



Rudali' as an Epitome of Caste, Class and Gender Subalternity: An Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's Rudali

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *The aim of this paper is to critically examine Mahasweta Devi's short story Rudali that dismantles Spivak's idea of subalternity and hence Robert Young's idea of subalternity has been applied that is more suitable to justify the argument that subalterns can speak if they are given conducive environment to flourish economically and socially. This short story is the journey of two low caste women, Sanichri and Bikhni from non-agency to agency who are the crystal clear example of the invincibility of human spirit that never adopts escapist tendency even in the trying circumstances. The main focus of the paper is to show transformation that takes place in the lives of Sanichri and Bikhni after they have adopted the profession of wailers for the funeral processions. The text in this respect shall be analysed to show how the gendered subaltern hopes against hope in the undemocratic social and economic set-up.*

It has been the point of argument and debate that only a Dalit writer can well understand the afflictions of the Dalit community in which he or she is living. But Mahasweta Devi presents a different story because despite being a non-dalit, she can very well capture the essence of Dalit experience. So this writer with a humane approach has proved the aforesaid notion wrong. All her short stories and novels bear the testimony to the fact that she is the true representative of the voice of the subalterns. All the major characters of her works like Jashoda, Draupadi, Dhowli, Doulati, Gangor present a vulnerable picture of the gendered subaltern and sometimes the human condition shown in these literary works presents a very gloomy and cursed picture of the female Dalit characters. One of her short stories "Doulati the Bountiful" sums up the plight of all the subaltern women who are sexually and economically exploited "Doulati is all over India" (Imaginary Maps: Three Stories: 1995, 160).

Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" makes a valid comment "... the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" than subaltern men. (quoted in Post colonialism: 2010, 193). Due to Spivak's extremely exclusive use of the term subaltern, the more general definition suggested by Robert Young seems more suitable, defining subalternity as including "subordinated classes and peoples" (Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction: 2003, 6).

Mahasweta Devi, documents the economic, social and religious oppression experienced by the Dalit women in her short fiction Rudali. The women in this story suffer from the triple oppression that is of caste, class and gender. The text glorifies the death of the feudal lords to establish their caste supremacy. In the past, in case of upper-castes, if any of the members die, the dominant community expressed remorse not over the dead but the fact that his or her death came as a major blow to their dominance on lower classes: "Hai, Chacha! As long as you were alive, the lower castes never dared raise their heads. For fear of you the sons of dushads and ganjus never dared attend govt. Schools. Now who will take care of all these things? (88). The tradition is still prevalent in some remote parts of the country. In the text under analysis, the dead man, Bhairav Singh the 'chacha' was the source of nuisance for the lower caste ganjus and dushads of the village. His nephew Lachman Singh made every possible effort to make burial a grand occasion just to show his caste superiority. It is the Brahmanic patriarchy that snatches the

honour of gendered subaltern by making them wail over the dead body of high caste lords. On this occasion, Sanichari and Bikhni, for the first time enter the wailing profession that both humiliating and lucrative not for them but for the whole dalit female community.

This short narrative is the saga of two Dalit women, Sanichari and Bikhni who adopt the various strategies of survival to emphasize the fact that their problems are common to their class, caste and gender. Sanichari and Bikhni represent the whole dalit community around them. Anjum Katyal states "The individual is historicised, not highlighted to the exclusion of context" (3). The problems of Sanichari are perpetuated by the socio-religious set-up and her own poverty where the idea of her empowerment seems to be ridiculous and even utopian. The religious system controls these women through subtle, unreligious methods where empty rituals provide comforts to the pot-bellied priests and poor are left to fend for themselves. When Sanichari's mother-in-law dies, she can not even cry because she was busy in doing empty rituals. Her husband dies of cholera after drinking the contaminated milk donated to the Shiva idol by the rich. Her son Budhua dies of tuberculosis while he was working in the fields of Ramavatar's son Lachman Singh. Later she is deserted by her daughter-in-law Parbatia and her grandson Harao because they can not cope up with the hard conditions. Bikhni, another Dalit female character shares the same fate like that of Sanichari and starts living with her in Tahad village. The turning point in their life comes when Dulan the male member of their community inspires them to take up the profession of rudalis. Dulan is the symbol of the community support that is very important to sustain life in the trying circumstances. He helps them in learning the philosophy of optimism that there is hope against hope even in the worst circumstances. The strategy of struggle for survival is the main argument of the writer. When the poor Dalit women, especially Sanichari and Bikhni find no other way to survive, they opt for the profession of mourning through the able guidance of Dulan in which they seek their social and economic renaissance. This 'commodification of grief' turns out to be the blessing in disguise for these two disgruntled old but bold ladies and hence this profession of wailing has been enlivened by the duo of Sanichari and Bikhni who put heart and soul in this otherwise heartless profession. When Bhairav Singh died, his family members got the chance to show their prestige off. The first performance of Sanichari and Bikhni as wailers made

them famous in the area. They left no stone unturned in out-performing randis. They wail and sang songs in praise of Bhairav Singh. Their wailing was so strong and domineering that even the randis had to admit defeat. It was after Bhairav Singh's funeral that their demand increased and hence it had become a war of prestige for the rich of the area to invite the duo of Sanichri and Bikhni as wailors.

After the death of her passionate companion Bikhni, Sanichari demonstrates her wailing professional skills with much more vigour at the death of Gambhir Singh. She with the help of other rudalis flanked the dead rotten body of Gambhir Singh and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground. Anjum Kalyal states "The Sanichari we encounter at the end of the story –out-going, shrewd, manipulative-is very different from the stoic, long-suffering but repressed woman we see earlier." (22).

This short story also propounds the idea that resistance does not bring any major changes in the lives of the subalterns and gendered subalterns are all the more on the periphery. The characters like Sanichari and Bikhni represent all the dalit women whose pattern of living has been almost the same for a long time. If there are any changes, they are mere the travesty of human existence. Hence their evolutionary development does not promise any big-bang reforms in their lives. The women described in the text Rudali, do not fall in the category of 'pure subaltern' rather they are the women of vision. However, they can not progress fast because they are cornered by multiple forms of oppression. Although India is the fourth biggest economy of the world, but the distribution of resources is not equally distributed. It is ironical that a handful of dalit women compete for top posts in the executive and political arena while others fight for bare survival. In twenty first century India, women have come out of their stereotypical images but as far as the dalit women of backward areas are concerned they live in an unjust world order who still lag behind because of the dominant factors of caste and gender that have always been instrumental in impeding their progress. Sanichari and Bikhni take the extreme steps of doing the job of rudali for their bare survival that can be termed as the travesty of human existence. These two characters can be clubbed in the category of Jashoda who figures in the short story 'The Breast Giver, who for her survival though belonging to a Brahmin family takes the extreme step of breastfeeding the children of the Haider family. She conceives every year so that she may breastfeed the children of the Haider family. For women like these "Considerations of the stomach are more important than anything else" (116).

The author devotes much of the text to trace their evolution into a professional team of wailors. Sanichri joins the profession after a lot of mental debate whereas Bikhni feels no qualms about joining this lucrative profession. It is Dulan who helps them in becoming rudalis but Sanichri raises some doubts about the adaptability and respectability of this promising profession. She demurs "Won't there be talk in the

village" (92). Bikhni seems to have adopted this profession more ardently and religiously because it is she who brings news of the death of some rich landlord or Mahajan. They also don't feel shy in striking the bargain and their presence can be felt on all the occasions. Dulan acted as a true mentor to Sanichri even after Bikhni's death. He pleaded like a lawyer and exhorted her not to give up her profession at any cost. He states "...Your profession of funeral wailing is like your land." (114). He even exhorts Sanichri to bring back her daughter-in-law in the business of wailing, who is a prostitute at the Tohri village but Sanichri frowns at the idea. He has the firm belief that the abstract words like 'fate' have nothing to do with the sad state of affairs of Sanichri and Bikhni.

So it won't be wrong to comment here that Sanichari and Bikhni, true matriarchs in patriarchal set-up, try to defy card-board stereotypes. They are the women who show more agency and independence and hence set healthy precedents for others to follow. If there had been no agency in their lives, it would have been like a war without purpose. So whatever the circumstances, they become the captains of their own fate, though they know that there is no hope of social and economic renaissance in their standard of living, they believe in making an effort to steer themselves to the ever expanding path of struggle and perseverance without much hope of economic and social renaissance in their standard of living.

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