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INHERITANCE OF LOSS AND RESISTANCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S 'RUDALI'

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**Abstract**

The tribal groups or 'adivasis' are the voiceless victims of the Indian hegemonic, capitalistic power structure. The paper examines the representation of the lives and performances of 'rudalis' ('the professional moaner') to understand their marginalization as performers, and their significance in the collective consciousness of the producers and consumers of Indian cultural artefact. The hunt for selfhood for women has been an undying focus since unbounded time. Within the strictly knit frontier women face double bigotry in the name of gender-caste-class discrimination. The search for the self of a woman was even unimaginable in an elite fringe a few centuries ago. But 'She' has travelled an elongated space and has reached at a crucial stage where multitude promises she can make and diverse conduits of self-realization she can yearn. *Rudali*, one of the most acclaimed short fictions of Mahasweta focuses the subalterns' undulating fight against unclothed and unabashed exploitation. It is a potent account of an abusive and despotic socio-economic system where the painful struggle is between human being and consuming hunger and survival, a system which

compels the 'have not's to live in a margin. To encapsulate, the paper is a tolerant observer of a brilliant blow between rule and resistance, confrontation and conquest.

**Key words:** subaltern, discrimination, confrontation, liberty

Literature is the momentous idiom of society and it has an extensive account of its own. Indian legendary historiography incorporates feminist standpoint as one of the imperative arenas. The hunt for selfhood has been an undying focus since unbounded time. Stereotyped images, utility and customary collective beliefs trouble the structure of any society where identities are framed according to these backgrounds. This results in nepotism of definite sects of people who are measured weak and powerless in a class-caste-ridden society. However, within this strictly knit frontier, women face double bigotry in the name of gender-caste-class discrimination. The search for the self of a woman was even unimaginable in an elite fringe a few centuries ago. But 'she' has travelled an elongated space and has reached at a crucial

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stage where multitude promises she can make and diverse conduits of self-realization she can yearn.

Mahasweta Devi is accepted and established by her readers both in India and beyond as a prominent name in the history of modern Indian literature because of her avid vow and a sagacity of history to her revelation of injustice and exploitation. She makes use of her ingenious oomph to give an inventive idiom to the ruthless realities of poverty and socio- economical and moreover political exploitation in the current society. Her novella *Rudali* focuses the subalterns' undulating fight against unclothed and unabashed exploitation. It is a potent account of an abusive and despotic socio-economic system where the painful struggle is between human being and consuming hunger and survival, a system which compels the 'have nots' to live in a margin. To encapsulate, it is a story of a brilliant clash between power and resistance.

Right from the beginning, Mahasweta Devi places Sanichari, the central character in historical position, offers a socio-economic backdrop and emphasizes her crisis which is common to her class, caste and gender. The writer strongly ascertains that Sanichari, who shares the condition of dearth with her co-villagers, is one of a community. The implication is that familiarity with

Sanichari's one life itself familiarizes the life of a community. In this way the individual is historicized and runs a harsh powerful critique of an exploitative and repressive system. "In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads were in a majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty." (54) From the beginning, she must face so many impediments from social and economical levels because she replaces the normative urban observation of the ceaseless Indian villages static, harmonious, fostered by tradition. She is a poor, low-caste agricultural labourer for whom nothing has ever come easy. Every loss she suffers is because of the dismal poverty, the knotted life and the unharmed lack of anticipation of any alteration or expansion.

Malik-mahajan Ramavatar is the representative of a ruthless system which viciously assaults the most clandestine freedom of an entity so that even pain is warped in the frantic fight for endurance. Grief is turned into a commodity and mourning is labour. If sorrow is ruled by the malik-mahajan, tears can be used as a source of earning. When her mother-in-law died Sanichari did not cry. At that time, her husband and his brother were in jail because of malik-mahajan Ramavatar Singh. Enraged at the loss of some wheat, Ramavatar Singh had all the young dushad and ganju males of the village locked up. "There wasn't even a cupful of grain in the

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house... handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she [Sanichari] was so busy that there was no time to cry” (54-55). When her brother in-law and his wife die, Sanichari is once again remains silent, not able to weep, because she is so stressed for the fact that Ramavatar is trying to have all the dushads and ganjus dispossessed from the village. She muses, “Weep or worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbors’ cheaply at the ‘shraddh’?” (55) But Sanichari forgets to cry at her husband’s death also such is her lot. She borrows a small amount of twenty rupees for her husband’s ‘shraddh’ has to pay back fifty rupees through bonded labour over the next five years. Malik-mahajans like Ramavatar Singh, and later his son Lachman Singh, are shown as domineering and manipulating almost every aspect of the lives of the lower caste villagers. They can have the men locked up whenever they want, they can use and abandoned the women and haul out years of unpaid labour as repayment for small debts. There is no doubt that the text does privilege class and community over women’s issues in isolation, woman’s perspective tends to get marginalized or elided over in the ‘general’ interest of the class. But the gender and class need should not be viewed as polarities that one’s discourse can be informed by class and simultaneously be gendered.

The loss of Budhua to Sanichari is the loss of a compassionate, caring and considerate companion. Sanichari cannot imagine a life without him. In spite of it, she does not cry for her son either. Sanichari finds herself totally alone; she experiences the support and bonding of her community. The class of malik-mahajans, who has evicted the poor of their land in the years following the Independence, generally holds convoluted funerals at which orgiastic weeping and ululation is performed by the ‘rudalis’. Sanichari, the poor, low-caste agricultural labourer, after she becomes a professional mourner, all she has to do is weep, wail and ululate, roll on the ground, smack herself on the breast, belly and forehead, and she will receive fine meals, cash and clothes. The malik-mahajans are obliged to recompense Sanichari handsomely for shedding tears in memory of her ‘benefactors’, their deceased kith and kin. The tears which would have been a consequential custom of socialisation for Sanichari, when she herself was genuinely bereaved remained unshed, only to reappear now in a perverted viable form and human tears have become commoditized.

In fact, the co modification of grief is shown first as a characteristic of the malik-mahajan’s social class. When there is a death in their families, they have to hire ‘rudalis’ to mourn for them so as to enhance their prestige since this market

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exists, the outcast and marginalized can supply their skilled labour to service it. The rudalis, the exhausted bond labourers, have nothing to sell but their howls and some of them have been seduced, ruined and thrown into the whores' quarters by the same malik-mahajans. The dim, shadowy pictures of the night now take pride and pleasure of place in the elaborate performance of a rich man's death ritual. "... rudalis surrounded the swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground. The gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double!" (91) Using this eerie custom of the rudalis as a metaphor, Mahasweta Devi has created a story of a heart-rending 'survival strategy' or 'coping mechanism.' She has delivered a potent and composite icon—rich in incongruity— an organised band of women, the marginalised and exile, intervening to destabilize the grave pretence of a juncture which is metonymy for a patriarchal, manipulative system. *Rudali* elucidates the various stratagems of continued existence employed by the subalterns as individuals and as a community. They are all disheartened and displaced and have been destined to be taciturn and recluse in familial hierarchy. Anjun Katyal in the 'Metamorphosis of Rudali' states that "Greif is turned into a commodity and mourning is labor. If sorrow is controlled by the imprisoned, tears can be used as a

produce, a source of earning by professional mourners" (5)

Mahasweta wants to show that among the poor, all exploitation is vertical. Horizontally, at the level of community and at the level of the family where the husband, father or household head are commonly oppressors of the women, in *Rudali*, there is an alternative picture. Dulan is the example who knows how to use the system. Sanichari and her husband are shown as partners. They are together both at home or livelihood. Budhua is shown as sensitive, thoughtful, gentle, caring both towards his mother and his wife. The author posits class solidarity as a norm; men and women of the lower classes/castes are helpful and supportive to each other. Moreover, the relationship between Sanichari and Bikhini, who are childhood playmates who rediscover each other as ageing, lonely women and decide to support each other, is the major statement of bonding and support within a community seen in the text. They are disjointed but their lot is common. Both are poor and struggling for survival. They are equals, both are equally without family, equally abandoned but on the basis of their common fate, they construct their companionship, the disability turns into an enabling force. Even after the death of Bikhini, Sanichari does not cry because tears are a commodity for her now, it is a part of a commercial transaction. She

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knows her loss lies deeper, but life must go on. It is a shift from darkness to light.

In *Rudali* Mahasweta Devi enables these subalterns to resort to ‘strategic essentialism’, to borrow the concept of Gayatri Spivak, a sort of temporary solidarity, an ‘essentialist’ position in order to be able to act. Anjum Katyal comments:

I see *Rudali*...as activist fiction. It sets out to support the process of struggle she writes about—by enlightening, educating, celebrating, reaffirming and inspiring. It participates in the struggle by attacking, through accusation and exposure, the exploitative system the struggle targets and the individuals through whom this system functions. Fiction is honed into a weapon by being presented as its apparent opposite, reportage. Just as Dulan’s work in *Rudali* is consciousness-raising, *Rudali*’s work is conscientizing. (27)

The indispensable fortitude in Sanichari finds its path when her lingering inhibitions are removed and she emerges as confident, in control and empowered. She confronts her social superiors and declares boldly, manipulating the situation cunningly to trap them in their own hypocrisy that if patriarchy restrains her, the greed of the superiors will be exposed. Infact, everyone irrespective of their gender, caste or status has a right to live life with dignity and liberty, but when ‘She’ is denied her right to live, she fights back. *Rudali* unfolds the story of people like Sanichari, who forever search for a real space, a homely space within the mainstream where they can ‘belong’ actually and where love and acceptance can promise them with legitimate refuge and bliss.

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