltern women navigate and contest intersecting systems of oppression, contributing to a broader reimagining of historical and mythic narratives from the perspective of those traditionally silenced.

Conclusion

After Kurukshetra is a key work in the new interpretation of the Mahabharata, marked by its long-term interest in the ethics of the subaltern and postwar trauma. Devi reshapes the epic by placing marginalized figures at its center–peasant women, Nishadans, and servants–transforming the epic from a site of divine righteousness to a place of moral questioning. Her work does not merely reverse the hierarchical order; it contradicts the epistemological foundations of the canonical narrative by questioning who is entitled to tell the history. By doing so, Devi contributes a unique perspective to the literature on mythopoeic criticism, highlighting the moral dimension of non-representation in narrative. Finally, Devi's narratives indicate that the history or fiction of a heroic conquest is not the primary measure but the lives of others whom it subjugates. Anticipating these views, the three stories collected in Devi's work *i*ncrease the ethical and critical relevance of myth and make it a place of responsibility, opposition, and reconsidered human worth.

Her exploration of subaltern narratives also aligns with critical approaches that view traditional folktales as expressions of human-centered narratives, challenging hegemonic ideologies, and affirming marginalized voices. This recontextualization extends to epic narratives, where authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagine figures such as Sita and Draupadi, imbuing them with agency and challenging traditional interpretations of their roles. Similarly, Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" subverts the mythological figure to critique contemporary socio-political injustices and state violence, transforming her into a symbol of radical agency and

empowerment. These reinterpretations exemplify a broader trend in postcolonial literature of critically engaging with foundational myths, revealing their inherent biases, and offering alternative perspectives that center the experiences of historically marginalized communities. This re-evaluation not only deconstructs dominant narratives but also provides a platform for understanding the complexities of gender, power, and identity, particularly through queer theoretical lenses that reveal obscured selves and challenge marginalization within the reinterpreted works of the Mahabharata. Such revisionist mythmaking, particularly through feminist and postcolonial lenses, demonstrates how epic traditions continue to serve as fertile ground for deconstructing patriarchal norms and highlighting the resilience of female characters navigating oppressive systems.

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