

Voicing the Subaltern in a Global Tongue: Reading Mahasweta

Devi's After Kurukshetra

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Abstract

In the contemporary literary landscape of India, Mahasweta Devi has arguably been one of the most widely translated writers in a regional language. A prominent Bengali writer, known for her social and political activism, she not only effectively voiced the struggles of the oppressed and the marginalized peoples but her works continue to draw attention to this section of the Indian society.

Translations of her works into the major Indian languages, including English, not only make them widely available but also broaden their readership, thereby granting the author national and international status and recognition. While translations help mediate culture, it is interesting to note that the theory and practice of translation, as exemplified by Mahasweta Devi's works, have become a major site of critical inquiry. In the context of postcolonial studies, especially in translation, who and what get translated are matters of debate. It is in this light that the present paper attempts to look at Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra: Three Stories*, translated into English by Anjum Katyal and published by Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2005.

Keyword: Mahasweta Devi, Translation Studies, Postcolonialism, Subaltern Voices, Cultural Mediation, Indian Literature, Literary Translation

The collection comprises three stories – “The Five Women” (“Panchakanya” in Bangla), “Kunti and the Nishadin” (“Kunti O Nishadin” in Bangla) and “Souvali”. Anjum Katyal’s translation steers clear of any agenda of literary translation, as no introduction is provided and only very brief and necessary notes are appended regarding the various characters from the *Mahabharata*.

After Kurukshetra recovers a few ‘untold’ situations that supposedly take place on the sidelines of the Mahabharata, interrogating gender, class, and caste hierarchies engendered within the royal quarters as portrayed in the epic. The stories are told from the point of view of women who are marginalized and dispossessed. The first story in the series, “Five Women”, examines the post-war scenario in the *Mahabharata*, deliberately shifting focus from the main heroes of the war to the foot soldiers who support the warriors. Mahasweta Devi further shifts the scene to the inner royal quarters, teeming with countless widows, a consequence of the war. She gives identity to the womenfolk, salvaging subtexts about them that have gone unwritten, unheard and uncared for. The five tribal women who are recruited to give company to Uttara, (the widowed daughter-in-law of the queen Subhadra) who has lost her husband in the war, enter the patriarchal domain of the royal household to critique the valorization of war. The chandal women’s counter-narrative also debunks the heroism of the Pandavas and condemns the fratricidal war that meaninglessly claimed the lives of their husbands, who worked as foot soldiers. Mahasweta Devi articulates the voices of the silenced and offers alternative lives (worlds) for tribals, especially women, who comment on the rigid, stagnant life of the royal household in contrast to the flowing life of tribal women. The dharma of the ‘lokavritta’ to move on in life as opposed to the ‘rajvritta’ is emphasized. Mahasweta Devi gives the tribals agency and exposes the helplessness of the women within the tradition-bound patriarchal values of ‘rajavritta’.

The second story, “Kunti and the Nishadin”, is a contemplative examination of guilt, memory, and moral responsibility, centering on Kunti’s persistent regret for her involvement in the deaths of five tribal men erroneously recognized as the Pandavas. The narrative juxtaposes Kunti’s enduring psychological turmoil with the pragmatic fortitude of the downtrodden Nishadin women. The five bereaved tribal women endure the initial anguish of bereavement but progressively reconstruct their lives through remarriage, childbirth, and reintegration into normal life. This ability to progress embodies a cyclical, life-affirming reaction to sorrow, sharply contrasting with the stagnant, self-destructive guilt endured by the royal figures. Kunti, together with Gandhari and Dhritrashtra, occupies a state of waiting, both literal and existential, as they anticipate death from the approaching forest fire. This period of waiting symbolizes their moral paralysis and their inability to overcome the consequences of past actions. In contrast, the Nishadins, characterized within the epic as an “uncivilised” community, display foresight and adaptability by relocating before the fire threatens their habitat. This ironic reversal challenges the civilised versus uncivilised binary in the sense that those considered marginal demonstrate agency and survival intelligence, while the supposed custodians of ‘dharma’ remain incapacitated by remorse and fatalism.

Thus, the narrative questions the ethics of violence and responsibility while foregrounding subaltern resilience in contrast to elite stagnation. It critiques hierarchical structures within the epic tradition, demonstrating how marginalized communities address trauma through materially grounded and future-oriented strategies, whereas dominant figures remain confined to cycles of memory and moral reckoning. The Nishadin women display an innate mechanism of processing their trauma into a cohesive life narrative. The spirit of survival in these subaltern women remains undeniably persistent.

The third story in the series is “Souvali” which again foregrounds the marginal by quietly employing the subversive voice of a ‘dasi’ within the epic framework of the *Mahabharata*. Souvali, the mother of Yuyutsu—the illegitimate son of Dhritarashtra—occupies a liminal social position that is neither fully acknowledged nor entirely erased. Significantly, she refuses to identify her son as ‘Yuyutsu,’ a name sanctioned by the patriarchal lineage and instead calls him “Souvalya,” asserting a maternal claim that resists the authority of royal nomenclature. As a ‘dasiputra’, Souvalya is denied legitimacy and inclusion within the royal household and is subjected to systemic humiliation and invisibility. Ironically, however, his presence becomes indispensable at the moment of death, when he is summoned to perform ‘tarpan’—the ritual offering of water to the deceased Dhritarashtra—thereby exposing the hypocrisy of caste and lineage hierarchies that exclude in life but require in death.

Souvali's reaction to this scenario is marked by a scathing and disdainful critique of ceremonial conventions. She interrogates her position by inquiring “Am I merely a dasi?” Was I his lawful spouse, that I must endure the funeral rites? (Devi 48.) This rhetorical position contests the moral validity of Brahmanical traditions that enforce ceremonial cleanliness (*ashaucha*), abstinence, and sorrow upon women such as her, who have been deprived of respect and dignity.

Souvali chooses a unique type of resistance instead of submission; she expresses her intention to maintain her normal life, which includes savoring delicacies like “kheer,” “ladoos,” and “pithas.” By rejecting the performative austerity of mourning imposed by upper-caste norms and reclaiming bodily autonomy and everyday pleasure as forms of defiance, this act becomes a political statement. Souvali not only resists erasure but also voices a subaltern ethics that prioritizes lived experience over authorized rituals, thereby revealing contradictions within patriarchal and caste-based social structures.

Mahasweta Devi's rewriting into the corpus of the epic tradition, however, is different, for she uses the textuality of the myths in her stories to recuperate the tribal as a protagonist figure. While her efforts are geared towards recovering suppressed, marginalized voices, she also invests the subaltern women with an agency that undermines the authority of the royal household. The stories represent the lives of those who are marginalized but are relatively free from the burden of traditions, rituals and practices. They, therefore, possess the ability to adapt to new situations and circumstances. While Mahasweta Devi's resistance is textual, it succeeds in foregrounding those stories about which the *Mahabharata* is supposedly silent.

The translation of Mahasweta Devi's work into English not only broadens its readership but also enhances its global consumption. While the translated text reaches out to a wide trans-cultural audience, it also succeeds in voicing the concerns of the marginalized and the oppressed. It is also significant that such a translated text not only readily gets included in the English academia, but it also runs the risk of being appropriated within academic discourses as data to substantiate postcolonial debates on the subaltern. As Minoli Salgado puts it, translations become key sites not only of authorial but also of cultural contestation... sites of persistent cultural interchange in literary studies. (155)

The translation of particular texts within a politically dictated literary agenda leads one to view such translations with suspicion. Such translated texts not only suffer from the politics of appropriation but, paradoxically, also help give voice to the voiceless. With no introduction to her translated text, Anjum Katyal's translation project appears to be a transparent venture, with minimal intervention on her part, making the translated text seem unproblematic. However, poststructuralist, historicist and postcolonial theorizations on translation have raised questions over the possibility of translation and its changing functions and values over time and space. (Bhaduri xxvii) In translation studies, scholars such as

Lawrence Venuti argue that translation is never neutral but is shaped by ideological choices that either domesticate or foreignize the source text (Venuti 15). Similarly, Tejaswini Niranjana highlights how translation has historically functioned within colonial power structures, producing knowledge about the colonized (Niranjana 2)

Katyal's emphasis on subaltern voices in translating Mahasweta Devi's reinterpretation of the Mahabharata makes the work easily accessible to those engaged in postcolonial discussions of translation. The English translation of *After Kurukshetra* expands its audience while presenting nuanced representations. Translation enables worldwide dissemination but poses the possibility of appropriation in scholarly discourse. Translation of culturally rooted texts may erase cultural specificity if it prioritizes accessibility over linguistic and cultural nuances. Furthermore, in the domain of World Literature, works like Devi's are often regarded as representative of subaltern suffering, raising concerns about commodification. Thus, translation is both an enabler of cross-cultural exchange and a mechanism of constraint—within which discourse and appropriation are inextricably linked.

Currently, Devi's art aligns with modern dialogues around caste, indigeneity, and narrative justice. *After Kurukshetra* examines contemporary efforts to restore marginalized knowledge systems and challenge dominant epistemologies (Guha 7). It intersects with emerging fields such as eco-criticism and indigenous studies, in which land, community, and identity are deeply intertwined. The indigenous women of Devi illustrate these connections, offering alternative modes of existence that contest both colonial and nationalist frameworks.

Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* is a counter-epistemological work that challenges canonical authority, foregrounds the agency of subaltern women, and explores the politics of translation. The importance of this work lies in its subject matter and its engagement with broader theoretical discussions of representation, power, and global

circulation. Instead of simply “giving voice” to the subaltern, Devi exposes the very structures that oppress them, urging readers to confront the limitations of representation itself.

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