

Rudali: A Quintessential Figure of Subalternity, Hegemony, and Marginalisation

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Abstract: Dalits are closely identified and recognized as subaltern. This term finds its origin from the Latin word sub meaning next below and alternus meaning every other. Subalterns are a group of people or community who are excluded because of their inferior rank in the Varna system and are under the hegemony of the dominant class. In the Indian context, marginality stresses on the notion of boundary, edge, and limit. Subalterns or dalits occupy the edge or boundary of the Indian societal arrangement. This has given rise to their literature which is arresting the attention of its readers for its authentic descriptions of invisible lives. Mahasweta Devi has worked effortlessly and dedicated her entire life for the upliftment and betterment of this class of tribals and dalits, who are tortured, disrespected, and exploited. Her short fiction Rudali portrays the constant struggle of exploitation and survival of Sanichari. This paper explores her journey as a winner, a quintessential figure of subalternity, hegemony and marginalisation.

1 INTRODUCTION

"The strong survive but the courageous triumph."
Michael Scott

Since ages, Literature and society have a close association with each other. Every event that occurs is duly recorded variously by different people. Revolutions, movements, science and technology, feudal systems, ancient civilizations all find place in books, which is created by writer(s). Writers perform the role of a social reformer and point at the wrong and also suggest remedies to the ailments of society. They draw attention to the emotional stresses, socio-economic offences and backwardness of a community. Specifically, when talking about Indian writers who voice the callous realities of society which is divided into various castes and race, voices the racial isolation and efforts put in to climb the economic and social ladder by them. The deep-seated hostilities of a large group of people against the dominant group of society are expressed by these writers. A writer makes a conscious effort to bring to light all that is hidden and experienced in a lifetime. Harish Narang writes:

The writers attitude plays a crucial role in depicting this reality, infact no correct formulation of

a book or a writer is possible without probing into the writers attitude to life because a piece of literature is not merely a dream but an act of deliberate communication, a choice of verbal gesture of advocating a certain point of view. (Narang, 2014)

What a writer creates is a reflection of his or her own world. Largely therefore, literature created is autobiographical in nature. This way, the writer gives way to a thought, an idea or a view that sheds light on society through every character, situation and plot of a story. Writers as part of society are affected and they reflect the changes ushered through their writings. As an informant of society, writer(s) form the bridge which links the two.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Dalits are closely identified and recognized as 'subaltern'. This term finds its origin from the Latin word 'sub' meaning 'next below' and 'alternus' meaning 'every other'. The *Compact Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus* defines 'subaltern' as an officer in the British army below the rank of captain. But the connotation this term has acquired is far different. Subalterns are considered a group of people or

community who are excluded because of their inferior rank in the Varna system. They are under the hegemony of the dominant class. In the Indian context, marginality stresses on the notion of boundary, edge and limit. 'Subalterns' or 'dalits' occupy the edge or boundary of the Indian societal arrangement. As a result, the 'untouchables' have occupied a larger and a wider significance in society. This has given rise to their literature which is arresting the attention of its readers for its authentic descriptions of invisible lives. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines a subaltern as:

A subaltern is someone who has no access to social mobility. The case is comparable with men on a much lower class scale than women. ... The disease of gender blindness like many chronic diseases keeps the culture alive but unhealthy. It does not kill. The culture is alive and weak, culture with a huge split inside it, marked by class. It is because of this gender blindness changes with class mobility. (Spivak, 2011)

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is a synonym of tribals and dalits, who are ill-treated tortured disrespected and exploited. She has used her socio-political writings as a tool to voice the rights of an underprivileged class of society. Devi was born to a privileged middle-class Bengali family on 14 January, 1926 in Dhaka, now part of Bangladesh. Born into a family with a long custom of civic spirit and high literacy, she grew up among men (her relatives) who played important roles in shaping early Indian nationalism as well as modern Bengali literature— apparently the richest and the most dynamic of the literary traditions in India. Devi was not just a fiction writer but she was actively engaged as a creative writer, editor and journalist. A writer so multi-faceted merits no comparisons and her volumes of work speak for her. Mahasweta Devi articulates the socio-cultural, mytho-religious and circumstantially muted positions of the subalterns in contrast with the ruling, nationalist patriarchal class. She exposes the superficiality of the bourgeois class who claimed that they lived in a world that was based on equality and freedom. Mahasweta Devi throughout her stories searches for this equilibrium but is unable to locate it.

Rudali is a powerful short fiction written by Mahasweta Devi. The decisive motif of the short fiction is to portray the constant struggle of exploitation and survival. Devi has created a strong character called Sanichari whose complete life revolves around mistreatment and endurance. Born on a Saturday, Sanichari is named after '*sanichar*', which in the Hindu mythology is considered inauspicious. So, from the time of her birth Sanichari had to battle hard for her existence and identity. Often

quoted by her mother-in-law '*sanichar*' or inauspicious heightens the tension reaming high in her life. She is unable to understand why and how those born on the other days of the week are lucky and why is she termed '*manhoos*' or ominous. Sanichari is also poor which places her in a weak socio-economic condition in a village of Rajasthan and her caste pushes her to the periphery of severe poverty. The opening lines of the short story, "In Tahad village, Ganju's and Dushads were in the majority. Sanchihari was ganju by caste. Like, the other villagers her life was lived in poverty" (Devi, 2009).

She suffers from brutal poverty, as a result is unable to pay off for the funeral rites of her own husband. In order to fulfill customs and traditions she is forced to borrow rupees twenty and thumbprint on a paper for rupees fifty to be paid in the next five years. Unfortunately, being poor and illiterate her condition worsens and she is gets into deeper debt. She's even helpless at the time of death of her mother-in-law, brother-in-law and sister-in-law and her son Budhua. In order to perform the cremating rites she had no time to shed tears in remembrance. She feared Ramavatar and later his son Lanchman who could resort to anything to teach a lesson to the ganjus and dushads. Her son Budhua, died suffering from tuberculosis and her daughter-in-law left her and the grandson Haroa eloped with a magician. Her utterance while Budhua still suffering is poignant. She utters sincerely:

Sanichari felt as the flames of the funeral pyre were burning within her, she felt the 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. (Devi, 2009)

However, Sanchihari was not affected by her son's death because she had a bigger responsibility of upbringing her grandson. Unfortunately, her grandson Haroa also leaves her and Sanichari is again left wrecked and incapacitated. Fortunately, some happy moments does knock her door, when she meets her childhood friend Bikhani. Bikhani has the same story like Sanichari's and they start living together at Sanichari's place on Bikhani's earnings. Their survival needs force them to find work and here Dulan's entry changes the entire scenario. He introduces them to the profession of *rudali*, wailing loud and rolling on the floor for the dead one was now to be their job. Sadly, they were driven towards the profession only to fight hunger. Their shift to the profession of *rudali* comments on the miserable condition of the Indian poor and the writer purposely introduces the reader to understand the divide in

society. The character of Dulhan is used as the mouthpiece to remark upon them. Dulhan remarks in the novella, "Don't weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger" (Devi, 2009). The survival needs forced the two to adopt the profession of *rudalis*. According to Dulhan, this profession was practiced to extract money from the rich and simultaneously unleashed the hypocrisy of the elite class of the society. This profession of *rudali* brought them in demand in the entire region. "They were professional. The world belongs to the professional now, not to the amateur. . . . Professional mourning for the unmourned dead is a regular business. . . ." (Devi, 2009). Thus their business prospered. This gave Sanichari the confidence that allowed her to grow as a fighter.

Seeing the emptiness of Malik Mahajan for their dead taught her few good lessons. While the person is alive no care is taken but after his or her death grand funerals are planned and *rudali*'s are summoned. This raised the prestige of their family which actually was hollow and empty. "...the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family" (Devi, 2009). The story takes a dramatic turn when Bikhani, also dies and that leaves Sanichari afflicted again. The death news leaves Sanichari in shock and she attempts to visualize her future without her and pushes her from grief into fear. She deeply sighs:

What did she feel? Grief? No, not grief, fear. Her husband died, her son had died, her grandson had left, her daughter-in-law had run away – there had always been grief in her life. But she never felt this devouring fear before. Bikhani's death affected her livelihood, her profession, that's why she's experiencing this fear. (Devi, 2009)

She had a fear that she was also growing old that may become an obstacle to her profession. But Sanichari has evolved and knows that in order to stay alive she has to work which is possible only if she continues the profession of *rudali*. She had to protect her profession just like our land. Dulhan's utters, "It's wrong to give up one's land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you must'nt give it up" (Devi, 2009).

We also witness Sanichari as the emancipator of the prostitutes or whores. She takes the initiative in giving the chance to the prostitutes of '*randi bazar*' (whore's market) to mourn and earn some money. Dulhan remarks, "It's a question of survival" (Devi, 2009). Sanichari reflects the image of a strong woman who fights exploitation, oppression and turns a survivor against all odd circumstances. She learns to

exploit her tears against Malik Mahajans and is able to enjoy better life which once was denied. However, the amount received (as *rudali*) is very little yet it stands in contrast to all the demands which the poor and the low caste bear at the time of the deaths to fulfill religious rites. As a woman, she is marginalised and she suffers under the dictates of upper classes. This has been the situation in many parts of India when a woman is double marginalised for being a woman and from the low caste. They (women) become mere commodities used and discarded. Sanichari is also a victim of this particular situation which she battles hard to recover. Sanichari's discovery of her daughter-in-law at the *randipatti* (whore market) brings a lot of embarrassment to her, yet she accepts her giving way of life to join the other whores as *rudali*. Her dilemma discourages her to do so but after Dulhan's advice we find she accepts her. "What one is forced to do to feed oneself is never considered wrong" (Devi, 2009). Anjum Katyal rightly comments, "Grief is turned into commodity, and mourning is labour. If sorrow is controlled by the malik-mahajans, tears can be used as a produce, of earnings by professional mourners" (Devi, 2009). Sanichari as a woman stands as a hope to all the whores who have been forced to become whores whether by choice or used and discarded by their mahajans in order to acquire the colourful life promised by the rich. Nonetheless, we find one thing that connects all reasons mentioned together is the hunger for food. In order to survive one has to feed the stomach otherwise death is compulsory. Sanichari laments aloud, "Money, rice, new clothes- without getting these in return, tears are a useless luxury" (Devi, 2009). The whores are out casted by every community in the world but Mahasweta Devi through Sanichari comments on the situation of these whores. A helping hand is extended by Sanichari to them which may be enumerated a bold assertion by her, though being low caste. Anjum Katyal writes, "Whores are not a separate caste, as they believe, merely poor women like them who are forced to earn a living. ...the prostitutes too are victims and should not be treated like outcasts and untouchables" (Katyal, 2009). Sanichari evolves in the story from being submissive to strong and powerful woman. Vandana Gupta rightly comments, on Sanichari, "the evolution of the protagonist, Sanichari, from a suppressed 'voiceless' subaltern woman to an empowered and empowering agent of resistance carrying the potential of deconstructing the exploitative forces" (Devi, 2009). She reflects a positive approach to survive. She witnesses many deaths in her own house but does not lose her composure but on Bikhani's death she

badly shaken and realises the upcoming challenge of her life. However, she assures herself not to cry again as she has understood tears are now a mere commodity and part of commercial transaction. Though she fears the loneliness of her life yet she moves ahead. She evolves as confident, courageous, provider, decision-maker and an employer to many outcastes at the end. This assertion is confirmed by Anjum Katyal in her article "The Metamorphosis of Rudali" where she writes, "...the text sees an evolution in the central character Sanichari, who emerges at the end as better equipped to adapt, survive, and manipulate the system- in the other words, more empowered - than she is at the beginning"(Devi, 2009).

Devi's women caricatures are circumstantially muted since their right to speak and express is forcefully taken away and pushed to the margin. However, Sanichari changes the tradition and evolves stronger and indestructible. Her dalit representation in her story is purposeful to give voice to the voiceless and she appears successful in her task. Vandana Gupta writes, "Mahasweta Devi in fact, moves beyond to envision a 'remedial' nation. She re-visions nation as a space which is inclusive, egalitarian, non-hegemonic, gender-neutral that truly empowers the erstwhile 'othered' populace" (Gupta, 2009).

Sanichari emerges a bread winner to many women who are outcasted and herself, who had a tragic history. She is a classic example of being burdened by the malik-mahajan, and severe poverty that compelled her to remain at the periphery of society. She struggled hard to be recognized and she does get an opportunity to mock at the malik-mahajan through her profession of rudali. She collects many whores to mourn the death of Gambhir Singh. She learns the hypocrisy practiced by the maliks and exposes the truth of their life. To this, S. Guru Shobhna rightly remarks: Leaders are born out of survival such as Sanichari. She emerged as natural leader to the randi rudalis and made the commercialization of tears not only a s means of survival but as a tool in the hands of the victims to strike back. A woman who could not shed her tears on her own grief, sign of depression became a professional mourner and inverted it as sign of empowerment. (Guru, 2016)

3 CONCLUSIONS

Thus, Sanichari emerges a winner, a quintessential figure of subalternity, hegemony and marginalisation. Her journey is not a happy one, yet continued

existence is important. According to the theory of existentialism and its multiple prepositions, two imperative opinions incorporated in the novella are 'existence precedes essence' and 'freedom' of an individual. Both of these are highlighted through the character of Sanichari. Her existential spirit throughout the novella is remarkable and motivates millions, that a day arrives when exploitation, suffering and pain is put to an end. In case of Sanichari and the other women portrayed in the short novella, the profession of mourning (*rudali*) serves as an escape window from age long tyranny and affliction.

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