

## Motherhood and Mourning in Kunti and the Nishadin

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The encounter between the Kshatriya queen and the Untouchable Nishadin in Mahasweta Devi's "Kunti and the Nishadin" (originally published as *Kunti o Nishadin* in Bengali) constitutes an ethnological encounter, between the historical subject and the gendered subaltern non-subject. The climactic encounter between Kunti and the Nishadin strategically deferred till the end of the story, both metaphorically and literally constitutes a confrontation between an ethico-psychological and an ethno-philosophical view of female subjectivity. Mahasweta's text announces and documents the vanishing point of the idealist ethico-political (male) history documented by the Bardic tradition. The polyphony and heterogeneity of female voices in Mahasweta's story displace the omniscient narrative voice of Vyasa while recuperating the 'woman' Kunti who was contained in the self-reflecting representations of Kshatriyahood. Mahasweta delegitimises the patrilineality of the male kinship structures in *Mahabharata* to show how 'Dharma' rationalises the Kshatriya state's prohibitions and regulations upon female sexuality through the polyvalence of power entrenched in structures of fatherhood, family formation and dynastic propagation. Kunti's sole identity in *Mahabharata* as the archetypal 'Mother'/Mourner uncovers the phallogocentric constriction of her femininity around the anchoring points of the symbolic father's authority (as Pandu is not the biological father) and cultural preconditions of maternity. As the widowed Kunti reminisces about her sexual encounter with Sun God, Mahasweta's text retrospectively re-constructs her alternatively conceived female sexuality. Thus, Mahasweta's story can be read as a profound reorganisation of the Epic tradition as she reinscribes the political Dharma within an ethico-feminist narrative to show it as a phallogocentric circuit enabling the 'emasculated' Pandu to perpetuate a male line. The virginal Kunti's sexual encounter with Sun God is revealed by Mahasweta to be motivated by desire (Kama) unlike her encounter with Dharma, Varun and Indra which were motivated by duty/patriarchal Law/Law of the Father (Dharma). This brief sexual encounter becomes a site for the symptomatic eruption of Kunti's sexuality, it becomes a point of recalcitrance withholding within it unsocialised eroticism of Kunti which exceeds the modes of Vyasa's phallogocentric representational model.

*Mahabharata* shows us a Kunti whose sexuality is always Other directed or Phallus oriented even though Pandu exhibits a phallic lack. Institutional regimes, social organisations, economic structures of exchange ensure that Kunti exercises her gift of summoning a God (a metonym of sexual choice) only on Pandu's command. Her femininity remains dependent upon Pandu's Masculine needs, the Kshatriya socio-symbolic system accommodates Kunti's womb so that Dharma, Indra and Varun acting as phallic substitutes to Pandu form a patriarchal discursive system in which symbolic fatherhood is the only cultural instrument for the production of desire. The Gods serve as substitutive mythological figurations simulating the phallic mastery that Pandu

is unable to exercise biologically. Karna, thus metaphorically becomes the illegitimate and disruptive libidinal impulse, the Dionysian threat which can never be socialised or contained. The virginal Kunti's erotic entrancement and enrapturement with Sun God marks a blind spot in *Mahabharata*, a textual excess which Vyasa wants to disavow.

Using Irigaray's ideas in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), one can say that Kunti's shame at her sexual encounter with Sun God and her subsequent refusal to acknowledge Karna shows the socialisation of her libidinal body. The female corporeality is structured, constructed and inscribed socially and culturally as a body which exists only as an instrument of labour production. Having internalised the socially produced meaning of the body, psychically and historically as maternal/asexual, Kunti is unable to reconcile her two bodies – the erotic/unlawful/pleasurable/pleasure-seeking/undomesticated body with the de-eroticised/lawful/pleasure-giving/marital body. It is the Nishadin who deconstructs the patriarchal power relations, the dominant social discourses which regularise and contain sexuality. Patriarchal social relations rely on the pre-condition that women surrender their independent sexual choice. The Nishadin calls these entrenched feudal, political and discursive structures, Rajavritta. In opposition to it, the Lokavritta, the Law of Nature or Eros does not impose social inscriptions upon the 'natural/erotic' body so that "if a young Nishad girl makes love to a boy of her choice and gets pregnant, we (Tribals) celebrate it with a wedding" (Devi, p. 40). Lokavritta becomes an alternative to the pure position of phallogocentrism; it is the Law of life, what Freud called pleasure principle. It restores libidinal autonomy to the female body and shows Rajavritta as a theoretical position which reduces female sexuality to a biological complementarity or opposition to the phallus. Both morphologically and sociologically, Kunti's sexuality is "vaginal", only existing as a compliment to the symbolic phallus, for its completion. Thus, female libidinal autonomy whether clitoral (auto-erotic) or genital is always subsumed within copulative relations. Kunti surrenders the autonomy and excessiveness of her sexuality to a phallic libidinal economy where its social function is subordinated to the cultural primacy of the male phallus despite Pandu's biological impotency. Kunti's body is 'over-consumed' by demands of patrilineal exigencies; it has a Use Value that is abstracted or extracted from the labouring female body. It is thus encrypted over and inscribed by the feudal logic of division of labour.

The encounter with Nishadin instigates Kunti to rekindle the residue of jouissance from her pre-marital sexual frisson. The pre-marital encounter, motivated by hedonistic pleasure and not patriarchal duty shows a female libidinal energy not contiguous with conceptional ends; something that elides classification between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity. Lokavritta offers a positivistic representation and recognition of female pleasure; it positively constructs women's experience of their corporeality and sexual independence. Thus female desire and sexuality are not defined in relation to reproductive ends; desire whether pre-marital or non-procreative are not subsumed within the reductive taxonomy of a phallogomorphic system. Rajavritta becomes a deterministic and hegemonic discourse of cultural representation which inscribes Kunti's reproductive sexuality within its phallogocentric interests. Lokavritta as an ideological position of subalternity contests the terrain annexed by elitist feudal ideology; it demonstrates the political underpinnings encoding prevailing definitions of illegitimacy and unnaturalness since "Nature abhors waste. We (Forest Tribals) honour life. When a man and woman come together they create a new life" (Devi, p. 41). It accords women an experiential and libidinal autonomy, freedom from phallogocentric constraints of sanctioned intercourse, a corporeal self-sufficiency which is denied to them in the dominant heterosexist feudal regime. Nishad women respond to the pulsations and flow of desire in nature; they remarry and beget children after being widowed. As opposed to the phallogocentric representational structures of historical

archives which document exclusively male lines of inheritance such as the dynastic lines of Kurus, Pandu, Bharata and so on; the Nishad women's oral history documents a maternal genealogy serving as an archive of women's cultural, social, domestic roles and functions.

The Nishads-Kirats-Sabars-Nagavanshis offer a critique of the dominant feudal culture of Hyper-masculinity staged in the Kurukshetra war. The Nishadin re-defines Kurukshetra battle as a reified cultural instrument for reproduction and reassertion of Masculine excesses and not for restoration of Dharma. The feudal phallogocentric state creates extreme class differentials between the Kshatriyas and the ethnographic minorities/Forest Tribals, regurgitating social inequalities in a new guise as the episode of Jatugriha shows. The forest or *aranya* marks the ideological limits of the feudal Imperial discursive formation; it serves as a site where the dominant discourse of phallogocentric Kshatriyahood and Rajavrtitta have no cultural sway. Mahasweta makes the sovereign feudal discourse collide with its ethical/ethnological 'other', the aboriginal forest tribes who follow Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra in their exile. In doing so, the story retrieves the repressed narrative of tribal history subordinated to the larger historical and nationalist project of consolidating an Aryan identity.

Rather than reify the Ur- narrative from which it derives its origin; Devi's story gestures towards an alternative historiography which seeks to recuperate and recover those 'minor' narratives dismissed as beyond the proper purveyance of classical poetics and the realm of Dharmashastra. As the title of the collection, *After Kurukshetra* (2005) alerts us; the story serves as a post-textual or extra-textual investigation of new areas of social life such as the lives of women and aboriginals. Mahasweta contests the Male Brahminical and Bardic history by using tales of domestic dispute, marital disharmony, and tribal labour. By privileging the woman and the outcaste she reveals the slippages and aporias in Vyasa's official narrative. By locating women such as Kunti, Gandhari, Souvali and Nishadin at the centre of her narrative she restores their enfolded subjectivities in the form of motherhood, domestic labour, marital sexuality or widowhood, thus politicising the dynamics of power that underlie the technology of history/epic making. The narrator here is not the Kshatriya, Sanjaya bestowed with divine vision but an untouchable tribal woman who exposes the nobility of Kshatriya ideology as a remorseless, vengeful, hyper-Masculine, elitist political dogma. By reinscribing the subaltern woman's voice; Mahasweta's revisionary text acts as a counterpoint to the silencing and erasure of tribal lives from elitist epic discourses. The death of the six tribal people in the Jatugriha shows the historical exploitation of the dispossessed by the feudal-Imperial regime.

Mahasweta's feminist counter-narrative reconstructs those unrecognised histories of subaltern groups; in this case the widowed tribal women of forest, thus serving as a political critique of dominant representational discourses, both epistemological and ethnological. The story affects a figurative unveiling and historical retrieval of gendered and subaltern subjectivities. In Gayatri Spivak's terms, the Nishadin is not a "historicised political subject or self-determining subject"; she metonymically represents an Ascriptive Difference, one between self and its ethnological other. "Kunti and the Nishadin" reconstructs the gendered subaltern non-subject's cultural history, thus in Irigaray's terms *specularising* subaltern female subjectivity and acting as an alternative rhetorical site for articulating ethno-histories and tribal stories which Vyasa's elitist narrative has occluded.

The story follows Kunti's renunciation of royal privileges and exile into the forest after the death of her sons including Karna's; practicing severe penitence Kunti resolves to atone for the sins of Pandavas and mourn the departed. In a self-admonitory vein she rebukes herself for her intractable stoicism and inability to mourn the death of Karna. Mahasweta uses this moment of

Kunti's privatised grief for Karna as opposed to her public and ritualistic mourning for the Pandavas as a site for probing questions of sexuality and motherhood. Like in Rabindranath Tagore's *Karna-Kunti Dialogue*; Mahasweta dissociates Kunti, the stoic ideal of Kshatriya womanhood from Kunti, the erring mother guilty of abandoning her first born. Kunti has increasingly come to read her body re-signified through Masculine cultural semantics. The phallic signifying economy differentiates the maternal/lactating/pregnant body from the erotic/libidinal/orgasmic body. She remembers her pre-marital encounter with the Sun God for its intense eroticism and for the engorgement of her libidinal self. She sees this encounter as illegitimate since it was not designed for procreative ends. Even though that transgressive moment is irretrievable, it is interesting to note that the widowed Kunti recollects those 'taboo' moments of pure eroticism spent with Sun God and not her years of domesticity spent with Pandu. Within the self-serving logic of male signification the ego boundaries of the marital/maternal body are clearly demarcated from that of the orgasmic/erotic body and hence Kunti is psychically and ideologically unable to acknowledge her maternal bond with Karna.

To acknowledge Karna would mean legitimising the pre-marital sexual encounter. Kunti has allowed her body, its drives, secretions and pulsations to be disciplined through patriarchal social relations and hence sees the moment of pure carnality as transgressive and morally aberrant. Kunti's productive/generative/gestative body being the primary site of labour production gets normalised within the heterosexist marital culture and for her it is only this 'docile', de-eroticised body which is definitionally maternal. She can only think of the Pandavas as her biological progenies since genealogically their birth followed her marriage and took place under Pandu's patriarchal supervision and for political ends of furthering his line. Kunti's excessive pleasures are subjected to the confining and conforming logic of patriarchal law which operates by inscribing 'sexually active but not betrothed' female bodies negatively.

On the other hand, the Nishadin positively re-conceptualises female sexuality, whether pre-marital or non-maternal as polymorphous, liberated and erotogenic; the emergence of Kunti's disciplined marital sexuality depends on the successful repression and banishment of this pleasure principle. The metonymic offering of the serviceable womb for begetting male heirs is a metaphor for Kunti's containment in a phallic orbit and dis-embodiment from her sexual self. Marriage, the heterosexist Kshatriya institution normalises and produces the marital/maternal body as passive, docile, singular and end-directed; thus abstracting it from the multiplicity and fluidity of the female form. The cultural precondition for normalised marital sexuality is abrogation of sexual autonomy and mastery by the phallus so that generative sexuality becomes women's 'only' sexuality. Like the maternal body, the body undergoing mourning is also desexualised, guilt ridden, repressed and sedimented with ritualised pollution. The Nishadin brings Kunti towards a halting recognition of the spiritual inefficacy of mourning; the Queen's mourning cannot expiate or exorcise the sins of her sons or resurrect the dead tribal men burnt alive in the Jatugriha.

Sanichari, the professional funeral wailer belonging to the Dusad community in Mahasweta's short story, *Rudali* can be seen as a descendent of the Nishadin since both sociologically telescope the cultural history of "grief" and "mourning" in a patriarchal social system. Sanichari like the Nishadin is tellingly aware of the power structures endemic to institutionalised mourning since they offer instant salvation and redemption to the official mourner, be it Kunti or Draupadi or Gandhari thereby exonerating the guilty. Sanichari's embeddedness within the commercialised system of mourning exposes its facile nature. Like the six tribals in "Kunti and the Nishadin" whose deaths are unmourned, unremembered and

uncommemorated; Budhua's funeral rites in *Rudali* too remains incomplete as the Brahminical regime of religious exploitation burdens the living with insurmountable debt. Kunti's final decision to surrender herself to the consuming forest fire is not simply a symbolic purgation of her bodily sins and earthly corruptions but a self-willed re-making of her "self" after her older "self" has been immolated, by engaging with long established discourses of motherhood, womanhood and wifehood. The Kunti of Mahasweta's story is not the stoic Kshatriya queen of *Mahabharata* as she has been traditionally read by scholars such as Krishna Chaitanya in *The Mahabharata: A Literary Study* (1985) and Bimal Krishna Matilal in *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* (1989) but an elderly woman whose gendered identity is like a pleomorphic semantic space invested with cultural significations of Rajavritta. The encounter with her cultural 'Other' empties this space of its received meanings. The Nishadin demythologizes and lays bare the futility of Kunti's adopted asceticism by pointing out that she has been endlessly playing out the outmoded and retrograde cultural semantics of Rajavritta even in exile. Kunti uncritically internalises and rehearses the ideological dogmatism of the exclusivist/elitist cultural script of mourning. Mahasweta juxtaposes the privative and deeply personalised model of tribal mourning against the distant, impersonal and de-personalised public model of Kshatriya mourning. The female community of the Nishadins is outside history; they are the children of forest, lacking even the insurrectionary collective consciousness of fringe ideological groups who fight the state encroachment of forests.

The virginal Kunti who had willingly summoned the Sun God out of sexual curiosity thus laying control over a libidinal economy of transgressive female desire to compensate for her impotence within a Masculine economy of exchange; eventually de-essentialises her identity by reinstalling herself back into the familiar world of marital and maternal bondage. One would imagine Kunti's ability to save the royal bloodline from extinction as giving her a sexual power over the impotent Pandu but ironically she is re-entrenched within the master narrative of Feminine vulnerability and inadequacy.

Mahasweta imagines in the final moments of Kunti's life an imaginative correspondence and sympathetic co-relation between the elderly 'woman' Kunti and the Nishadin, since both the widowed women are finally outside the transactional space of institutionalised male history and Dharma and even outside of Vyasa's textual universe. The untouchable Nishadin brings Kunti to an embattled recognition of her crimes, that of abandoning Karna and murdering six innocent tribals. The Nishadin's final judgement damns Kunti since ritualistic penance cannot exorcise her sins, "You couldn't even remember this sin. Causing six innocent forest tribals to be burnt to death to serve your own interests. In our eyes, by the laws of Mother Nature, you, your sons, your allies, are all held guilty" (Devi, p. 43).

Grieving establishes the embeddedness of the lost object within us; mourning can absolve and obviate the unbearable experience of object loss as Freud in his essay *Mourning and Melancholia* observes but that object of love gets internalised and incorporated within the ego. We try to preserve the emotional bond which we shared with the object of loss since losing that feeling would fundamentally enact the dispossession and desolation of our own knowable identity. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004) looks at the political and public dimension of grieving. According to Butler when we grieve; we are experiencing a state of unknowingness since we are undergoing something outside our control. Kunti experiences this same heuristic ambivalence; but this psychological dispossession of which she is the experiential subject also contains the philosophical meaning of Who she is? Butler thus sees grieving as "fundamental sociality of embodied life since we are already given over, beyond

ourselves, implicated in the lives that are not our own” (Butler, 2004: 28-29). Since, Kunti cannot trace what it is that she has lost with Karna’s death, whom she didn’t know intimately; she enters a state of personal dispossession that in Butler’s words “exposes (her) unknowingness, the unconscious imprint of (her) primary sociality”(Butler, 2004: 28). Butler seizes upon this idea of disembodiment and dissolution of ego boundaries to anticipate a utopian political formulation in which our personal loss makes us connect with global crisis. Our own corporeal vulnerability and un-belongingness to our ‘self’ during mourning paves the way for an interface with other selves in a form of transcendental communicability and thus re-socialises us precisely when we are experiencing acute isolation.

Mourning dissolves stable ego boundaries exacerbating our vulnerability but the Nishadin observes that Kunti’s self-defences remain intact making her impervious to the loss suffered by the forest women at her hands. In the house of lac, the Kshatriya queen and her five sons hatched a barbaric plot; Kunti invited an elderly Nishad woman and her five sons to a feast in the Jatugriha and got them drunk. So that when she and her sons flee the burning mansion; the charred bodies of the Nishadin and her sons serve as substitutes and provide irrefutable proof of their death. Kunti’s subterfuge reveals her extreme self-absorption and wilful blindness towards the sorrows of the outcastes; thus making her the “blindest” amongst Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and herself. Thus foreclosing the positivist effects of mourning; since “to foreclose vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources” (Butler, 2004: 30-31).

Kunti is unable to discover the philosophical constitution of mourning; Butler asks “Is there something to be gained from remaining exposed to its (griefs) unbearability and not endeavouring to seek a resolution of grief through violence? If we stay with a sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless?” (Butler, 2004: 30-31). Butler’s answer to this problematic is one with which both Mahasweta and the Nishadin are in ideological agreement with since in grieving “we are returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another” (Butler, 2004: 30-31). Mourning had the ideological and political power to disengage Kunti from her Rajavritta mooring and alert her to inequitable distribution of privilege and power; to impel her towards an identification with the sufferings of tribals and women who lost their sons and husbands at the hands of Pandavas. But Kunti remains ensconced within the ideological prison of Rajavritta, even when inhabiting the existential state of unknowingness. The loss of her sons fails to jolt her into a critical re-evaluation and condemnation of Kurukshetra war and to apprehend the fallibility and vulnerability of those exposed to violence; her perceptual and perspectival “blindness” reveals the purely narcissistic nature of her mourning.

Seen in Kristeva’s terms; Kunti’s exile to the forest away from the domain of (Masculine) aggression and violence, signals her severance from the universality of the Law of the Father and entry into the domain of the Maternal, Feminine and pre-oedipal as she enters the womblike darkness of the *aranya* ruled by the mother, Devi Aranyaka. Kristeva in *Revolutions in Poetic Language* (1985) speaks of the semiotic as an eruption or excess, as bodily pulsations and drives that rupture the stable ego boundaries of the symbolic during states of religious ecstasy or jouissance. The semiotic in other words can be seen as a revocation of the maternal that has been repressed by the normalising operations of the phallic and social economy in language and culture. The forest thus becomes the locus of reclaiming that lost maternity; of reinstating one’s attachment to the abandoned maternal principal which the paternal symbolic law had declared unlawful and transgressive. Hence, it is in the forest, that Kunti comes to a halting discovery of

the debt she owes to Karna as a mother. As Chodorow has theorised, the mother is both an object of the child's adoration as she lactates him/her as well as the object of revulsion and hatred as she can deny the child food, milk or love thus throwing the child in a perpetual state of want.

Society has led mothers to view themselves as un-maternal, unfeminine and guilty when they abstain from the maternal function to indulge their own desires. Kunti having internalised this phallogcentrically constricted definition of maternity, rebukes herself for being a desiring being. She tells Yudhisthira:

The only time I got a man of my own free will, I got Karna. I was unmarried then, there was no need for a husband's assent. In today's society, if her husband should wish it, a woman can beget a child sired by another. But no woman can become a mother of her own free will (Devi, p. 37).

Being subjected to the patriarchal law of Kshatriyas; Kunti as a mother sacrifices the possibilities of self-definition and sexual independence. Motherhood implies the cultural death of her sexual being; the woman who took Suryadev "out of her own free will" (Devi, p. 37) is subsumed, crippled and forgotten so that she can acquire the predesignated identity of a child bearer. Kunti's submersion in motherhood which is the normalising script of social organisation, robs her of sexual autonomy. As a mother she only has a social value that accrues from her ability to gestate, conceive, reproduce and nourish the child; only through these social functions does she become serviceable. It induces a psychic split and disorientation in the carrying out of her maternal function, so that on one hand, she smothers her children with excessive protection, suffocating them with her overwhelming maternity like in the case of Pandavas. On the other hand, she weans away the child from her maternal protection, leaving it clamouring for her love and protection, as seen in her abandonment of Karna.

It is the alternative subaltern ideology of Lokavritta that defies this phallogcentric polarity between motherhood and desire. The Nishad women do not disavow bodily desires when they become mothers. The Nishad women acknowledge their primal attachment, their attachment to the maternal and pre-oedipal and hence maintain a lifelong attachment with others of their own sex. They live in a maternal community. Such a unique social organisation does not subsume the Nishad woman under the husband's patronymic or patriarchal law; this unique social order establishes intergenerational links between mothers, daughters, and daughter-in-laws. Motherhood as a patriarchal principal grants recognition to women in Rajavritta and makes women complicit in the re-production of patriarchy as they derive social legitimacy solely from their maternal function. But in Lokavritta, a woman need not abdicate her maternal function in order to re-explore her libidinal possibilities as a woman; women resist the economic circuits of patriarchal commerce as they can give birth without getting married. Nishad women respond to the "demands of life" (Devi, p. 42). Thus, it is highly fitting that Mahasweta makes an untouchable aboriginal woman tutor Kunti in the principles of motherhood and mourning.

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