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## Representation of Gendered Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*

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### Abstract

Having first hand experiences of living with tribals existing in the Eastern parts of India who are landless labourers, Mahasweta Devi writes not as a writer but also as a social activist, about these people who have been thrown outside the discourses of mainstream fiction. She is known as one of those prolific writers whose writings represent the voice of those voiceless people who are called marginalized and having been victimized for a very long period, cannot speak for them. Women, dalits, tribal communities, subalterns, diasporas and transgender etc are those people who can be categorized as marginals. Mahasweta Devi in a very de-sentimentalized manner has tried to portray the plight of all landless farmers through her powerful story *Rudali*. The paper is a modest attempt to study on the one hand, how the writer has projected the hopeless predicament of Sanichari and many other women like her in the book, who are doubly victimized and subjugated due to their being women as well as belonging to low caste community; on the other hand, it aims to analyse how *Rudali* can rightly be interpreted as an embodiment of social change. This work of Mahasweta Devi, as a representation of the plight of gendered subaltern, also changes the outlook of readers about the

so called notion of 'women empowerment' in post colonial era as it seems only to be a myth not a reality as far as the case of these low caste women is concerned, which will also be discussed and analyzed in detail in this paper.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Women, Marginalized, Oppression, Exploitation

Mahasweta Devi is one of those versatile writers of India whose name stands for an embodiment of social activism and who has put forth the rebellious spirit of tortured and marginalized people of society with a rare blend of fact and fiction in her writings. She has won many prestigious awards such as Sahitya Academy Award in 1979, the Padamshri in 1986, the Bhartiya Jyanpith Award in 1996, the Raman Magsaysay Award in 1997 and the Padam Vibhushan in 2006 for her valuable contribution to literature. Her works deal with the plight and sufferings of poor, marginalized and ignored people of society who are not able to speak for their rights and are considered speechless by the upper class people of society. *Rudali* is

also a powerful short story written by her in 1979 in Bengali with the title *Nairitey Megh* which was further translated into English in 1997 by Anjum Katyal. This story is a saga of the various strategies of survival adopted by poor and deprived section of society and in a very de-sentimentalized manner, the writer has depicted that the tears which are otherwise considered as a symbol of emotions, with the change in circumstances, can also become a commodity for sale, and thus a way of survival and existence for the poor.

It is assumed normally that only a person who himself belongs to a marginalized or subaltern class of society, can raise the voice in favour of Dalits or downtrodden class. But Mahasweta Devi in spite of belonging to an upper class has tried to capture the plight of people of lower class of society in her works. Almost all her works are a testimony to the fact that her voice is the true representation of the voice of subalterns. The story *Rudali* is also an account of the economic, social and historical exploitation of the landless farmers living in the Eastern parts of India who are subjugated time and again by the upper strata of society i.e. Malik Mahajans or Landlords living there. This exploitation has been depicted by the writer with the help of portrayal of the character of Sanichari around whom the story revolves and she is called so because of her birth on Saturday which is considered by her mother-in-law a very inauspicious day and thus her whole life is inauspicious or 'Manhoos'. Not only the Subalterns but

the gendered subalterns are the cause of major concern in this work which means the women who are doubly subjugated because of their caste, class as well as because of their gender at the same time. Corroborating to this fact, Gayatri Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", says that "... the subaltern as a female is even more deeply under shadow" (qtd in Post Colonialism: 2010, 193).

In fact, the writer through this story has tried to project that even the subalterns can speak if they are given an environment which is favourable to flourish economically and socially for them. Devi has presented this truth by portraying the plight of subaltern women living in Tahad village who are the victim of exploitation and suppression but once they are given chances to prove their capabilities, they emerge as empowered characters who are equipped to adapt, survive and manipulate the system in which they are living hitherto.

Commenting on the life of these people of low community, Devi starts by explaining: "In Tahad village, Ganjus and Dushads were in majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty" (71). These opening lines indicate the tension between the 'givens' of fate/karma questioning the concept of a 'natural' order. Here Sanichari stands not as an individual but she is a representative of all women of her caste who are being subjugated on the basis of caste and gender. The religious system controls these women through awkward and

“unreligious methods where empty rituals provide comforts to the pot-bellied priests and poor are left to fend for themselves” (Singh 282). When the mother-in-law of Sanichari dies, she, before the death kept lying in her own excrement and kept crying ‘food, give me food!’ The depiction of plight is at its peak when the readers come to know that these subalterns don’t have a right to mourn over their sorrows and deaths in the family due to their extreme poverty. Ultimately, she dies in great pain and completely hungry. Above all, it was pouring that night and with the help of her sister-in-law, Sanichari lowers her mother-in-law on the ground but both of them can not cry or mourn over the death because of socio-religious constraints according to which if “the rites were not carried out before the night was over they would have to bear the cost of repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. And there wasn’t even a cupful of grain in the house!”(72).

The misery of poverty and oppression which always stands as a barrier in the path of progress of these downtrodden people, make them insensitive towards their sorrows, sufferings and emotions. So, the helpless Sanichari instead of sitting in her home to morn over the death finds herself forced “to go from neighbour to neighbour in the pouring rain. Dragging the neighbours home with her, and handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry” (72). Somewhere, deep down in her heart

Sanichari also knows that “it is the daily struggles under oppression and the everyday realities of injustice and double standards that degrade and dehumanize women” (Kumar 64). When after a few years again her brother-in-law and his wife died, Sanichari could not cry because she was again in a dilemma as she thinks: “Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shraddha?” (72). Bereft of her emotions and even of tears, Sanichari “had sighed with relief. Is it possible to feed so many mouths on the meager scrapings they bring home ... Two dead, just as well. At least their own stomachs would be full” (73).

Throughout the narrative, the writer has depicted the plight of gendered subaltern and one can find the descriptions of caste oppression and material violence on these people. Such types of treatment from upper class people so called malik-mahajans and feudal lords remains endless throughout the story especially for the gendered subalterns who are at the lowest level of this social pyramid. Sanichari’s friend Bikhni, who was her playmate in childhood, re-enters into her life at the old age and both try to rediscover each other’s status. The writer here projects that although both women are different from each other as they were just friends not relatives, but their common circumstances make them closer to each other. After Sanichari, Mahasweta Devi portrays another female character in front of the readers whose plight seems to be no less than that of Sanichari. Bikhni’s only son

who becomes so selfish that he leaves behind his aged mother and takes away all the cows along with him which are only source of livelihood for this woman, as he wants to move in with his in-laws. Bikhni's house was claimed by mahajan in lieu of repayment of the loan which she had taken for solemnizing her son's marriage. Now left alone and homeless she ran into Sanichari on the streets of the village where both listened to each other's stories carefully. Bikhni responds saying "Is there no caring left in this world? Or is it just our fate, yours and mine?"(85). In a way both feel relaxed and find solace to notice that "the other was no better off than herself" (85). Sanichari also shares her grief with Bikhni telling her how after the death of only son Budhua, her daughter-in-law couldn't stay at home due to her special needs of spending money due to her extravagant nature and left only few months old son behind her who was brought up by Sanichari with great troubles only to find later that he runs away to city leaving behind her to cry and think about him all day. Having faced so much in life these women have become calm and composed now as the time has taught them to be so as Sanichari says, ". . . no husband, no son, wherever my grandson is, may he be safe" (85).

So, at this point, they are the women shorn of all roles and find themselves ". . . in a highly unusual situation for Indian women, one that allows them to bond a friendship and partnership which, free from preconceptions and societal norms, can, in

a sense, invent itself" (Katyal 25). However, there is a continuous pain in Sanichari's heart and mind when the thoughts about her daughter-in-law Parbatia come into her mind time and again. The writer has poignantly delineated that all subalterns do not feel affected in the same manner under same situations. Unlike her mother-in-law Sanichari, Parbatia refuses to submit to the hard conditions of life imposed upon these people belonging to low class by the land lords and runs away with a man of her choice. However, her wonder lust ends up by sitting in marketplace as she sees no other alternative but to go there. So, here Mahasweta Devi has projected one more horrendous aspect of this exploitation of poor women by the high class zamindars who create prostitutes by keeping them first and then casting them off, thereby forcing them into the marketplace. On the other hand, the writer has tried to create sympathy for these gendered subalterns in the minds of the readers as Dulan, as a mouthpiece for the writer seems to say in the story that these prostitutes are also the victim of the circumstances and should not be treated as outcaste from the society. Prostitutes, he seems to be corroborating, ". . . are not a separate caste, as they believe, merely poor women like [others] who are forced to earn a living . . . the exploitation of the poor by the rich takes many forms, that the prostitutes too are victims and should not be treated like outcasts and untouchables . . ." (Katyal 8). So, in the whole work, the writer draws the attention of the readers towards

the question of survival and various strategies adopted for the same in life by these marginalized people. As Mahasweta Devi herself points out, "Rudali is about . . . "how to survive" . . . "bread and mouth" . . . it is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this" (Devi 2).

The dilapidated conditions of life of the subalterns become more conspicuous to the readers when these are presented by the writer in contrast to the lavish life style of those of landlords or so called Malik-Mahajans. The writer has very carefully portrayed the expenditures done by these rich people over the death of some relative which is a prestige-issue for these people. All rich land lords are in competition with each other to show off their money on these occasions but it is really outrageous to see that this money is again earned by exploiting the poor people as the writer says:

When someone died in malik-mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremony immediately raised the prestige of the family . . . The price for this is paid by the dushads, dhobis, ganjus and kols, from the hides of whom the overlords extracted the sums they had overspent. (103)

Thus, not only the subalterns are exploited economically but socially, mentally and physically too. Their money, property as well as body too, are under the

control of these rich exploiters who leave no stone unturned to show their superiority over them. Now these subalterns are constantly under the pressure and fear of survival but the writer shows that life itself is an experience which teaches one how to move forward. The novel becomes an embodiment of social change, as the writer acquaints the readers with the fact that "in order to survive, the poor and oppressed need the support of the other poor and oppressed. Without that support, it is impossible to live in the village even on milk and ghee provided by the malik" (82). Stressing upon the need of communal fraternity, partnership and sisterhood as essential requirements of the society for survival, the writer, time and again shows the solidarity among these people of low class. Dulan in spite of belonging to ganju caste knows very much about the inside matters of jamindars. He uses this knowledge as power and becomes a threat to his superiors by helping the people of his own community. Even his wife also tries to lessen the plight of her fellow women like Sanichari by getting her a job at railway track when she is jobless and has nothing to feed her small grandson. Not only this, but she even solves her problem offering that her grandson would be taken care of by her own daughter-in-law as she could breastfeed the child along with her own son while Sanichari would be out to work. All this forces Sanichari to think, "There are some debts that can never be repaid . . . If her fellow-villagers had not rallied around in this

manner, would Sanichari had survived?"(76).

Dulan is shown as a symbol of emancipation and social reform for the women of his community as he unites them together and makes them aware of their potentials. As a mentor and a guide, he comes forward to show the way of survival to these helpless women. Suggesting them to hire themselves as rudalis, whose job would be to mourn over the death of the people belonging to the families of rich landlords so as to earn money, he even accompanies them and makes it sure that these women could get right sum of money for their services. This is how, emancipation of these women begins and how these gendered subalterns convert their plight into power. Here, the role of community has been shown very important in empowering it; because, "If community can be a tool of offence and defence for the exploiters, it has to be a form of protection and strength for the exploited" (Katyul 15). Sanichari and Bikhni both become rudalis and are very much in demand whenever there is some death in Malik-Mahajans' families. They do their work in such an impressive manner that after their first performance, they feel themselves empowered enough to lay down their own terms and the landlords are forced to accept their conditions because there is no other substitute for these women in that area. They further start helping the prostitute women by involving them too in their profession whenever required.

The new strategy of survival proves very successful for these subalterns but death of Bikhni once again shatters the life of Sanichari. Confident and empowered Sanichari turns into a sad and hopeless person. She thinks, "After the worth disasters, people gradually bath, eat, chase away the goat . . . can do anything – but if they can't eat, they die . . . she's devastated, but she won't cry. Money, rice, new clothes – without getting these in return, tears is a useless luxury (115). Again, this is Dulan, who comes forward and gives valuable advice to her for survival. Grasping the gravity of the situation, he says ". . . look, Budhua's ma. It's wrong to give up one's land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn't give it up (114). From amateur mourner, he advises her to opt it as a permanent profession of rudalis forever. Even the whores or prostitutes, who have no potential in the old age to earn, they should also be included as part of this profession, Dulan reasons with Sanichari saying so. Through the voice of Dulan Ganju, the writer shows her condemnation against the upper class exploitation, greed and their hypocrisy.

So, although the writer has time and again depicted the plight of the landless labourers and shown the plight of gendered subalterns particularly, she has also shown the way for getting empowerment, independence for these people and the novel becomes an embodiment of social change. Sanichari, who stands not as an individual in the story but is a representative for all the

subjugated women of her class, is a symbol of transformation from helpless victim to empowerment and agency. The system of *rudali* proves to be not only as a means of survival, but an “instrument of empowerment and a subaltern tool of revenge” (30). The writer has projected through this work that the subalterns, who otherwise are supposed to be voiceless and silent, can also speak and show their resistance to exploitation by getting united and having an agency. However, the writer also focuses on “the tribal poor people of India whose freedom and identity is still a question mark even many years after India attained political independence” (Dasan 78) and her intention is to problematize the pathetic situations of women in this postcolonial era in India which forces the readers to think whether women empowerment is actually a reality or just a myth.

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