

Women as Doubly Subaltern: An Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*

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Abstract

The oeuvre of Mahasweta Devi falls in the postcolonial era. There are many writers that belong to the postcolonial literary world of India. Despite the contrary, studying Mahasweta Devi in a postcolonial context is thought over more rewarding, hence the inclined topic for the present research paper. She adopts various techniques to proceed in her creative explorations. Use of black humour is a unique implement deployed by her to represent the subalterns. The text like *Rudali* (2008) gives an expression to the predicament of the subalterns and to black humour. *Rudali* is a touching anecdote of the old and the baseless whose life is fraught with destitution of multiple kinds. The woman suffers as the bereaved: wife, mother, grandmother and friend. The women from the established fabric are just given to fun. They wait for deaths in their families so as to celebrate the funerals in so grand a fashion. The competition of celebration between them gives rise to black humour. This is where humanity loses its grounds. Mahasweta Devi has dealt with it with great success. Her fiction shares multifarious dimensions. Marginality subalternity and dehumanization are the key themes occurring in her fiction. She exercises all her capability to connect the periphery to the mainstream.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali*, Marginality, Subalterns, Subalternity, Black Humour and Dehumanization

Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi is a unique blend of writing and activism. In her opinion, literature cannot be separated from the joys and sorrows of common man. She is not an armchair scholar sitting pleasantly in her home and making fictitious pictures of the sufferers. She has always used her writing as a weapon to attack any exploiting agency and unveil the ugly faces of the exploiters. The plethora of novels, short-stories and plays by Mahasweta Devi matchlessly portray the unwritten tragic lives of the landless farmers, tribals, labourers and suppressed women. She is certainly one of the influential writers in India writing in English and also fighting for and about subalterns. The splendid portrait of our country progressing by leaps and bounds appear to be totally fake after realizing the trauma of the downtrodden portrayed in her writings.

Truly great and really pure (Maha - sweta) Mahasweta Devi surely deserves a salute for her selfless and tireless dedication for the upliftment of the marginalized. When asked in an interview what she planned to do the rest of her life, Mahasweta Devi answered that she wanted

to fight for the downtrodden and write creatively if and when she finds the time. True to her words, she has consistently been fighting for the cause of subaltern communities. For her activism and writings, this octogenarian has been awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Bhartiya Jnanpith award, the Ramon Magsaysay award and the Padma Vibhushan. But all these awards together cannot recount the glory of who is the true example of woman empowerment, who has heard the voice of the voiceless people so far, who has lived and thought and fought and worked and written for the upliftment of the downtrodden, who has shaken the soul of many, who has shown a mirror to the so-called shining India, she is really an ideal for those who want to use their skills for the betterment of others.

Mahasweta Devi's Feminism

Mahasweta Devi's feminism is based on the opposition of denial of woman as an equal human being by the male-dominated society. Among the subalterns a woman is doubly suppressed. She is seen as a commodity not as an individual. The elites as well as the members of her own society cause this suppression and exploitation. Even in the middle-class society a woman does not get equal opportunities. All these voiceless women of almost all sections find voices in her works.

In fact, Mahasweta Devi's feminism is so mingled with other sorts of oppression that she does not see it apart but in the memory of a reader, her female characters stick more deeply to the memory than her male characters. A reader cannot forget the valour of Dopadi in front of Senanayak towards the end of the novel. One cannot stop shedding tears over the terrible death of Doulati, Jashoda and the suicide committed by Josmina in "The Fairytale of Rajbhasha." AnjumKatyal rightly says in her introduction to her translation of *Rudali: From Fiction to Performance*. She says,

There is no doubt that the text does privilege class and community over women's issues in isolation. And yet it has a special significance when read as a feminist text. The common accusation of those who privilege a cross class gender perspective to those who position gender issues within those of class is that the woman's position tends to get marginalized or elided over in the 'general' interest of the class. Perhaps because Mahasweta Devi writes from a 'class point of view' but is herself a woman, there is no sign of this in her text, not even through slippages. In fact, her text shows us that gender and class need not be viewed as polarities; this one's discourse can be informed by class and simultaneously be gendered. One political stance need not rule out the other. (17)

Rudali

In her feminist text *Rudali*, Mahasweta Devi shows the zeal of a subaltern woman to survive. She says: "Rudali is about... 'how to survive' 'bread and mouth.'" It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this" (Katyal 9). The protagonist of the story Sanichari evolves from a voiceless subaltern to a voiced, empowered female who knows how to snatch bread from the mouth of the exploiting devilish system. Hunger is the greatest concern among these low-caste ganju people. When someone blames her inauspicious name for her misfortunes, she refuses the blame stating that everyone in the surroundings is no better than her: 'Muh' because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday - was your life any

happier? Somri, Budhni, Moongri, Bishri - do any of them have happier lives?
(*Rudali*54)

Sanichari

In Sanichari's life there is no end of the deaths of her loved ones. When the novel opens, we see her mother-in-law dying with the cry 'give me food.' Her brother-in-law and his wife die in the next coming years. Her husband dies due to cholera in a religious fair. Her son is a great solace for her since he is very caring and understanding but he also dies due to Tuberculosis. Her daughter-in-law leaves the home and becomes a prostitute. She looks after her grandson with the help of the other people of her community.

The trauma of a dying son in front of a mother's eyes is very painful as the author says: Scorching heat blowing about her day and night. She could see that he was going to die, and realized that her dreams of building a life around Budhua would never be fulfilled. Even her more modest dreams have never been realized. She had wanted to buy a wooden comb for her hair, to wear shellac bangles for a full year - neither of these dreams had materialized. With time, her dreams had changed shape. Her son and daughter-in-law would earn enough, they would support her, she imagined sitting in the winter sun sharing a bowl of gur and sattu with her grandson - Had this last dream been overambitious? Had she sinned by wanting too much? Is that why Budhua was wasting away before her eyes? (59) When her grandson grows up, Sanichari finds a job for him in the market for two rupees a month. For the first few months, he works hard but gradually he gets bored and one day he also runs away deserting his grandmother and goes away with some magic-show fellows.

When Sanichari is all alone, she meets her childhood friend Bhikni. Bhikni is also all alone and hearing the story of Shanichari, she thinks, "Is there no caring left in the world? Or is it just our fate, yours and mine?" (65) Thus, the two desolate women find the support of each other. With the help of cunning Dulan, they start working as 'rudalis,' ladies who cry loudly when some rich person is dead. They do well in their profession and gradually their demand grows rapidly. How these two ladies are able to survive on the deaths of the rich can be understood from these lines in *Rudali*,

Just for wailing, one kind of rate. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees two sikka. Wailing and beating one's breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground there - for that the charge is six rupees. At the kriya ceremony, we want cloth, preferably a length of plain black cloth. This is the rate. Over and above this, you people are like kings, can't get the goddess Lakshmi captive at home, you won't miss it! And Sanichari will sing your praises everywhere she goes. (75)

Satire on Hypocrisy

The author also makes a satire on the hypocrisy of the rich people who start a competition to flaunt their status on the deaths of their elders. Dulan tells about one such landlord,

His mother's left to lie in her own excrement all day. Once every evening Moti the dushad woman cleans her up - no one is concerned about loss of caste or defilement any longer, it seems. They've kept a maid to sleep beside her at night.

He's not willing to spend a paisa on trying to care her, but plans to spend thirty thousand on her funeral. (77)

Once again, Sanichari is alone since Bhikni, who goes to a relative's wedding never returns. She dies of Asthama in Ranchi. Now the question of survival stands before Sanichari. She is reluctant to go to Tohri red-light area to bring prostitutes with her to work as rudalis since her daughter-in-law is also there. At this critical time, Dulan once again empowers him saying, "Don't weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger" (90). Sanichari feels no hesitation in going to red-light area of Tohri now. She calls everyone including her daughter-in-law. The voiceless Sanichari becomes voiced, is evident from the last lines of *Rudali*:

Move, move, and let us get on with our work. The Malik belongs to us now. Gambhir's corpse stank of rotting flesh. The randirudalis surrounded his swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground. The gomatha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double! He and the nephew were reduced to helpless onlookers. While hitting her head on the ground and wailing loudly, Gulbadan turned her dry eyes in the direction of the nephew, cast him a leering wink and grinned. Then, listening to Sanichari's cry she rejoined the chorus. (91)

To Conclude

Thus, *Rudali* is about the empowerment of a downtrodden woman who not only survives despite of many calamities but also finds ways for other downtrodden women. The work can be said a saga of class and caste oppression by the system in which women find themselves doubly oppressed. The work gives a realistic presentation of the inevitable struggles of countless women among the poor and low caste people. But like 'mother-earth' women have immense capacity of tolerating sufferings. Although feminists opine that characteristic of tolerance among women, makes them weak. It is also true that our Indian society comprising of the rich and the poor is sustained by this quality.

All the women characters in *Rudali* are the example of life-affirming values. Although they are caught in the grimmest of situations, they strive to maintain their existence. Caught in the web of the double oppression of class and gender, they stretch their arms towards life. The end of the story aptly shows that given a chance, they can make the exploiting system extremely vulnerable. They have seen the worst in their lives and now they can enjoy every moment, they are given among the harsh realities of their lives. The oppression of the downtrodden and inequality between male and female is not a new phenomenon in recorded or unrecorded times. Supremacy of the male and the powerful has been taken for granted over thousands of years. Before independence it was easy to endure this injustice since we could blame the foreign rule for it. But after independence it is certainly a slap over the face of modernization, development and equality.

For Mahasweta Devi, the oppressed and the downtrodden people of India are neither figures nor a mere percentage of this fat subcontinent. They are her India the real India to her, their slavery is sufficient proof that the war of independence is still to be fought and won. Thus,

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all these works present different issues of subalternity in the lives of ‘doubly subaltern’ women. From Jashoda to Sanichari of *Rudali*, all force us to think whether women will ever be able to enjoy the equal status as of men in society? Will the day ever come when women will not have to pay the price for their being women? The day seems to be far away but the writer is optimistic since in her opinion women have greater strength, greater tolerance and greater power than men who make them survive in this cruel world.

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