

CHAPTER II

WOMEN AS DOUBLY SUBALTERN

Introduction

To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater power of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?
(Mahatma Gandhi)

Despite such powerful advocacy by the father of our nation and despite our Vedic tradition that claims that even deities reside where women are worshipped, Gayatri C. Spivak has to claim in her work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', "There is no scope from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak." (Spivak 307)

Although there is a long list of empowered Indian women who had guts to prove themselves from politics to business, from space to medicine, from high-profile jobs to N.G.O.s and many other women who represent the changing scenario, reality of 120 billion people cannot be judged on the basis of these few educated, well supported women. We cannot turn our faces away from those billions living

under or slightly above poverty lines who are the real face of India. For centuries, women have been the victims of injustice, suppression and exploitation. The scenario is almost the same all over the world. The centuries of suffering culminated in the movement called ‘feminism’.

Feminism

The term ‘feminism’ was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas in 1872 in his pamphlet ‘L’ Hommefemme’. But even before this, writers like Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and J.S.Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869) talked about the social oppression of women. In the early twentieth century Virginia Woolf and later Simone de Beauvoir raised many gender questions. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* in 1969, Juliet Mitchell’s *Woman Estate* in 1971 and Elaine Showalter’s pioneer works *The New Feminist Criticism* in 1985 and *Speaking of Gender* in 1989 advocated for the correct judgement of women’s literature.

K.K. Sharma in the article “Feminism: Some Observation” remarks:

The ultimate goal of feminism should be to enable woman to achieve self-realization, self-definition, self-actualization, self-emancipation, self-fulfillment etc. by having freedom of choice—i.e. freedom to live a life of her own. The feminist protest and militancy, taking the shape of warfare is undesirable and unhelpful for the cause of woman’s self-fulfillment and full development of her varied faculties—physical, emotional, moral, intellectual etc. In fact, feminism should mean the march towards ‘wholeness’ through

resistance, resilience, and determination, and not simply a war against patriarchy etc. it should aim at seeking authentic selfhood or personhood, and not simple, traditional womanhood. (Sharma 201)

Literary theory: An Introductory Reader in its introduction to Feminist Literary Theory defines it as,

Just as Marxism is believed to deal with hierarchies in the domain of material possessions, feminism is commonsensically believed to deal with the sufferings of women because of their physical differences with man. This is far from the truth. As has been discussed in the 'Preface', 'theory' moves from the immediate point of departure for a problematic into its ideological, cultural implications. Furthermore, as has also been stated in our discussion of Marxism, 'theory' is not interested in the simplifying and reductionist rhetoric of binary opposites but attempts rather to probe the complex nature of power. Accordingly feminism, as a theoretical form, deals with 'gender' or the cultural baggage that accompanies the sexes, rather than the physical sexual dichotomy and it is more bothered about the complex machination of gender power, rather than the simple polemic of man-woman dichotomy. (Malhotra and Bhaduri 111)

Feminist critics believe that for long the 'text' has been the property of the male which works only as a tool to reinforce the patterns of patriarchal society. Even if some women writers emerged, they had to follow the norms of the perfect text created by the male. These literary texts present the woman as the 'other' of the male.

Her subordinate position is justified by presenting her as a weak object. By symbolizing her as 'Mother Nature' and 'Mother Earth', she is only expected of giving. The feminists suggest that inequality of sexes is not based on biological reasons rather it is socially and culturally constructed.

Feminists demand different canons for women's writings because till now literature, criticism, syllabi and even disciplines as Psychoanalysis and Philosophy are built upon male ideology which deliberately presents the male as superior. They also hope for a gender-neutral language, which can present woman condition in a better way.

Virginia Woolf comes under the category of early feminists who in her books *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* talks about the oppressive structures in pedagogic practice. She says that the language itself is gendered and a woman writer is forced to use the masculine tongue. The language set by male authors is not suitable for women authors. She advocates the establishment of an 'Outsiders' Society' which will advocate anti-war, anti-fascist and life-affirming ethics.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, talks about the deterioration of the woman into 'the second sex'. The book has been considered a pioneer work analyzing women's oppression. *The Second Sex* published in French sets the foundation for contemporary feminism. The famous statement of the book that 'one is not born a woman, but becomes one' breaks the traditional beliefs attached to woman.

Beauvoir believes that women have always been considered the 'other'. Woman themselves considered them to be subordinate to men. Not even this, they were even considered deviated from normalcy. Beauvoir urges women to elevate themselves and break the shackles of such non-sense beliefs.

Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) was originally published in June 1949. It was translated by Howard Parshley who had a little command over French language. It was only in 2009 that a second translation came out to mark the 60th anniversary of the original publication.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) raises her voice against prominent male authors like D. H. Lawrence, Norman Miller and Henry Miller. She blames these writers for creating hyper masculine images of the male characters so that male's control over sexuality is sustained. She also criticizes Freud for considering only male sexuality as 'the sexuality'.

'Gynocriticism' is propounded by Elaine Showalter, which looks at the history, styles, themes, genre, and structures of writing by women. With her works *The New Feminist Criticism* and *Speaking of Gender*, she has argued for a separate female framework for the analysis of women's literature. In her important book *A Literature of Their Own*, she talks about the neglecting of women's literature in 19th century. Critics of that time rejected women's literature for being trivial. She talks about three major phases in the development of women's writing. The first phase is called the Feminine Phase (1840-1880). In this phase women writers accepted the patriarchal norms in their works. They even adopted masculine names. The second phase is called the Feminist phase (1880-1920). In this phase women writers started

protesting against patriarchal values. Here began the war between the sexes and women started exploring their own position in every field of life. The third phase is called the Female Phase in which women started a search for their own identity.

Eli Zaretsky's work *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* is considered a pioneer work. Socialist feminism talks about the economic dependency of the female because of their deprivation of any political control. Women perform double duty i.e. wage earners in society and unpaid labourers in their homes.

In relation to these issues, Zaretsky held the capitalism responsible for dividing public and private spheres. Workers were considered as commodities. Family became the solace away from the industrial set up. Housewives performed the double task of household chores and the preservation of human values.

Along with these writers many other female writers with their seminal books on important issues contributed for women's causes. Juliet Mitchell's *Women's Estate* (1971), Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), *No Man's land* (1987-89), Michele Le Doeuff's *The Philosophical Imaginary* (1989), Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) and *This sex which is Not One* (1987), Helene Cixous' essays like "The Laugh of the Medusa", "Sorties" "Coming to Writing", *Other Essays* (1991) etc. and Michele Barrett's *Women Oppression Today* (1988) are some of the seminal works which helped in changing the position of a woman from the 'voiceless' to the 'voiced'.

To conclude we can say that feminism advocates the opinion that men and women should have the same rights. Feminist literary criticism focuses on the way woman is portrayed in literature, in the works of male and female authors.

Mahasweta Devi as a Feminist

Mahasweta Devi's feminism is based on the opposition of denial of woman as an equal human being by the male-dominated society. Among the subalterns a woman is doubly suppressed. She is seen as a commodity not as an individual. The elites as well as the members of her own society cause this suppression and exploitation. Even in the middle class society a woman does not get equal opportunities. All these voiceless women of almost all sections find voices in Mahasweta Devi's works. Nandini Sen remarks in the "Introduction" to her book:

Several women characters portrayed by Mahasweta Devi belong to these oppressed sections of the society who are forced to fight for their basic sustenance. Caught in the grim battle of class, caste and poverty, her women protagonists chart out their own paths of self-realization. More often than not it is not limited to debunking patriarchy, but attempts a redefinition of the woman's role in the severest of adverse situations. Mahasweta's canvas is vast – from the palaces of the Queen depicted in the *Mahabharata* to domination of class, caste and patriarchy. She also looks at her own social surroundings closely exposing the hypocrisies of the middle class and the utter insensitivity of the state funded attack on the Naxals where a

human being is reduced to bring a corpse which merely bears a number to facilitate identification. (Sen 15)

Despite of presenting a powerful picture of all kinds of oppression, women undergo, Devi strongly denies of being a feminist. In an interview given to Gabrielle Collu she passionately remarks,

Why! Why! Why! Because I am a woman? I never consider myself as a woman writer, as a feminist nothing. I am a writer. I am a writer and when I write, I write of such people who live much below the poverty line. They are men, women, and children. I don't isolate the woman. Women have to pay a lot. They also have their special problems. They come to my stories naturally, not just to uphold the woman. (Collu 224)

In fact, Devi's feminism is so mingled with other sorts of oppression that she does not see it apart but in the memory of a reader, her female characters stick more deeply to the memory than her male characters. A reader can't forget the valour of Dopadi in front of Senanayak towards the end of the novel. One cannot stop shedding tears over the terrible death of Doulati, Jashoda and the suicide committed by Josmina in "The Fairytale of Rajbhasha." Anjum Katyal rightly says in her introduction to her translation of *Rudali*. She says,

There is no doubt that the text does privilege class and community over women's issues in isolation. And yet it has a special significance when read as a feminist text. The common accusation of those who privilege a cross class gender perspective to those who position

gender issues within those of class is that the woman's position tends to get marginalized or elided over in the 'general' interest of the class. Perhaps because Mahasweta Devi writes from a 'class point of view' but is herself a woman, there is no sign of this in her text, not even through slippages. In fact, her text shows us that gender and class need not be viewed as polarities, this one's discourse can be informed by class and simultaneously be gendered. One political stance need not rule out the other. (Katyay 17)

Breast Stories: Female Body Symbolized

Breast Stories by Devi is a collection of three stories, the first one among which is "Draupadi." It is one of the most famous stories by Mahasweta which has often been translated and anthologized. Gayatri Spivak has translated Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and it is a part of the third section of Spivak's "In Other Worlds." Spivak tells about the origin of the name of Draupadi who is the central figure of the story:

Dopadi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name (Draupadi), or the tribalized form Dopadi, is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi. She is on the list of the wanted persons, yet her name is not on the list of appropriate names for the tribal women. The ancient Draupadi is perhaps the most celebrated heroine of the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the cultural credentials of the so-called Aryan civilization of India. The tribes predate the Aryan

invasion. They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names. Neither the interdiction nor the significance of the name, however, must be taken too seriously. For this pious, domesticated Hindu name was given Dopadi at birth by her mistress, in the usual mood of benevolence left by the oppressor's wife toward the tribal bond servant. (Translator's Foreword 10)

The story is, set against the background of Naxalites' revolt in 1970s which was against the long established oppression of the landless peasantry. Dopadi Mejhen, a tribal woman, wife of late Dulna Mejhen is on the list of the wanted. She and her husband used to work at harvests in Birbhumi, Burdwan and Bankura districts of West Bengal. At the time of drought, they became revolutionaries and felt proud on it. In the process of the search operation by the real army, her husband Dulna is killed by the police. The story also throws light on the problem of increasing rape cases against the dalit and tribal women. William Dalrymple in his book *The Age of Kali* remarks:

Rape is actually very common in Indian villages particularly the rape of lower – caste women. But because of the shame and stigma it goes largely unreported: in all of India, astonishingly, only four or five cases are reported each year. The victim knows she will be labeled for life, moreover, everyone around will encourage her to hush it up, as the stigma will be attached not only to her, but also to her family and to her village. (Dalrymple 106)

The story 'Draupadi' first appeared in *Agnigarabha (Womb of Fire)*, a collection of political narratives. The reinvented character of Draupadi reminds us that a subaltern woman's body is only for exploitation. Devi makes Dopadi a medium through which she can raise her voice against the patriarchal norms. Rape is the worst abuse which can happen to any woman from any part of the world. The history of the world tells that whenever there is war, women become the victims of rapists. These men are mainly the soldiers of the winning side. There are numerous movies which show that the women become the prey for the vultures in the form of men and ironically these men have the greater responsibility of protecting human beings. But when they cross the boundaries of their side, they consider the other side's women only as objects. The same irony happens with Dopadi Mejhana.

The story can also be read as the psychological study of men's minds. When they are not able to control Dopadi for quite a long time, the first thing, they do on catching Dopadi is to rape her.

When we meet Draupadi in the story for the first time, she is thinking of washing her hair with kerosene. Suddenly she hears her name but does not respond to it since she knows that a reward has been declared in her name. She does not even look back at her name but finally the police officer Senanayak traps her. She gives expression to her anger by ululating:

Now Dopadi spreads her arms raised her face to the sky, turns towards the forest and ululates with the force of her entire being once, twice, three times. (34)

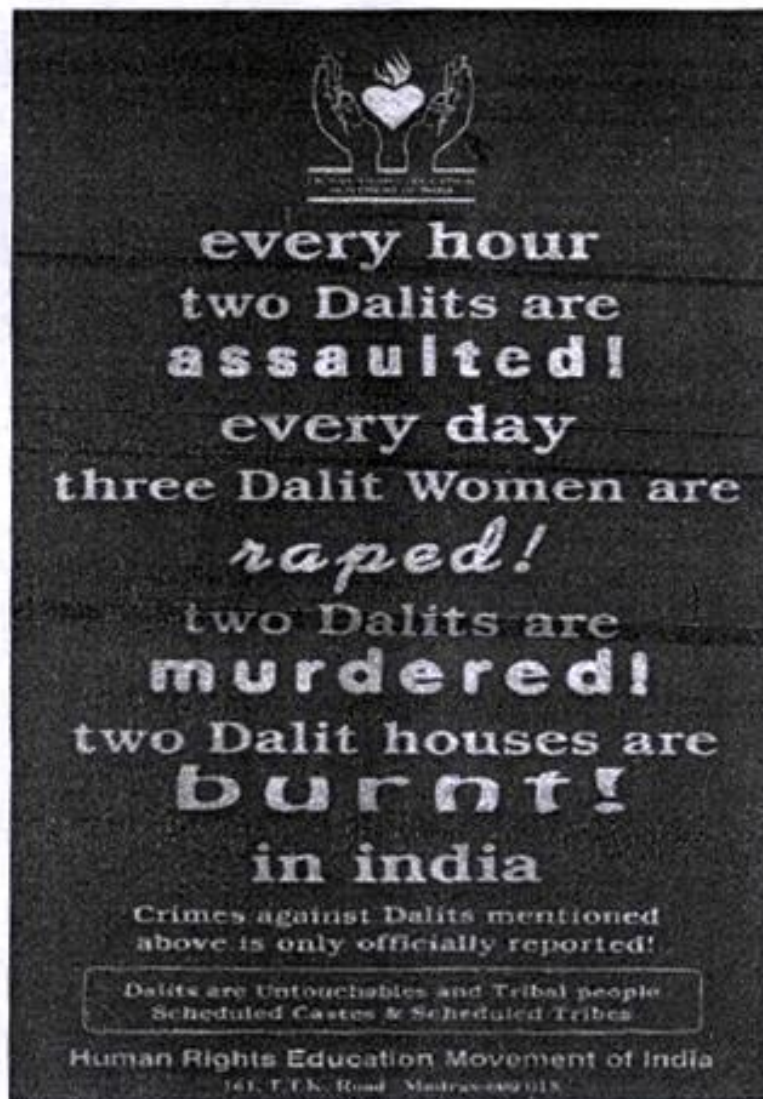
She is brought to the camp and when Senanayak, whom Gayatri Spivak finds more interesting than the protagonist disappears saying ‘make her, Do the needful’, the harsh reality of this male-dominant society becomes evident. Rape of Draupadi should not be considered only as sexual violence but that is a result of deep-rooted belief that a male is superior to a female in all ways. If a woman tries to cross her boundaries, she can be assaulted sexually. Her female body makes her weak in front of her male counterpart because her ‘honour’ can be snatched away. It is she who loses her chastity in the forced sex not the male. It is she who is supposed to commit suicide after this heinous crime although it was a male who attacked her. She becomes the Centre of sympathy. She feels guilty of being a woman. Her parents curse themselves for begetting a daughter. The female body becomes an easy prey for vultures in the form of men. The dignity of the women of low caste is considered to be very cheap. Phoolan Devi who killed twenty-two upper caste men, avenged the torment of being gang raped and paraded naked in her village. She tells in an interview to the Atlantic Monthly;

What you call rape, that kind of thing happens to poor women in the villages everyday. It is assumed that the daughters of the poor are for the use of the rich. They assume that we are their property. In the villages the poor have no toilets, so we must go to the fields, and the moment we arrive, the rich lay us there, we can’t cut the grass or tend to our crops without being accosted by them. We are the property of the rich.... They would not let us live in piece; you will never understand what kind of humiliation that if they want to rape us, to

molest us, and our families object then they would rape us in front of our families. (qtd in Sen,14-15)

Annexures

Annexure - I



This land mark Poster designed by Dr. Henry Thiagaraj in June 1963 for United Conference in Human Rights held in Vienna, Austria sensitised the UN Community and NGO's in Europe the struggle of Dalits. The text of the poster is widely used by NGO's.

(Thiagraj 311)

The above mentioned poster shows the brutality done to the poor and low caste subaltern women in the different parts of our country. The situation has not changed till now. We keep on listening in news about the heinous crimes committed against the marginalized. The next poster shows the never ending tortures done to these people.

Annexure - II

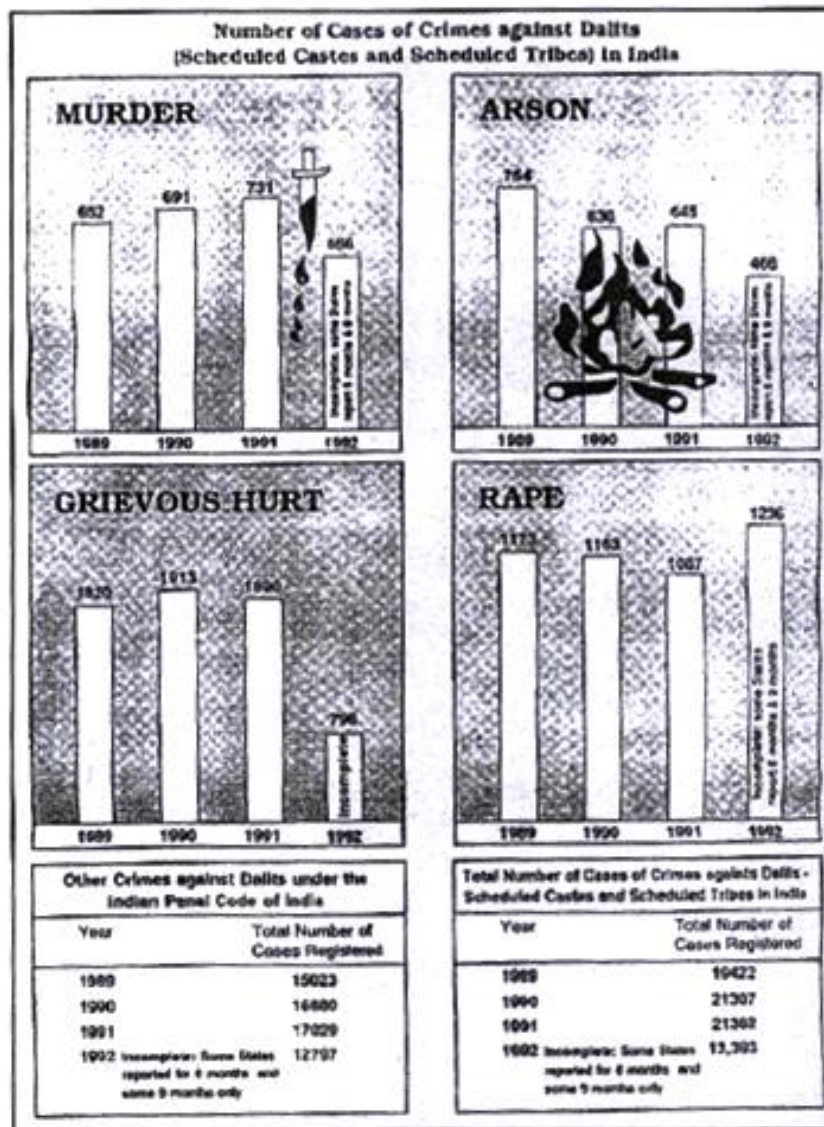


Chart first published in the booklet Dalits of India—The wounded society published by Mr. HENRY THIAGRAJ for distribution at World Conference on Human Rights in 1993.

(Thiagraj 312)

In the background of such grim and shocking reality, Mahasweta Devi has woven the story of “Draupadi” who breaks the myth that if a woman is raped, nothing is left in her life. ‘Drapadi’ of Devi’s story gives the proof of unusual courage and even makes her attackers feel fear of their unarmed target. She is not like mythical ‘Draupadi’ of the epic *Mahabharata* who prays to Lord Krishna for saving her honour. Mahasweta, in an interview with Gayatri Spivak published in the book *Imaginary Maps*, says,

Remember, Draupadi in the Mahabharata is a black woman. She must have been a tribal. In the state of Himachal Pradesh we still find the sort of fraternal polyandry that Draupadi was supposed to have practiced in the Mahabharata. The polyandrous tribal women of Himachal Pradesh are said to belong to the Draupadi Gotra or clan.
(Imaginary Maps i)

In the epic the *Mahabharata* Draupadi is the wife of the five pandavs. Although in the ‘swayaimvara’ she is won by Arjuna, she is ‘distributed’ equally by the five pandavas as per the order of their mother. In this way, the mythical Draupadi also raises the question of patriarchal norms in which she is considered as a mere object. Moreover, she is shown to be the main reason of the war between the pandavas and the kauravas. And above all, to her humiliation, her husband and the eldest of the pandavas, Yudhishtira stake her in the game of dice as if she were the mere property held by him. He loses her and as a result, she is brought to the court and the winning side tries to humiliate her by undressing her in front of all. She prays to Lord Krishna who helps her and the length of her saree becomes endlessly long and she cannot be stripped off.

But no miracle happens in the life of our human Dopadi who is caught and raped by the men in charge. Whereas mythical Draupadi's cloth becomes infinitely long, Dopadi rejects the only cloth she has been given by the police after her rape. The miracle which the reader watches is the transformation of Dopadi into a lioness. With an indomitable spirit, she challenges the manhood of her rapists and remarks that there is no one she should be afraid of. She makes her vulnerable womanhood her weapon and with this weapon, she goes to Senanyak stark naked. She ever pushes Senanyak with her two mangled breasts and he is for the first time afraid to stand in front of an unarmed target. The climax of the story 'Draupadi' makes it unforgettable in the memories of the reader.

When Senanyak orders his juniors to make Draupadi:

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her? (Draupadi 35)

A tear comes out of her eyes. She is not even able to count her rapists. One after another comes and tries to taint her body as well as her soul, but instead of being cowed and defeated, she emerges as an indefatigable soul. It is true that her body has been raped and as a woman she is doubly victimized but she gives the

proof of unmatched valour, refuses to put any clothes on and goes stark naked in front of Senanayak. She behaves like a wounded lioness who becomes more dangerous although she is unarmed. Senanayak does not have enough 'manhood' to face this indomitable woman,

Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says. The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?

Where are her clothes?

Won't put them on, Sir, Tearing them.

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says. There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me?

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terrible afraid. (37)

And this is her challenge to male society which makes Draupadi memorable character in the subaltern literature. The end of the story compels the reader to question the norms of male-dominated society. Although Devi denies being a feminist, the story strongly advocates her to be the fighter for subaltern women.

Another story “Breast-giver” by Mahasweta Devi presents various dimensions of the concept of motherhood and the insights on the use of a woman as a mere object in Indian society. The protagonist of the story is Jashoda, wife of Brahman Kangali Charan and the mother of two children. They are leading a happy life until the Halder’s son ran over his feet and make him crippled. The Halders are an influential family of that area and they consider Kangalicharan ‘Brahman Devta.’ Since the elder Halder’s son has committed the sin of making Kangali lame, he promises to help him and open a shop for him but unfortunately dies very soon. Helpless Jashoda goes to the Halder’s house in search for any odd job suitable for her. Knowing about the plentiful supply of milk in her breasts, the mistress of the house gives her the job of suckling her grandsons & granddaughters. Jashoda as a loving wife and caring mother accepts the job happily since in this way she will be able to feed her family. Mahasweta Devi remarks very wittingly on this role of a woman in Indian society, Jashoda is fully an Indian woman whose unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness, have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani.² The creeps of the world understand by seeing such women that the old Indian tradition is still flowing free. They understand that it was with such women in mind that the following aphorisms have been composed – ‘A female’s life

hangs on like a turtle's' – her heart 'breaks but no word is uttered' – 'the woman will burn, her ashes will fly/only then will we sing her/praise on high.' Frankly, Jashoda never wants to blame her husband for the present misfortune. Her mother-love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest. Sages did not write of this motherly feeling of Jashoda's for her husband. They explained female and male as Nature and the Human Principle. ("Breast Giver" 46)

Mahasweta Devi, in this one paragraph, strongly criticizes patriarchy and in a humorous manner tells the characteristics of Indian womanhood that adjusts itself according to the convenience of patriarchal society. She also shows the hypocrisy of men and their double standards.

Even the lion-seated goddess comes in Jashoda's dream as a midwife which is considered as a symbol of approval from her for Jashoda being a wet-nurse. Jashoda is given a special treatment by the mistress of the house. Kangalicharan is ordered to take the responsibility of cooking in his house. Jashoda is considered as very pious by the whole area. The Halder's family is also full of happiness because of her duties.

The husbands are pleased because the wives' knees no longer knock when they riffle the almanac. Since their children are being reared on Jashoda's milk, they can be the Holy Child in bed at will. The wives no longer have an excuse to say 'no'. The wives are happy. They can keep their figures. They can wear blouses and bras of 'European cut'. After keeping the fast of Shiva's night by watching all-night

picture shows they are no longer obliged to breast-feed their babies.

All this was possible because of Jashoda. (52)

Twenty five years pass by in this way and the mistress of the house dies. The last child of the family is reared and Jashoda is ordered to leave the home by the elder daughter-in-law. Here the plight of Jashoda starts. Kangali is not ready to keep her with him in the temple since he is engaged with some other woman over there. Kangali even makes her realize that she made an entry into the Halder's house because his feet were cut off by their son. They both fight fiercely and Jashoda leaves the home. She is given the shelter by the Halders again but this time scenario is completely changed. She is no longer the centre of respect rather is treated like all other servants of the house. Her own children don't care for her and rarely come to ask about her. Mahasweta Devi describes her pitiable condition:

Jashoda understood that now no one would attend to a word she said. She cooked and served in silence and in the late afternoon she went to the temple porch and started to weep. She couldn't even have a good cry. She heard the music for the evening worship at the temple of Shiva. She wiped her eyes and got up. She said to herself, Now save me, Mother! Must I finally sit by the roadside with a tin cup? Is that what you want? (61)

Her health starts deteriorating and she is suspected of having breast-cancer. Jashoda refuses to go to a doctor. No ointment works for her and her breasts are full of sores. She took great care of her breasts but now the same smell of rotting flesh. She is taken to hospital and the doctor tells that she is suffering from an advanced

stage of cancer. No one can tell how long she will survive. Initially her husband visits her but then he also stops going. Here Mahasweta probes very minutely into the selfish human nature. We very easily forget our responsibility and leave everything to fate. The mistress thinks,

Guilt said- she lived with us, we never took a look at her, when did the disease catch her? We didn't take it seriously at all. She was a silly person, reared so many of us, we didn't look after her. Now, with everyone around her she's dying in hospital, so many children, husband living, when she clung to us, then we had-! What an alive body she had, milk leaped out of her, we never thought she would have this disease. The disappearance of guilt said- who can undo Fate? It was written that she'd die of cancer – who'd stop it? It would have been wrong if she had died here – her husband and sons would have asked, how did she die? We have been saved from that wrongdoing. No one can say anything. (69)

When everybody accuses Kangali of not visiting the same Jashoda in the hospital who fed them for twenty five years, he also very easily shrugs from his responsibility. The story shows the narrow attitude of our society which only expects from women and never thinks of giving them something in return. Kangali stops going to Jashoda when he is told by the doctor that there is no hope of her living. Her sons don't consider their mother as 'mother' because for them 'mother' means a person who takes care of everyone clad in beautiful clothes. The person lying in hospital demanding care is a stranger for them. And thus Jashoda dies alone

in the hospital. Nobody from her family comes for her cremation. An untouchable cremates her body. The writer satirizes on the society saying,

Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone. (74)

Gayatri C. Spivak does not limit the story of Jashoda to the story of a particular unfortunate woman. She compares Jashoda to whole India and says,

Like the Protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother by hire. All classes of people, the post war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. If nothing is done to sustain her, nothing given back to her, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of consuming cancer. (Spivak, *A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's "Standayini"* 107)

Thus, Jashoda's whole life and her death are metaphorical. The description of Jashoda sacrificing all her life and in the end dying alone is a slap on the face of feminism. As Spivak has compared Jashoda to mother India, her child-bearing and child-rearing becomes the metaphor of India's increasing population which in the end will be proved fatal to her.

The story has references to many other aspects of Indian society. There are many references to male sexuality and women's unwilling participation in it. Caste system enables Kanglicharan and Jashoda enjoy special status for being Brahmins

but with the rapid change in the society the younger generation of Halder family does not give Jashoda a special status.

Like Draupadi, Jashoda is also a mythical name that appears in the epic *The Mahabharata* as Lord Krishna's foster mother. In the epic, Lord Krishna is destined to take birth from the womb of Devaki and later on kill Kansa, his maternal uncle, symbolic of evil. On hearing the prophecy, Kansa imprisons Devaki and Vasudeva when Krishna is born. There, he is replaced by the daughter of Nanda and Jashoda of Vrindavan. Thus, Jashoda becomes the foster-mother and by nurturing Krishna, she nurtures whole universe, as Krishna is the embodiment of the whole universe. In the story "Breast-Giver", while dying Jashoda considers everyone as her milk-son. For her, even the doctor and the untouchable who will burn Jashoda, are her milk-sons. Ironically, the mother of so many milk-sons dies alone.

Here, one is reminded of the poem by Hira Bansode's poem "Woman" which aptly summarizes the life of Jashoda in these lines:

She, the river,
said to him, the sea:
All my life
I've been dissolving myself
And flowing towards you
for your sake
in the end it was I
who turned into the sea
a woman's gift

is as large as the sky
but you went on
worshipping yourself
you never thought
of becoming a river
and merging
with me (Bansode 84)

Another story “Behind the Bodice-choli Ke Pichhe” from the trilogy *Breast-Giver* proves Mahasweta Devi as a writer capable of probing into contemporary socio-political scenario. The narrative of the story begins in an unconventional manner,

Everyone got busy to find out what was there: national media, censor-board, liberated anti-bra girls-many associations-organizations.... Cable-t.v. channels-green eye shaded lady ‘votarians’ associations-all the religious groups-and politicians. Watching cassettes of Khalnayak under cover became the ‘norm of the day’ India suddenly discovered that behind the bodice was the Middle East.... That powerful lobby which is engaged in sending messages to the brain of the youthful generation to the effect that Bombay films are the cultural medium for representing Indian popular culture, that lobby was pissed off at this. (“Behind the Bodice”139)

The protagonist of the story Gangor is again a subaltern woman, who due to famine in her place, comes to Jharao for work. Upin, the photographer is stunned to see her statuesque breasts, her mammal projections and clicks some pictures of her while feeding her baby. Gangor enters Upin's mind and he keeps thinking about her and tries to meet her again. However, when he happens to find her, Gangor is a prostitute. Upin is shocked to see her condition:

No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin- *gang rape*... biting and tearing *gang rape*... *police* A court case... again a *gang rape* in the *lockup*...now from Jharoa to Seopura... Seopura to Jharoa ... the Contractor catches clients... terrorizes a *public* ... plays the song, the song.... (155)

Thus, another subaltern woman becomes the victim of gang rape, which is the most common form of oppression for women in society. Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav comment in the introduction to their book:

The most common form of victimization in Devi's stories is that of women succumbing to male sexual violence rampant in rural areas. They usually give in without resistance (Dhowli and Tura's daughter in "The Witch Hunt"), at times get pregnant (Dhowli, Douloti, Sanichari in a story by the same name, and Josmina in "The Fairytale of Rajbasha") and are often sold for money by their own fathers (Douloti and the daughters of Giribala). Prostitution becomes their meager means of livelihood, which perpetuates the brutality and

routinizes the indignity of their sexual exploitations.
(Sen and Yadav 20)

Outcast: Tales of Survival

Outcast by Devi is a collection of four stories showing different forms of exploitation in the name of love, money or survival. To be downtrodden and poor and then to be a woman is definitely a curse in this male-dominated society. A woman's body becomes the centre of physical exploitation in the form of rape. In spite of having no mistake on her part, she had to suffer both mentally and physically. Ironically enough, a higher-class man cannot touch a low-class man but he can definitely seduce and molest a low caste woman as his birthright. The physical contact never makes him impious; rather, it gives him an air of superiority. When the protagonist of the story Dhoulī is beguiled by Misrilal the Brahman, her mother tells her the truth, "They always make such promises. You're not the first dusad girl the Misras have ruined. Dusad, ganju, dhobi- who have they spared?" ("Dhoulī"⁴)

But Misrilal convinces her of his true love and promises to marry her. Dhoulī also falls in love and gets pregnant. When the Brahmin family comes to know about the whole affair, they send Misrilal away. Dhoulī, a nineteen-year-old innocent girl fails to accept that Misrilal cheated her after making so many promises to her and ran away to the city. Her own society is not ready to accept her since she was willingly involved with Misrilal. Soon she would give birth to a baby and if she is not attended by the Misras, she is bound to be a prostitute. She and her mother are

refused any job or food by the Misras who are of the view that it is Dhouli's fate to suffer:

Dhouli waits for Misrilal for four months, still having faith in her love. He comes and disappears again giving him fifty rupees. Dhouli no longer believes in their love and thinks. Had it really happened? Had a 'deota' really kissed the feet of a 'dusadin' after extracting a thorn from it one day? No, it could not have been. It was all a fantasy! Only the child sleeping in her lap was real. (21)

The exploitation does not stop here. They have no source of livelihood. Misrilal's brother is adamant on leading them to death by starvation. Her mother does not get any job, nor does she. The only way of rescue is to become a prostitute, which Dhouli's conscience does not allow.

Dhouli's mother starts cursing her for their starvation. Dhouli even tried to commit suicide. How can poverty and helplessness make death very cheap and not an unusual phenomenon in the lives of these poor people. Dhouli tries to commit suicide under the same waterfall where Misrilal saw her. She thinks that if she dies, there will be an end to their miseries. The community will look after her mother. Her mother will be able to look after her child.

Nevertheless, her fate does not permit her to commit suicide. Ultimately, to feed her child and her mother, she becomes a prostitute and then suddenly Misrilal gains his manhood and claims his right over Dhouli. He blames Dhouli for becoming a prostitute and says that she should have committed suicide instead. Dhouli replies,

I tried to kill myself. But then I thought, why should I? You can get married, run a shop, see movies with your wife, and I have to kill myself? Why? Why? Why? (31)

Dhouli accuses him for his insensitivity and cowardice nature. Misrilal asserts that he will prove that he is a real man and a brahmin's son too. The reader thinks that probably he will bear the responsibility of his child and Dhouli. He summons a Panchayat in which obviously untouchables are not allowed to speak. Dhouli is ordered to leave the village immediately otherwise her mother, her son and she will be burnt to death. Dhouli is forced to leave her child with her mother in the village and she decides to become a professional prostitute of Ranchi. She is surprised to see unaffectedness of nature as she moves to Ranchi.

The sky looked blue and the tree as green as always. She realized that nature was unaffected by the upheaval in her life. This painful thought made her weep. Wasn't everything supposed to change from today? Everything? The day Dhouli was to finally enter the marketplace? Or is it that for girls like Dhouli, nature accepted such a fate as only natural? The nature which, after all, was not created by the Misras – Or had the sky, the trees and the earth sold out to the Misras a well. (33)

Colin Mac Cabe, in "Foreword" to *In Other worlds* by Gayatri Spivak comments:

The force of Mahasweta Devi's text resides in its grounding in the gendered Subaltern's body, in that female body which is never questioned and only exploited. The bodies of Jashoda and Dopdi

figure forth the unutterable ugliness and cruelty which cooks in Third world Kitchen to produce the First world feast that we daily enjoy.

(xvi)

In another story “Shanichari”, an innocent girl is caught in the web of crafty people.

Nature does not also move to see the plight of Shanichari who is ostracised from her own society with no fault of hers. Her only fault is dire poverty, government’s failure to give them protection and the crafty trap set for these poor innocent girls by the devils of mainstream society.

Shanichari is an Oraon girl who belongs to a small village near Tohri. Due to scarcity of water, there is drought every year. As a result, no harvest is there. Even the forest is not able to provide them with anything. At such time, Gohuman arrives from the city. She feeds them well, shows them the dreams of a good living, and thus convinces them to be rejas in the brick kilns of Kolkatta.

She is able to trap some girls from different villages every year and smuggles them to Kolkatta. Shanichari knows well about the tricks of Gohuman but still willingly surrenders to go to the brick-kilns due to a disaster in their village. There is a meeting of ‘Adi Jati Raksha Morcha’ at Rata village. Many tribals from surrounding villages gathered there with their bows and arrows to assert their rights. Suddenly firing starts and many tribals get killed. As a result, Bihar Military Police is deployed in that region. They start burning the tribals' crops and huts. There is no end of torture and destruction. Young girls are raped and forced to flee to the forest.

At this moment, Gohuman of Kolkatta appears and gives them new clothes. The author says,

Scores of young girls were bitten by Gohuman's fangs. There is not just the one Gohuman, after all, hundreds of similar snakes are slithering around, now that they sense an opportunity. And it's easy for them to gain entry to the area. (47)

Gohuman bribes the local police and the GRP and easily smuggles the girls to Kolkatta who could live without food but not without clothes since all their belongings are burnt by the BMP. Their mothers sing,

My girl could live on tubers,
wear leafs and buds in her ears,
Alas, trees can't grow clothes
"Dear Ma," my girl said," So
To the brick Kilns I must go
To the brick Kilns I must go. (47)

The life is like a living hell under the prison walls of the brick-kilns. They have to live in pig sites and there is a single tube well for three hundred people. Worst of all, after the all day's backbreaking labour the girls are exploited by the men working in the brick kiln. Shanichari becomes Rahmat's mistress, who is the owner of the brick kiln. When the brick kiln shuts down, she carries Rahmat's child in her womb which means she would be an outcast from her society. She lives along in a hut and cooks along. For her, Gohuman is not the only person responsible for her plight. In the end of the story, author also comments.

Everything around you, ev-er-y-thing.’ Shanichari stretched out her arms to include the world around her, standing stock-still. I know Shanichari is showing us who the real culprits are, I also know that she’s waiting. But I don't know how long she’ll like Rahmat unabashedly run bricks kilns, as Gohumans entice girls like Shanichari, till our motherland can provide basic food and clothing to girls like her, the freeze shot of Shanichari pointing her finger at the accused will remain. (55)

Thus in both the stories, poor innocent young girls become the victims of a cruel social system which does not give them any rights. The title ‘Outcast’ chosen by Devi refers to the common practice of tribal girls being raped and when they give birth to a child, their own society make them outcast for no fault of theirs. On the one hand, tribal women enjoyed a very high status in their own community, on the other, they become the easiest victims of rape now-a-days. Neither the government nor the administration is helpful in ending this cruel practice. The news we hear on news channels regarding the rapes of low caste and tribal girls make these stories more authentic.

Rudali: Will to Survive

In another important feminist text *Rudali* Mahasweta Devi shows the zeal of a subaltern woman to survive. She says:

Rudali is about... “how to survive”... "bread and mouth.” It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this.
(qtd in Katyal 9)

The protagonist of the story Sanichari evolves from a voiceless subaltern to a voiced, empowered female who knows how to snatch bread from the mouth of the exploiting devilish system. Hunger is the greatest concern among these low-caste ganju people. When someone blames her inauspicious name for her misfortunes, she refuses the blame stating that everyone in the surroundings is no better than her:

“Muh” Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday – was your life any happier? Somri, Budhni, Moongri, Bishri – do any of them have happier lives? (*Rudali* 54)

In Sanichari’s life there is no end of the deaths of her loved ones. When the novel opens, we see her mother-in-law dying with the cry ‘give me food’. Her brother-in-law and his wife die in the next coming years. Her husband dies due to cholera in a religious fair. Her son is a great solace for her since he is very caring and understanding but he also dies due to T.B. Her daughter-in-law leaves the home and becomes a prostitute. She looks after her grandson with the help of the other people of her community. The trauma of a dying son in front of a mother’s eyes is very painful as the author says:

Scorching heat blowing about her day and night. She could see that he was going to die, and realized that her dreams of building a life around Budhua would never be fulfilled. Even her more modest dreams have never been realized. She had wanted to buy a wooden comb for her hair, to wear shellac bangles for a full year – neither of these dreams had materialized. With time, her dreams had changed shape. Her son and daughter-in-law would earn enough, they would

support her, she imagined sitting in the winter sun sharing a bowl of gur² and sattu with her grandson – Had this last dream been over-ambitious? Had she sinned by wanting too much? Is that why Budhua was wasting away before her eyes? (59)

When her grandson grows up, Sanichari finds a job for him in the market for two rupees a month. For the first few months, he works hard but gradually he gets bored and one day he also runs away deserting his grandmother and goes away with some magic-show fellows. When Sanichari is all alone, she meets her childhood friend Bhikni. Bhikni is also all alone and hearing the story of Shanichari, she thinks, “Is there no caring left in the world? Or is it just our fate, yours and mine?” (65)

Thus, the two desolate women find the support of each other. With the help of cunning Dulan, they start working as ‘rudalis,’ ladies who cry loudly when some rich person is dead. They do well in their profession and gradually their demand grows rapidly. How these two ladies are able to survive on the deaths of the rich can be understood from these lines,

Just for wailing, one kind of rate. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one’s head, five rupees two sikka. Wailing and beating one’s breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground there – for that the charge is six rupees. At the kriya ceremony, we want cloth, preferably a length of plain black cloth. This is the rate. Over and above this, you people are like kings, can’t

get the goddess Lakshmi captive at home, you won't miss it! And Sanichari will sing your praises everywhere she goes. (75)

The author also makes a satire on the hypocrisy of the rich people who start a competition to flaunt their status on the deaths of their elders. Dulan tells about one such landlord,

His mother's left to lie in her own excrement all day. Once every evening Moti the dushad woman cleans her up – no one is concerned about loss of caste or defilement any longer, it seems. They've kept a maid to sleep beside her at night. He's not willing to spend a paisa on trying to care her, but plans to spend thirty thousand on her funeral! (77)

Once again, Sanichari is alone since Bhikni, who goes to a relative's wedding never returns. She dies of Asthama in Ranchi. Now the question of survival stands before Sanichari. She is reluctant to go to Tohri red-light area to bring prostitutes with her to work as rudalis since her daughter-in-law is also there. At this critical time, Dulan once again empowers him saying, "Don't weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger." (90)

Sanichari feels no hesitation in going to red-light area of Tohri now. She calls everyone including her daughter-in-law. The voiceless Sanichari becomes voiced, is evident from the last lines of the novel:

Move, move, let us get on with our work. The Malik belongs to us now. Gambhir's corpse stank of rotting flesh. The randi rudalis

surrounded his swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground. The gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double! He and the nephew were reduced to helpless onlookers. While hitting her head on the ground and wailing loudly, Gulbadan turned her dry eyes in the direction of the nephew, cast him a leering wink and grinned. Then, listening to Sanichari's cry she rejoined the chorus. (91)

Thus, *Rudali* is about the empowerment of a downtrodden woman who not only survives despite of many calamities but also finds ways for other downtrodden women. The work can be said a saga of class and caste oppression by the system in which women find themselves doubly oppressed. The work gives a realistic presentation of the inevitable struggles of countless women among the poor and low caste people. But like 'mother-earth' women have immense capacity of tolerating sufferings. Although feminists opine that characteristic of tolerance among women, makes them weak. It is also true that our Indian society comprising of the rich and the poor is sustained by this quality. All the women characters in *Rudali* are the example of life-affirming values. Although they are caught in the grimmest of situations, they strive to maintain their existence. Caught in the web of the double oppression of class and gender, they stretch their arms towards life. The end of the story aptly shows that given a chance, they can make the exploiting system extremely vulnerable. They have seen the worst in their lives and now they can enjoy every moment, they are given among the harsh realities of their lives.

After Kurukshetra: Myth Deconstructed

Even the history has not been untouched by Devi's unbiased outlook. *After Kurukshetra* consists of three stories and in these stories, we review our ancient epic saga from the eye of the subaltern. In her book, Mahasweta Devi presents a feminist version of our sacred ancient epic the *Mahabharata*. The first story among the three is “The Five Women.” When the dharma-yudha is over and the whole battlefield is burning with funeral pyres, in a distance, a crowd of women moans over the deaths. The writer remarks about these women,

These women are not of the rajavritta, women of royalty, nor are they servants or attendants. These women are from the families of the hundreds of foot soldiers-padatiks-from various other little kingdoms. They had been slaughtered every day, in their thousands, their function being to protect the chariot-mounted heroes. They were issued no arm our. So they died in large numbers. (“The Five Women” 1)

Five women who lost their husbands in the battle, were appointed to accompany the pregnant young widow of Abhimanyu, Uttara. These women don't consider this war as righteous and remark that the deaths were not the result of any natural calamity; rather, the deaths were the result of cold-blooded power game in which numberless human lives were sacrificed. They say, “Disaster? What disaster? Huh, old woman? Was this some natural calamity? So many great kings join in a war between brothers.” (3)

These five women from kurujangal are named after rivers. Their names are *Gomati, Yamuna, Godhhumi, Vipasha* and *Vitasta*. Gradually Uttara and the five women become inseparable. Mahasweta Devi has tried to dissect the endless sufferings of women caused by this war. She remarks;

The Kaurvas are wiped out. Their widowed brides clad in white like silent shadows go about the daily rituals requires of them. Endless fasts, pujas, offerings of cows to the brahmans! Their lives rendered empty at such a young age. The life that now lies before them, an unending desert. Each step across that expanse scorched with sorrow.

(8)

Until now, we have read and heard the glory of so-called dharamyudha but the author perceives it like any other war, which has brought death and destruction for so many lives. Although the war has been considered a fight between the right and the wrong, nobody has been able to look at the real aspect of this war which is quite horrible. While the Kaurvas and the Pandavas earned immortal name and fame, there is no mention of countless foot soldiers who were not given any armours. They worked as human shields for the chariot or elephant mounted warriors. While these great heroes were cremated with proper rituals and rites mentioned in the scriptures, the countless foot-soldiers' bodies were piled high on the big pyres where they keep on burning for many days. Those foot soldiers were from many kingdoms in the surroundings. Some of them didn't even have any ideas regarding the purpose of this war. They just followed the commands of their kings blindly. They were the first to lose their lives in the war. Their lives were considered

so cheap that nobody cared for them as if they took birth only to die like small insects. In the story, the Lord Krishna is held responsible for this havoc:

Gandhari's words come to mind. She had held Krishna Vasudeva responsible for this fratricidal war. She whispers, Arya Gandhari was right. The Yadav clan will perish for the sin of causing this savage war. (8)

The destiny of five women is no better than the queens of the palace. They have lost their husbands in the battle. Collectively, they sing a song of mourning.

The fields of golden wheat lie un ploughed 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 village into cremation grounds, hai hai! (11)

These mournings are so loud that even the chandals who have been given the duty of tending to the pyres, flee away in terror. The earth of Kurukshetra becomes so full of heat that the five women from the Kurujungal region cannot return to their homes. They will have to wait till the earth cools down. Madaraj, the head 'dasi' is in search for 'dasis' for the young widow Uttara. Uttara is in deep shock after the death

of Abhimanyu. Subhadra, her mother-in-law thinks that these five women will be a solace for young Uttara. Subhadra guesses that probably these women from 'kurujangal' were newlyweds. There is a huge difference between the ways of living of them and the royal queens. Uttara being a widow is not permitted to laugh openly. The husbands of these women also died in the same war but they can never expect 'Divyalok' after the deaths in war nor do they glorify this war rather remark, "Brother kills brother, uncle kills nephew, shishya kills guru. It may be your idea of dharma, it's not ours." (23)

Mahasweta Devi stresses a great gap between the lives of the '*Lotavritta*' and '*Rajavritta*' especially those of women. Those queens who have lost their husbands can never return to their normal previous lives. But the women from 'kurujangal' will start their normal lives despite their husbands' deaths.

If we don't go... the fields will be uncared for. Once we return, all of us together will perform the necessary funerary rituals for our dead. Then the elders will arrange marriages. We need husbands, we need children. The village needs to hear the sound of chatter and laughter. We will... create life. That is what nature teaches us. But... Life wants that as well, Arya Subhadra, Respected majesties! As long as there is 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. Once we had husbands, now we don't crying won't bring them back to life Also, our husbands fought and died in

the king' war. No divyalok for them. That's only for the rajavritta. (25)

Thus, very keenly, the author touches that aspect of this epic which has remained untouched by scholars so far and that is the effect of this war on women. Women of Rajvritta and women of Lokvritta. Despite of Ved Vyasa's glorious imagination, she has shown the world as to how he failed to present a woman's heart who grieved the most after the war. Not only this, she has also dealt with the difference between the lives of 'rajvritta' and the 'lokvritta'. Certainly, in her viewpoint the life of 'janavritta' is better than the false pretension of the lokavritta.

Mercy Lucas remarks in her article “After Kurukshetra: A Feminist Postmodern Historiography”:

After Kurukshetra is a gynotext, narratives of the colonized subaltern that 'write back' to superimpose and obliterate the grand narratives of colonialism, patriarchy, monarchy, dogma and class division. It presents a multiplicity of discusses whereby marginality and perpetrated 'otherness' are sources of energy and potential change. All the three stories are anti-establishment in which the women chart their own destinies of individual freedom by celebrating all forms of difference. They establish what Patricia Waugh states, in her essay "Post modernism and Feminism", that gender is not a consequence of anatomy and that social institutions do not reflect universal truths about human nature. (Lucas 101)

Thus all these works present different issues of subalternity in the lives of 'doubly subaltern' women. From Dhouli to Shanichari, from Dopadi to Douloti and from Jashoda to Sanichari of *Rudali*, all force us to think whether women will ever be able to enjoy the equal status as of men in society? Will the day ever come when women will not have to pay the price for their being women? The day seems to be far away but the writer is optimistic since in her opinion women have greater strength, greater tolerance and greater power than men which make them survive in this cruel world.

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