

FROM SILENCE TO RESILIENCE: A STANDPOINT EXPLORATION OF DALIT WOMEN IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S RUDALI

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Dalit women in Mahasweta Devi's short story Rudali, with particular focus on their silenced voices and resilient spirit. Through the life of Sanichari, the narrative portrays how caste discrimination and patriarchal oppression work together to confine Dalit women to roles marked by suffering and invisibility. The figure of the rudali, or professional mourner, becomes a symbol of this enforced silence, as women are compelled to express grief on behalf of others while their own pain remains unacknowledged. Yet, within these constraints, Devi also highlights the quiet strength and survival strategies that allow Sanichari to endure and eventually carve out a space of agency. The story underscores how resilience emerges not in the absence of suffering, but through the act of enduring and reimagining one's role in society. By centering the lived realities of Dalit women, this study reveals Rudali as both a critique of systemic oppression and a testament to the unyielding spirit of women who resist erasure through their capacity to survive and adapt.

Keywords: Dalit women, silence, resilience, caste oppression, patriarchy, agency

INTRODUCTION:

Mahasweta Devi, a critically acclaimed writer, journalist and activist who devoted her life for the sake of the indigenous people of India with specific reference to women. Her literary works are a compilation of her literary experiences with the marginalized people. She is one of the boldest female writers who initiated a battle against the forces of oppression and suppression. Her writing reflects the spitefulness, filth, and gloom in the lives of downtrodden and accuses Indian society of the shame it heaps on its most oppressed citizens. She gave voice to the voiceless people through her art of writings. The authenticity of her portrayal challenged the notion that only Dalit writers could genuinely represent the Dalit experience. Through her characters, such as Jashoda, Draupadi, Dhowli, and Gangor, Devi masterfully illustrated the psychological distress and oppression faced by women from marginalized communities. Ultimately, Devi's work served as a scathing indictment of the deception and hypocrisy within India's democratic system, shedding light on the three-fold exploitation of women based on gender, class, and race.

Many feminist theologians like her believe that there is an interaction of three-fold exploitation of women namely gender, class, and race. Women have been exploited and

mentally tortured from time immemorial. Devi's works personify details of underprivileged women's living, their sufferings and the way they endure their sufferings. Underprivileged women who are invariably docile in the Indian context do not have any identity and position in society. They suffer neglect in life, and live on the edge, facing multiple shades of oppression, domination and subjugation. Sadhana Sharma says:

She penned her stories to render and reveal to our readers gaze the charade and duplicity of the democratic set up in a country and to give a picture of the fates of the marginalized women experiencing and undergoing untold miseries within and without their own communities. (454)

Mahasweta Devi's writing is an incessant struggle against the feudal system which still prevails in the Indian villages. Devi's text give voice to the voiceless and offers an insight into the caste, gender, and class system. Spivak's translation of her writing takes it one step ahead, revoicing the texts to the world. Devi's stories vocalize the unspeakable reality of

women's suffering and their remarkable capacity for resilience, endurance and resistance. Her protagonists are underprivileged, but they remain undaunted and resist male domination doggedly besides upholding feminine dignity. No other woman writer grapples with and portrays the rural life and reality of the underprivileged better than Mahasweta Devi. Beck and Bose aptly put Devi:

Voicing and articulating the muted and the silenced, representing the gender margins within that of caste, the cause

of the gender subaltern, empowerment and radical feminist realism, and an attempt for subaltern speaking have been attributed to her fictional texts. (441)

Rudali by Mahasweta Devi documents the story of an underprivileged Dalit women Sanichari, whose life is an unending trail of suffering, loss and hardships. Yet not only does she survive, she shows the resilience and strength to transform her life by taking up the lowest of all professions i.e. of a professional mourner. This short story delivers a scathing indictment of a society marked by exploitation and repression, rather than giving the profound flaws in its socio-economic and religious systems. Through biting satire, it critiques the brutal practices embedded in life cycle rituals, exposing the darker aspects of a culture that perpetuates outdated customs. These archaic traditions are a product of a fractured society, where rituals serve as a means of exerting cultural power and control.

Rudali is a translation of Mahasweta Devi's Sanichari which was earlier adapted and produced as a play in Hindi and later made into an acclaimed full length feature film by Kalpana Lajmi. Rudali wishes to evoke the subaltern ethos prevalent in the society. Amidst the never-ending class struggle, Devi has effectively depicted the struggle of gender.

Sanichari metamorphoses herself and performs the role of a professional Rudali and discovers her own strength in the process. Judith Butler points out:

Every subject position is the site of converging relations of powers that are not unequivocal: In other words, no identity affiliation upheld by even the most marginalized of minorities can fully describe those it purports to present. (229- 230)

Rudali holds a mirror to the society and brings to light the trials and tribulations of marginalized Dalit women, victimized both for being women and for belonging to a lower caste. The short story delivers a searing portrayal of the mental and emotional traumas inflicted upon women, laying bare the atrocities perpetrated against them in the name of religion, caste, class, and gender. These oppressive forces are exposed in unflinching detail, revealing the devastating consequences of systemic discrimination. In keeping with her Dalit identity, she adheres to a cultural of subjugation and resistance. She is the representative of the exploited sections of the society but still muster the courage to revolt against oppression.

Rudali presents a vivid and powerful portrayal of a woman's struggle for survival and self-defense in a society governed by oppressive norms. Sanichari, the protagonist, embodies stoicism and strength as she navigates a series of predicaments following the death of her close relatives. "The whole story of Sanichari is the saga of grit and endurance" (Narasimham 22). Her father died at her birth and as a child she had been abandoned by her mother, who had run away with an itinerant troupe of performers of nautanki. The struggle for self defence and survival are powerfully portrayed in the story. The narrative masterfully condemns the exploitative culture of hiring professional mourners, known as Rudalis, and critiques the priests, landlords, and orthodox society for their heinous attempts to lure women. It tells the saga of Sanichari's gradual maturation, whose profundity and benevolence grow despite the routine sufferings of the bucolic poor in a feudal society. The socio-cultural custom of hiring a Rudali highlights the dialectical relationship between the upper and lower castes.

Sanichari's transformation from a marginalized subaltern voice to a powerful Rudali is significant, marking the triumph of an oppressed spirit. Her story showcases how the gendered subaltern hopes against hope in an undemocratic social and economic setup.

It is an ironic vein that the author portrays the pathetic predicament of the upper classes where they are unable to find time to grieve for their deceased family members. They owe their involvement in the pompous religious affairs on this occasion. The notion that money can buy everything is starkly illustrated in this context, where wealth operates as a two-way system. For the wealthy elite, the commodification of grief is a status symbol, with the hiring of Rudalis serving as a ritualistic affirmation of their social standing. The number of Rudalis present at a funeral directly correlates with the family's prestige, reducing these women to mere commodities. So, it is a professional performance for those women who have

„nothing to sell but their howls“. Sanichari becomes a representative figure for the collective struggles of the lower castes, shedding light on the pervasive exploitation and oppression that pervades their lives. The upper-class people give money to the poor, make them their bonded slaves, but do not care for their lives. Sanichari is one such slave. She resides in the village of Thahad, a microcosm of India's rural landscape, where entrenched power dynamics silence and oppress marginalized communities in various ways. "In Thahad village, ganjus and dushads were in majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like other villages her life too was lived in a desperate poverty" (54).

Sanichari's poverty makes her vulnerable to constant exploitation. When her husband dies, the Brahmin priest demands money for funeral rituals, knowing she cannot afford it.

This is a recurring pattern where every institution, from religion to community, takes advantage of her poverty. Even in her grief, she is not spared; her suffering becomes a transaction. Her poverty also subjects her to social humiliation. She is treated as a burden, blamed for her own misfortunes, and accused of bringing ill luck. People speak of her as if she is cursed, not because of who she is, but because her poverty makes her disposable and shameful in their eyes.

Sanichari's meager existence and paltry earnings starkly contrast with the opulent lifestyle of the Zamindars and their wives, highlighting the glaring disparities between the haves and have-nots. Furthermore, within these class divisions, a subtle yet pervasive gender-based differentiation exists, underscoring the complex interplay between class and gender hierarchies. Sanichari knew the fact that once a woman steps outside the line of *maryada* she can never return. She embodies the voice of the gendered subaltern, articulating the struggles and nuances of their experiences. This nuanced expression of social hierarchy is also reflected in the sartorial choices of Sanichari, Parbatia, and the privileged Thakurain, whose distinct clothing styles serve as a visual representation of their respective social stations. The imaginary Lakshmanrekha enforced through social consensus that has dictated to the lower caste is always there, not to be trespassed. She is an untouchable whose life story is an ironic tale of exploitation and struggle for survival.

Her mother-in-law used to say it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering. (54)

Sanichari's life is marked by unrelenting hardship, mirroring the tragic fate of Tess of Hardy. The loaded dice of circumstance ensure she is perpetually disadvantaged. The devastating loss of her son Budhua leaves her traumatized, yet she remains stoic. Abandoned by her daughter-in-law, Sanichari is left to care for her grandchild, a poignant scene that underscores her resilience. The label "manhoos" (unlucky) haunts Sanichari, a reference to the calamities that befell her family following her birth. Her father's death and mother's abandonment, Peewli's elopement with a wealthy lover, set the tone for Sanichari's precarious existence. Mahasweta Devi highlights the cruel irony that Sanichari's socio-economic struggles deny her the luxury of grieving. Each loss propels her into a frantic quest for survival, rendering her numb to sorrow. Devi's narrative scathingly critiques the systemic injustices that compel underprivileged individuals, particularly Dalit women, to sacrifice not only their pleasures but also their personal sorrows. Sanichari's story serves as a powerful indictment of the dehumanizing effects of poverty and marginalization.

Her mother-in-law died in great pain, of dropsy, lying in her own excrement, crying out, over and over, „food, give me food!“ It was pouring that night.

Sanichari and her sister-in-law lowered the old woman on to the ground. If the rites weren't 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 was not a cup of grain in the house! So Sanichari was forced to go from neighbour to neighbour in the pouring rain. Dragging the neighbours home with her, and handling all the arrangement for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry. (55)

The taking up the profession of a Rudali charts the subsiding of Sanichari's submissiveness to the victimizing forces in her milieu and marks a guarded step towards her empowerment. Bhikini asks Sanichari to cry at the death of those who have despised and mocked her. Though Sanichari becomes a Rudali and mourns at the death of the landlords, the tears are not coloured by protest. Her tears are an acknowledgment of her identity as a woman. She has discovered a new language to express herself; she has discovered the pre-Oedipal language. She uses this language to speak her mind. Tears become the tool for the protagonist to fight back against the society that has abused and exploited her from the time immemorial. As Dhira. B. Mahoney suggests in Sushan. S. Morrison's *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*:

Her tears which authenticate her experience, function as a language, replacing, and thereby subverting, patriarchal language. Her tears are a sign of her power. (136)

The loss of Sanichari's son is a pivotal moment that encapsulates her emotional and existential suffering. He was her only source of hope, support, and perhaps the last remaining emotional connection she had after a lifetime of abandonment and hardship. His death is not just a personal tragedy, it is a symbolic collapse of everything she had managed to hold together. However, what makes this moment especially powerful is Sanichari's inability to cry: "Her son was dead. Still no tears came. Her grief had turned to stone long ago" (76). This line reveals how her years of oppression being a Dalit, being a woman and, being poor have numbed her spirit. In a world that has never allowed her to express pain, even her deepest loss is met with silence. She is expected to continue functioning, even after such a devastating blow. This emotional breakdown, masked by stoic silence, is central to the irony of her later role as a rudali, someone paid to weep. For her, grief has never been a privilege; it has been buried under survival. The death of her son doesn't just break her, it reveals how thoroughly broken the system is, one that denies Dalit women even the right to mourn their own blood.

As a Dalit woman, her pain is not recognized by society as real or worthy of attention.

The death of her son, in a more compassionate world, would have brought her community support or spiritual solace. Instead, she is isolated, left to fend for herself both emotionally and materially. Even the rituals of death are commodified, with Brahmins exploiting her vulnerability for money. Thus, her suffering is not only personal but deeply political, exposing a world where Dalit grief is invisible, unless performed for the upper castes. This emotional numbness becomes especially significant when she later becomes a rudali.

Sanichari, who could not cry for her son, is now expected to produce visible, dramatic grief at the funerals of rich landlords. The cruel irony lies in how her genuine sorrow was unacknowledged, yet her fabricated mourning is accepted and paid for. Through this contrast, Mahasweta Devi critiques the hypocrisy of caste and class structures,

where only certain lives and deaths are considered worthy of public emotion. The loss of her son thus shatters whatever emotional resilience she had left, but also becomes a catalyst for transformation.

With no one left to live for, Sanichari eventually decides to reclaim her agency by becoming a professional mourner. This decision, while sprouts from her pain, marks the beginning of her resistance. She takes control over how her body and emotions are used not out of empowerment in the traditional sense, but out of pragmatic survival in a world that never gives her choices.

Sanichari's journey is one of self-discovery and empowerment. Despite feeling rejected, she refuses to accept her circumstances passively and instead transforms her existence into a more fruitful life. In doing so, she redefines the concept of power and challenges the patriarchal norms that govern her life. Through Rudali, Mahasweta Devi sheds light on the misery of a poor woman forced to become a professional mourner, exposing the harsh realities of a society that perpetuates oppression and exploitation.

The transformation from a marginalized subaltern voice to a powerful Rudali is significant as it makes the triumph of an oppressed spirit. It shows how the gendered subaltern maintain hope despite being entrenched in an undemocratic social and economic setup. Sanichari feels that she has been rejected, yet she does not feel completely dejected and rejects a passive acceptance of the power and the presence of the male protagonists in her life. She transforms her very existence into a more fruitful way of life, transforming the very concept of power unto her. In Rudali, Mahasweta Devi reveals the misery of a poor woman who are forced to don the robes of professional wailers. "Sanichari, the protagonist, refuses to shed a drop of tear when her kith and kin passes away one after the another, but she is forced to weep for others when she becomes a professional mourner" (Kalamani 61).

Rudali traces Sanichari's transformation from a submissive and resilient victim of the system into its indomitable manipulator. She is shown to be more empowered than she is at the beginning. Many factors go into the empowerment of Sanichari in the story too. Her empowerment has not taken place apart from her community rather it is extensively entangled with the empowerment of the whole Dalit community. 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 to become professional mourners.

Sanichari becomes the symbol of resistance. The resistance that Sanichari demonstrates after taking up the vocation of a rudali is illustrated in the manner she gathers the sex workers in randi street, without any sense of shame or embarrassment, to wail the death of Gambhir Singh, a self-made intimidator of the lower castes, particularly the lower caste women. The life of Sanichari offers a microscopic view of the larger exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious systems that prevail in the society. In the end, Sanichari emerges as better equipped to adopt, survive and manipulate the system. She, equipped with an invigorated concern for livelihood, leads the whores to wail Gambhir Singh's death. The way the story ends is significant as it suggests the organized efforts of the Dalit women to eke out their livelihood, despite numerous obstacles.

The wailing of Sanichari is not an involuntary emotional act. Instead weeping becomes for her a calculated and subservient activity that inhibits personal expression. By capsizing the traditional role of mourning to an effective means of survival, Mahasweta Devi demonstrates the possibilities inherent in an unreceptive environment. Her subsequent transformation into a Rudali, is not only the way to vent out her stockpile emotions, but can also be read as the subversion of the societal rendering of the gender concept. Significantly, not only does this howling symbolize a financial empowerment for them, but is also a means to vent out their frustration and anger, their intense personal anguish through a public performance of crying. She cries vehemently, giving expression to all the pent-up feelings of suppression and exploitation she had been a victim throughout her life. This cry has a "catharsis effect". She finally gains the strength and self-determination to adopt the role of Rudali. At the end, Sanichari discovers the meaning of life and discovers the means of survival through crying for the dead.

Mahasweta Devi, through Rudali, foregrounds the subaltern condition of Dalit women and interrogates the intersecting forces of caste, class, and gender that conspire to silence them. By narrating the life of Sanichari, she unmasks how systemic oppression relegates women to the margins, stripping them of agency while inscribing their bodies with trauma and exploitation. Rudali amplifies the silenced voices of Dalit women, revealing how power is negotiated within oppressive structures that often distort or mutilate their identities and bodies. This power, born of prolonged suffering and enforced silence, ultimately finds expression through the language of tears.

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