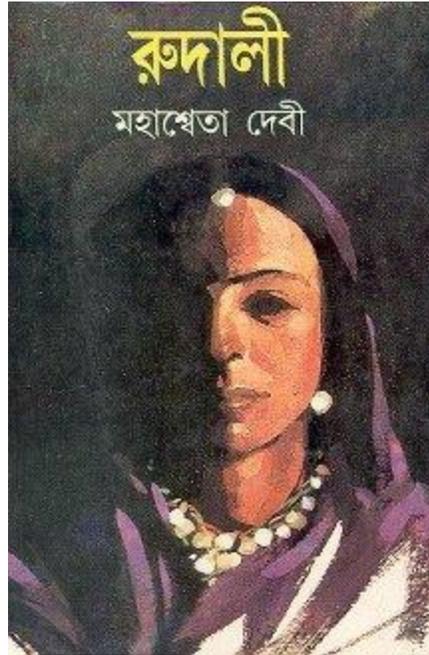


The Metamorphosis of Women in Indian Society: A Study of Mahesweta Devi's *Rudali*

Dr. K. Ananthajothi and Dr. (Mrs.) R. Santhi



Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, a veteran Bengali writer is among those irresistible voices who puts a question mark on the so-called progressive, democratic and civilized nation called India. Even after so many years of independence, the marginal are deprived of their basic rights. Mahasweta's texts carry out a contrapuntal reading of the mythical discourse and write back to the nationalist mythologizing of a colossal, integrated Indian custom and culture at the cost of oppressing the low castes, and tribals. The present study focuses from the novel *Rudali* depicted the struggle Sanichari oppressed against poverty, mortification and wrecked by an exploitative patriarchal caste-based social structure. Broken by their own family, community members and the ruling rich, these women either submit to a consigned existence made them became prostitutes for survival; or like Sanichari and Bikhni, challenge their subjugation. In digital era, Indian society still clings with certain religious and traditional values the name of social standard. Characters who undergone natural life calamities like Sanichari and Bikhni have been forced to face battle for life by creating new humorous ideas to come up in their life. Here, the innocent fades self-centered glitters.

Introduction

In the post-colonial era, the field of gender has been of much debated and many seminal works have been based upon it. Different societies have treated women as the 'other', 'colonized', 'deprived' and; 'the fairer sex' has time and again suffered the politics of oppression and repression. Of late, the concept of gender bias has been of much consequence which implies that women have been doubly suppressed first on the basis of nationality; the other, on the basis of gender not only that women are also forced to transform from innocent to self-centered.

There are two pictures of modern India; the first one portrays us the bright picture of 'India Shining' while the second one is a dismal picture of India reeling under starvation, poverty, debt and unemployment. The first picture depicts constant growth in every field, be it healthcare, education, industries, service sector, etc. This current position tries to project India as a nation continuously moving on the path of development. The other picture puts a question mark on the reality behind the first position. In the same land called India, we have millions of landless peasants reeling under debt and poverty; tribals who are losing their lands and are forced to become farm workers and even bonded labourers in many cases, and ordinary men who are making die-hard efforts to make their ends meet. But the calamity with these socially double suppressed people is that their lives are below the national attention.

There are a number of women writers who have marked their presence steadily in the men dominated land. They have declined to follow street and state censors and succeeded in bringing unheard voiced to the fore. Mahasweta Devi, veteran Bengali writer is among those irresistible voices who puts a question mark on the so-called progressive, democratic and civilized nation called India. Even after so many years of independence, the marginal are deprived of their basic rights. Through her novels, stories and a number of articles; Mahasweta exposes the feudal system which is anti-tribal, anti-women, anti-poor and anti-tiller. This study is an attempt to explore and throw light on Tribal women and how they suffer in the society. Throughout her literary career, she has written fervently about the tribal, subjugated and the deprived and tried to bring their unheard stories before the world to make the people sensitize about these people. And she is still active in her eighties talking to people, forming self-help groups, writing letters to authorities, visiting to people, rebelling against government atrocities.

Mahasweta Devi was an Indian Bengali writer and social activist. Her notable literary works include *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Rudali*, and *Aranyer Adhikar*. She worked for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people (Lodha and Shabar) of West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh states of India. She was honoured with various literary awards. She is well known for her pioneering work among the most oppressed in the Indian society - the dispossessed tribals and the marginalized divisions such as landless labourers of eastern India. Mahasweta's writings are often based upon scrupulous research, conducted sometimes through unconventional means (such as oral history), into the history of the peoples she writes about.

Rudali

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* revolves on the two women who build up a partnership for existence. *Rudali* is one of the haunting stories that come from remote villages in Rajasthan. The novel depicted the struggle Sanichari oppressed against poverty, humiliation and wrecked by an

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exploitative patriarchal caste-based social system. Damaged by their own family, community members or the ruling rich, these women either submit to a consigned existence, which became prostitutes for survival; or like Sanichari and Bikhni, challenges their subjugation. The novel represents the miserable condition of a low-caste starving family in post-colonial Indian society. It highlighted the particularly miserable position of backward class women in rural India.

The story of *Rudali* draws attention to on the bond aging relation between women, the relation between Sanichari and Bikhni is off course close, sensitive, affectionate and helpful. Sanichari meets Bikhni in the market place, where she is searching her grandson is already lost every member of her family, she is free from all other ties and relations. On the other hand, Bikhni is equally abandoned by her son; leave her home with no plan about where to go. She prepares to survive by begging at some railway station if necessary. In every domain of life such as social, financial, caste, gender, age, family these women are tribally equal. Bikhni is pleased with Sanichari's house, and she loves a household work, she cleans the house, clothes, mats and quilts, she brings water from the river and with little effort start vegetable patch in front of Sanichari's house.

Sanichari was marginalized firstly as a girl child and she was forced to get married at the time of adolescence. And then her mother-in-law was also responsible for her marginalization, she always ridiculed her saying that she was born on Saturday so her name was inauspicious. She even said that Sanichari's life is full of sufferings and brings out a bad luck to their family. This made Sanichari feels rebellious against her mother-in-law. Sanichari was forced to go for the profession of a paid mourner (Rudali) because there was nobody to provide her with basic requirements of life. "For them, nothing has ever come easy. just the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt is exhausting. While those people spend huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to gain prestige..." (Devi.9)

More on Sanichari

Sanichari, the protagonist, is a vigorous Dalit widow who lives in a village of Bihar, reeling under the burden of earning for her family. Without any earning family member, she faces many difficulties, feeding his family as she was cursed as a 'witch' who has devoured the men of the house. Sanichari is alone, and she gets a supporter in her long-lost friend Bikhni, another ill-fated Dalit widow who was left alone by her own son.

"Everyone said - she's led such a hard,sad life. But finding Bikhni has been a blessing" (Devi.110).

The two form a deep bond and a partnership for survival as they find out financial help in different livelihoods as hired mourners (Rudali)to add pretentiousness to funerals of the feudal rich in their two-faced society. The new profession gave them their first sense of mastery. But then, Sanichari suffers another waft when Bikhni dies from dysentery as given lack of basic medical care.

After facing this much of loss, Sanichari is moreover shaken. But she refused to take a break and emerges revolts against her loneliness. She meets the brothel to recruit a band of Rudalis all by herself from among the prostitutes, where she encounters her fiercely disobedient

runaway daughter-in-law Parvatia. Wishing to free them from ill-treatment of the flesh trade, Sanichari encourages them on how to outshine as false mourners at funerals of the rich landlords,

"When you start, weep as if you have lost someone close to you, someone dear to your heart. Beat your breast and cry out with such feeling that their blood runs cold!" she teaches them.

The play culminates with these prostitutes forging loud mourning at the demise of the very man who pushed them into the pyre of prostitution. There is a sense of liberty from their indignant life in this alternative profession that earns them cash, food grains and goodies without having to sell their bodies.

Importance of Community

Community is a medium of offence for the bloodsuckers at the same time it become the form of security and strength for subjugated. The writer stresses on the importance of community for the weaker section of the society, the community bondage between the poor and oppressed is strong enough for survival of the each and all of the community. There are a number of examples depicts in the novel by the author about how the poor and oppressed, help and cooperate other poor and oppressed in their respective communities. The writer stresses on the importance of community for the weaker section of the society, the community bondage between the poor and oppressed is strong enough for survival of the each and all of the community.

Marginalized Women

The writer strongly portrays with examples that the marginalized women and men help and support each other, on the contrary the upper caste people cheat betrays their relatives for gaining money, wealth, land, and property. It is impossible for the marginalized people to survive in the village without the support of each other. The author presents the central character Sanichari work very hard besides with her husband, her son and her grandson to support her family for survival and livelihood. Sanichari and her childhood playmate Bikhni are abandoned by their family accepted by the bondage of community and friendship.

In the very opening of the storyline is that Sanichari be treated as a commodity and thrown away as soon as her commoditized existence becomes futile to the males in her life. Mahasweta discriminates between the civilized and common reader, reading a short story or novel about the condition of the exploited tribal sitting in his or her comfortable hearth and home, and the condition of the "Ho-Oraon-Mundra girls."

The tragic fate of tribal girls like Sanichari is clearly portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in this short story. The Indian paramilitary forces sought to subjugate the tribal people by burning their shelters, by looting their possessions and killing them, and by gang raping their women. When someone died in a Malik Mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies instantaneously raised the reputation of the family. The status of the Rudalis also rose.

"We can offer worship to Shiva as well. After all we've managed to save up sever rupees!" (Devi.73).

Such is the humiliating conditions in which the low caste woman is destined to live. And such women are termed as a separate caste or caste of low "whore" women. It is the women who are ruined by the Malik Mahajans who turn them into prostitutes.

"The Malik-Mahajan demands honor even when he is a corpse." (Devi.91)

But Sanichari rises to the occasion and confiscates the opportunity by making it an act of revenge and expression of historical opposition. Sanichari contemplated that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them.

It can also be identified as a predictable part of the advancement of the cultural politics of dissent and difference from the historically marginalized people of India. It can be justly termed as representation the cultural politics.

Finally, she turned up to be a Rudali just to earn her daily bread. Rudali is all about how to survive. She had to sell her tears which she never shed at the death of her own people but the death of the landowners so that she could earn livelihood.

To Conclude

Mahasweta intensely loves tribal people and makes every possible effort to make their life better. She openly criticizes government policies which are meant for a selected group of people. She not only writes about tribal but also write about subaltern, she has taken many significant steps to uplift the underprivileged people. In 1980, she launched a Bengali quarterly, Bortika which has become a forum for marginalized people to voice their opinions and stories. In 1983 she formed Paschim Bangla Kheriya Sabar Kalyan Samiti, a welfare society to train the tribal to earn their livelihood. In her stories and articles, she celebrates rustic beauty and innocence of tribal people which has become so rare in today's materialistic world. She feels angry when people separate the tribal people calling them different:

"Who says they are different? You deny rights to these people make them invisible and label them as different! I live, eat and sleep with them like one of their family."

She is a long-time champion for the political, social and economic. She describes the "suffering spectators of the India that is traveling to the twenty first century". Many of her stories are about tribal fighting subjugation, resisting exploitation, rebelling against power. The author not only portrays miseries of the widows but one who spent her entire life for the advancement of tribal community.

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