

MAHASWETA DEVI'S RUDALI: FACT, FICTION, AND FILM

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Rudali' is a unique subaltern and feminist text. Devi's short story as well as the film adaption of the same, Kalpana Lajmi's Rudaali has been explored in this article. The text highlights the plight of women in the system of exploitation and hunger. Amidst the never-ending class struggle, that Devi's work so effectively deliver, the issue of gender struggle is highlighted in Lajmi's film. This article explores how Mahasweta Devi discovers a language through which the subaltern may speak, the language of tears. Tears that have been eternally associated with the female become the unique language of the feminine to speak for themselves in both Devi's 'Rudali' and Lajmi's Rudaali.

Keywords-*Caste system, Female plight, subjugation, gender struggle, subaltern, Dalit women*



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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar states: “I have a dream that one day; Dalit women won't be paraded naked, raped or forced to commit suicide for nothing wrong. Not only the Dalit women but whole women society will not be forced to do menial jobs. Women won't be disrespected, exploited, neglected or won't be treated as a sex-object only in Indian society. I dream that one day, equality will come in all spheres and women suffering will come to end.” (Ambedkar)

The Caste System in India has been accountable for social differentiations through religion, class, gender, language, tribe and region. Differentiations as such pre-exist in the society, it becomes problematic when one or more of these become the only basis of societal ranking and leads to unequal access to significant resources like income, power, prestige and wealth. The caste system is a closed stratified structure, an individual's social status is intrinsically linked with the caste they are born into. The influence of caste system is evident in the society through its restrictions on varying food habits and the unequal division of privileges decided through the individual's caste they were birthed into.

The writings of Mahasweta Devi deals with many forms of oppression, her activist zeal is displayed in her writings, which is representative of her contribution towards raising the problems of the marginalized. She acts as a spokesperson for the voiceless by exposing the evils of caste inherent in Indian society. Mahasweta Devi possesses a unique approach towards oppression, while writings of most female writers generally deal with problems of the upper class or middle-class women, Devi brings forth the issue of gender oppression enmeshed within caste and class dichotomies. Her activist writings exist in the form of short stories, plays, novels and essays, and examine the trident patterns/forms of oppression- caste, gender oppression and class. Devi's main focus is centred around the underprivileged tribes and castes of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand. The Ganjus, Kheria Sabars, Mundas and Santhals, in these regions, the low caste people are the most marginalized. She majorly wrote about these issues in her work: Caste inequalities, privileged vs. the underprivileged communities, class contradictions, the affluent vs. the poor and dispossessed and gender discrimination, male vs. female. The above binaries are highlighted in her writings and travails of the marginalized are brought forward to the public.

Devi's activist associations made her realise that even post-independence, inhuman condition of the downtrodden persisted, they lacked basic amenities like land, water and food. This deprivation forced them into bondage labour and slavery. The political leaders of our country provided no special provisions for women or people below poverty line, who are unaware of their human rights. They are discriminated against and their basic needs are dismissed, their condition is made even worse due to misguided policies. Mahasweta Devi's characters represent the same struggles, they're side-lined and denied any participation in religious, social or political activities, forcing them to lead a life of total deprivation. This leads to ostracization of an individual from society, by stripping away his or her social, political and economic rights. Mahasweta Devi's writings are often labelled as feminist texts but she firmly rejects this idea, her writings according to her are not exclusively identified with women, for her, gender is incorporated within the class and caste discourse. Emphasizing the former one at the expense of the other two would be a 'denial of history', as seen by Devi, "For you it may be important that this story is written by a woman her woman has adapted it into a play, and yet another adapted it into a film. But I think that a writer has written the story, a director has adapted it into a play and another directed the film. It is not very important to me whether it was done by

a woman or not . . . I write as a writer, not as a woman ... When I write I never think of myself as a woman. I have written a story called Chotty Munda and His Arrow which is about a tribal man. Aranyer Adhikar is about male tribals. So what? These are stories of people's struggle, their confrontation with the system ... I look at the class, not at the gender problem. Take a story like Ganesh Mahima -it is about a woman. But I have written it from the class point of view. In Rudali you have a character like Dulan who knows how to use the system. In my stories men and women alike belong to different classes.”

Stories of Mahasweta Devi are derived from her first-hand knowledge about the specific situation she is writing about, be it historic or socio-economic. Mahasweta Devi’s writings emerged from her wide travels by foot, in order to reach the marginalized and her involvement with them; she witnessed the ruthless impacts of absentee landlordism, debt bondage, despoiled environment, Naxalit movement, Bengal famine, Indian freedom movement and neglect of state towards the indigenous people. Her writings also subvert the class, phallogocentric and caste- ridden authority in the society. Mahasweta Devi’s years spent in social activism, gives her a vantage point far more superior than the one obtained through media and textual knowledge alone. Devi, through her writing technique, assures that her work is not treated merely as fiction but be categorized as historical text. In her famous work Rudali for instance, she refuses to individuate one of the characters Sanichari- who could too easily be perceived and positioned as the ‘heroine’- through psychological and physical description, to consider her character in isolation from the context and to put her centre-stage, and not as part of the concerned community. The materiality of Devi’s text lies in the relentless de-sentimentalizing, in the reinstating of the fact that primary concerns lie with considerations of the stomach, the driving force beyond censure, outweighing socioreligious convention or emotion. No romantic cliches or idealized notions of the village life are permitted to stand, instead material details like food production, labour and the struggle for survival, are stressed. The harsh realities of exploitation, death and poverty are exposed through the characters in brutal detail, which are mainly prototypes who exist out in the real world and not just as fiction.

Mahasweta Devi herself states, her work as an activist, journalist and creative writer overlap: “As a journalist I play the same role as an editor. I travel extensively in the villages and collect information about people's sufferings, complaints, political exploitation, their protests and

write about these in the press. . . As an editor, journalist and writer I experience no conflict between the three roles.” Rudali is an activist fiction, it supports-by educating, celebrating, inspiring, reaffirming and enlightening-the course of struggle Devi writes about. The work participates in the journey of struggle by exposing, attacking, accusing the exploitative system, it targets the individuals through whom this system functions. In Rudali, just as the character of Dulan's is mainly for consciousness-raising, Rudali as a text contributes through conscientizing. Devi's process of creative writing is deeply engaged with her committed and politicized consciousness, as would activism be in any other form, working towards the same goal. Rudali, as a work is more than fiction or journalism, and solely political. Devi, in her work, takes into consideration the urban literate readership, an awareness through exploration about the myths of rural village life. But in doing so, she doesn't compromise with any of her presentations or attempts at 'translating' for the ease of the ones unacquainted with the milieu Devi depicts. When questioned about the often harsh and shocking content in her stories, consumed by the urban middle-class readership, she rejected the idea that her writing was directed at shocking or used as a 'stunt'. Urban sensibility's ignorance surrounding the rural life, lead to grim facts being perceived as sensationalism.

For Mahasweta Devi, documenting the societal hardships through fiction writing and the social activism are inseparable. The events that take place in her work Rudali, are indicative of the exploitative system that controls each of our lives, more so of the downtrodden. In the story, Sanichari's husband dies due to cholera after consuming the old contaminated milk, which was offered by the rich people to lord Shiva's idol. Lack of awareness and blind faith in religion and its customs also plays a major role in the exploitation of the low caste. In keeping with the traditions, Sanichari had to pay twice the amount to the local priest, for the rituals of her dead husband. The local priests usually serve the high class, in this case Ramavatar Singh, the heartless lord, she is in turn indebted to the landlord, the exploitative system thus works in a vicious cycle. The character of Ramavatar represents the dehumanized and exploitative system, controlling the lives of the subalterns such as Sanichari. Sanichari's son also dies of tuberculosis while in the service of Ramavatar's son, Lachman Singh. Her grandson is also forced to take up employment under the murderers of his father, since there is no alternate source of employment, except for submitting to the exploitative religious and socio-economic environment. Rich think of oppression as their birth right, victimization thus becomes

hereditary for both the exploited and the exploiter. The villagers in the story are manipulated and taken advantage of, due to their ignorance, superstitions and illiteracy. The incident of borrowing money by Sanichari for her husband's samskara, illustrates how bondage labour functions in the Indian system. In contrast, the mahajans don't flinch from making death a grand and pompous affair, full of splendour: "...the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family" (Devi Ganguli 80). Their prestige is enhanced through the number of rudalis present at the death ceremony, since it also acts as a signifier of the wealth and power that vests within the Mahajan households. For Rudalis, crying involves no emotions in the process, it is for the 'belly's sake' since 'there's no bigger god than one's belly' (Devi Ganguli 69). Sanichari hesitates when she is asked to join the profession of a rudali since she could not even shed tears at her son's death, a villager then explains to her: 'I'm not asking you to shed tears you couldn't shed for Budhua. These tears are your livelihood ... just as you cut wheat and plough land, you'll be able to shed these tears' (Devi Ganguli 70).

Besides creating exploited and submissive characters like Bhikhni and Sanichari, Mahasweta Devi also introduces characters like Dulan, he narrates the history of oppressor and oppression, wherein the Rajputs infiltrated the tribal land and took possession as masters through force and power. Dulan also acts as an advisor and help to the tribals, through enlightening and educating them about their basic rights. Knowledge and information plays a very powerful role in the lives of people like Dulan, he strives to educate and empower the untouchables. He appreciates the Rudalis and their profession of mourning, since they are considered as an organized labour. Characters like Dulan are created to aware the subalterns that they can also be empowered through organization and education. Devi has created her rebellious characters with a purpose, so that they can rise in consciousness and take participation in what could be referred to as a transformed and new possibility, revolutionary movement, for the transformation and betterment in their as well as society's condition- the movement from passivity into freedom. The opening sentences of Rudali begin as such- "In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads were in the majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty" (Devi 22). The argument that follows between Somri and Sanichari regarding the inevitable connection between happiness in life and the day of one's birth is indicative of the fact that the ones belonging to Sanichari's caste, gender and class have little to no hope of a bright future. The need for survival is quite evident, even more in case of

Sanichari for whom life is more difficult because of her gender. She's doubly oppressed and incapable of fighting against the system, wherein the oppressor is also the employer and the only source of income, having no escape from the vicious cycle. But ironically, Sanichari finds a way to beat the system by becoming a professional mourner, a 'rudali', the ones who are paid to shed tears and grieve at the death of members of the upper-class. Grief is also commodified by the upper caste and turned into a ritual, to enhance their prestige and position in the society. To the benefit of the outcast, this very ritual characteristic become a means of employment for them, shedding tears are turned into an art. Sanichari, unable to grieve at her family member's death, shed tears at the death of Malik's kin. Tears are therefore monetized, they become a source of earning and a produce. Devi implies through her work, that for lower classes and castes even their tears don't belong to them- their emotions and tears, just like their bodies are encaged and hostages in accordance to the requirements of their masters.

The "rudalis" in Devi's short story can be viewed as a whole other category of women isolated from society because they mourn for the dead and touch their bodies in the process. Such a marginalization is depicted through the following lines: "Still crying, she washed off the sindoor from her head in the shallow Kuruda river, broke her bangles, and returned to the village. The panda of the Shiva temple at Tohri demanded that she made ritual offerings there before returning to her village, since her husband had died there. On his insistence she spent a precious rupee and a quarter on a Spartan offering of sand and sattu which Budhua offered as panda" (Rudali 56-7). The caste-system is also fraught with issue of gender, since prostitutes and their profession is stigmatized and labelled as a 'separate caste' (Devi Ganguli 80). Ironically enough, this 'separate caste' is a construct designed by the patriarchy, and its awareness is a constant threat, when it comes to the security and the safety of women belonging to the lower caste. The community of 'dushads' and 'ganjus' are well aware of the fact, that the young women employed in the fields of the malik never come back home. Initially they're sent to 'a nice house, then to the randipatti- the whores' quarters' (Devi Ganguli 60).

Rudali is a tale of survival, it depicts the journey of a low caste from a weak, repressed and dependent woman to a strong and empowered woman, who has successfully learnt the economics and business of her profession and can contemplate forming a union of prostitutes and rudalis. The formation of union would also result in wheels turning a full circle, since many

prostitutes were formerly mistresses of such upper caste masters and have also provided off springs to them. Anjum Katyal, the translator of Rudali, states that Devi has successfully transformed a woman by turning her occupation into ‘organized profession’, the move from intensive casual labour to an organized sector made her character more powerful. Another powerful aspect of Devi’s Rudali is reflected in female solidarity through companionship, mutual dependency and closeness between the two characters, Bhikni and Sanichari. The death of Bhikni is handled in an understated style, but the very lack of emphasis- an unemotional approach actually heightens impact.

Sanichari’s life exhibit the process of a woman turning into a Rudali, the women in this community either turn into a prostitute or a Rudali, as stated by Devi, “ It is women who are ruined by Malik Mahajans who turn into whores...” (Rudali 80) The sadistic pleasure derived by Malik Mahajans in tormenting the women of lower castes, either for their own sexual appetite or for power is blatantly depicted in the story. Fate of these lower caste women reside in the hands of upper caste men, everyone except themselves are the creator of their destiny, the only two options given to them is to be a prostitute or a Rudali. The lack of basic amenities in their community plays a major role in strengthening their age-old traditions like the Rudali ritual. Dr. Ambedkar’s statement aptly describes the lifestyle led by the village people as that “ditch of regionalism and the den of ignorance and parochialism.” (Ambedkar). The superstitions prominent in the lower caste society provide them some consolation for the unjust lives they led, but Devi makes her character question the very groundless viewpoint, “Like other villagers her life too was lived in desperate poverty. Her mother – in – law used to say it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering. (To which Sanichari would tell herself) Huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday that made me unlucky daughter – in –law! You were born on a Monday – was your life happier? Somri, Budha, Moongri, Bishri – do any of them have happier live?” (Rudali 54). The caste system is so inherent in the lives of the rural lower class that they willing consume the lies fed to them, for instance they believe that certain diseases are only contracted by the lower castes: “... I heard that the upper castes never got smallpox? That it was a disease of the poor and lower castes” (Devi Ganguli 78).

Ajit Kumar Jha's article about Dalits from India Today, highlights the problem of caste still rampant in the present-day society. He raises a question in his article, "Is Ambedkar's dream of social and economic equality a bridge too far?" He further states in his article, out of 25 suicides committed by students in Hyderabad and North India since 2007, a total of 23 students were Dalits. Furthermore, the article highlights the percentage in which the Dalit children have been segregated ranks the highest, right from the issue of malnourishment and lower caste children being made to sit and eat separately in government schools. Jha's article is one such factual example of the atrocities committed against the Dalits, right from a very small age, the higher castes suppress and assault them, brutally massacring the lower community because of their egotistical attitude.

The custom of Rudali still exist among the women of lower caste in rural Rajasthan in order to grieve the loss of an upper caste male, this very culture of rudali can be viewed as a site of contestation wherein caste, class, economic status and gender are intertwined. This act of publicly expressing private emotions such as- grieving and crying, is seldom considered a creative practise. Social oppression and poverty derive these women to commit these otherwise private acts in a public domain, their sorrow is also offered in the service of the upper castes. The practice of prostitution by these rudalis are also encouraged by the Malik Mahajans, so that their bodies along with their tears can also be at the disposal of the upper caste men. This act can be interpreted as the gendering of the bodily space and site serving the purpose of patriarchal hegemony. The complexity of these same issues of turning private emotions into saleable commodities have been poignantly highlighted by Mahasweta Devi and also by Kalpana Lajmi in her film of the same title Rudaali/ Rudali.

Kalpana Lajmi's treatment of Mahasweta Devi's famous work Rudali in her film adaptation shows major departures, for instance the character of Sanichari's husband- in place of a supportive husband as delineated by Devi, Lajmi chooses to portray the husband as an alcoholic. Lajmi focuses primarily on the character of Sanichari, while Mahasweta Devi intended to portray the community of the lower castes as a whole, without highlighting or narrating the story about one protagonist. Laxman Singh, the Malik Mahajan has also been shown as much more progressive which leads to an emotional development between him and Sanichari, however no such mention is found in Mahasweta Devi's writing. The starkest

difference is found in the relationship between Bhikhni and Sanichari, its different treatment on and off screen. When Sanichari enquires about Bhikhni's secret to instantaneous shedding of tears in rudali performance, she confides in her about the secret substance, which is applied like a kajal and thereafter causes a burning sensation resulting in tears. This brilliant addition of Lajmi acquaints the audience with the likes of Bhikhni, who have adapted a thoroughly professional attitude while performing their role as rudalis. While Devi's Bhikhni encourages Sanichari to adopt the same profession as hers, Lajmi introduces a different relationship between the two altogether, she introduces Bhikhni as the estranged mother, the death of whom moves Sanichari to tears for the very first time, when she had been unable to grieve for her loved ones. Her crying gives way to the pent-up emotions, feelings of exploitation and suppression which she had suffered throughout in her life. The cry functions as catharsis, the effect of which makes Sanichari gain in self-determination and strength to adopt the profession of rudalis. At the end of the film, Lajmi helps Sanichari discover crying as a means of survival, her sorrow could therefore find a productive outlet to help her be financially independent. Thus, in both the film and in fiction, the act of 'crying' is layered with multiple interpretations, heavy with symbolism. Mahasweta Devi turns crying into a powerful instrument for empowering women, rather than it being solely used as a tool of oppression, 'a howl of grief' is transformed into a 'a howl of triumph' (Devi Ganguli 23-24). Hence, the marginalized people and their voice cannot be suppressed; rather their voice and wailing can be heard and read as an act of subversion of the caste, gender and class atrocities inflicted by the centre at them. Mahasweta Devi's works are considered socially significant in relation to her activism, her writings hold accountable, the entire upper society responsible for the inhuman conditions of the oppressed. Her work expresses the belief that unless people unite and assess their own situation, in a group or as individuals and pressurize the higher authorities in a unified manner, no social change would be visible. Mahasweta Devi also highlights her social critical standpoint through her major works - her distrust and disappointment in the privileged classes, which are neglectful of the needs of poor and her respect and appreciation for the ones who are oppressed, struggling against centuries old oppression through their resilience and rebellious spirit. Devi, through her writings thus, gives a universal and globalized vision in place of a glorified or individualized struggle, she provides a rather universalized approach to oppression. This macrocosmic viewpoint conveys the message that the oppressed can only change their situation when they are prepared to raise a struggle against the oppressive forces.

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