
MAHASWETA DEVI'S RUDALI; A SAGA OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract : Mahasweta Devi is one of the prolific Bengali writers in India. She has contributed short fiction and novels in Bangla. She is Political, Social activist who fights for the cause of the marginalized tribals and the downtrodden. She has authored great novels such as *Mother of 1084* and *The American Champa Tree* and the stories of such as *Rudali*, *Breast Stories*, *Palamau Stories* and *Old Woman*. She has also written plays, and collection of prose writings. She has acknowledged as one among India's foremost writers in regional languages. Her powerful and satiric fiction has won her Sahitya Academy Award, Dnyanpith Award and Padmashree Award. Through her writings, she has made significant contribution to literary and cultural studies.

Anjum Katyal comment; "Her powerful haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have been seen as rich sites of feminist discourse by scholars. Her innovative use of language has expanded the conversation borders of Bengali literature. She stands at the intersection of vital contemporary question of politics, gender and class".^[1] She has emerged as an important figure in the field of socially committed literature. Her writings show her concern for the poor, landless labourers from lower castes of eastern India. *Rudali* is one of the best and famous stories by Mahasweta Devi. The story revolves around the life of a poor lower caste woman as well as an untouchable. Her life –story is an ironic tale of exploitation and struggle for survival. Her name is Sanichari, born on Saturday and hence her presence everywhere is symbolic of two bad omen and bad luck. The story begins with the description of Tahad village where the two communities ganjus and dushads are in the majority. "It is women who are ruined by malik mahajans who turn into whores. Nonsense they are a separate caste."^[2] By caste, Sanichari is a ganju who belongs to a poor family. Her mother in law was harsh to her when she was alive. When the mother in law died, her husband and his brother were in jail. Mahajan Ramavtar Singh, a money lender in the village had sent them into the jail along with other males of the village. Sanichari, like the vast majority of women in India is presented as un-emotional, bereft of her intimate emotions and even of tears. Sanichari is aware that it is the daily struggles of injustice and double standards that degrade and dehumanize women. "Their grief must have hardened into stone within them. To herself Sanichari had sighed with relief".^[3] After the death of her husband Sanichari has to feed her six year old son Budhua, the one born on Wednesday. Also, she did not weep because she had to make arrangement for his shradh (a ritual after someone death). She has to borrow twenty rupees from Ramavtar who takes her thumbprint on a paper declaring that she is now a bonded labour for five years. One day, when Ramavtar's uncle was on his death bed, Sanichari requests him to waive off her

debt. Ramvatar, who gets fifty bighas of land with the death of his uncle, grants her request. With the passing of time Budhua grows up and gets married. He has to work hard because he has to take the yoke of poverty on his shoulder. He gets infected with T.B and dies. His wife leaving her six months son behind elopes with a medicine man. Now Sanichari has to take care of her grandson. She meets her childhood playmate Bikhni, who has the same tale of bad luck to tell. On the death of his uncle, Lachman Singh Ramavtar's son orders for a royal funeral in which rudalis (female mourners who are hired) would lead the procession. For this they would be paid. Sanichari and Bikhni wailed loudly on the way to the cremation ground. Now with every death in the village the role of Rudalis becomes more important. They now work as Rudalis, the professional mourners. They are in great demand because of their skill in wailing and weeping.

"For them, nothing has ever come easy. Just the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt is exhausting. Through motherhood and widowhood they are tied to the money lender. While those people spend huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to get prestige"^[4] Both Sanichari and Bikhni are now famous Rudalis. One day Bikhni comes with good news that Gambhir Singh is on his death-bed. It may take a day or two for him to die. Bikhni goes to visit her nephew in law. After one week Bikhni's nephew-in law comes to Sanichari to tell about the death of Bikhni. Sanichari is shocked but no tears come into her eyes. She thinks,

"Money, rice, new clothes – without getting these in return,

tears are a useless luxury".^[5] Dulan tells Sanichari that death for the people from upper castes is a moment of self-glorification. These people are more interested to have a fanciful funeral and for Rudalis, it is a moment of earning food and clothes. Gambhir Singh died on 17th day and Rudalis are called. Sanichari visits the redlight area to fetch some prostitutes to work as Rudalis. Her own daughter in law is among the whores. They would get five rupees

each. Gambhir's nephew is shocked to see one hundred whores coming to play as Rudalis. Sanichari tells him that the funeral should be grand and royal. With this wailing begins and the Rudalis hit their heads on the ground. By doing this they would get more money. Now the Rudalis have learnt the art of extracting money from the rich money lenders who have exploited them. The story ends on an ironic situation where a whore Gulbadan "cast a leering wink on gomostha"⁴ and joins the chorus of mourners. He knows that now these Rudalis have learnt the art of earning livelihood, and they are now exploiting their master.

Sanichari is the central character who shows the courage to face life. She is transformed, metamorphosed into an active principle. She learns to adapt and manipulate the system according to her needs. She has been a victim of the system but in the last part of the story, she learns the tricks of the trade and reacts accordingly.

The writer provides a powerful critique of an exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system. The protagonist, Sanichari shares the common problems of her community such as poverty, illiteracy and exploitation. The figure of Sanichari is in the center of the narrative. According to Anjum Katyal; "She is not individualized through a description of her appearance, her clothes, mannerism. The author is not interested in sculpting a three-dimensional portrait of a rounded character through psychological and physical description".^[6]

The author tries to link the story of Sanichari to a larger discourse of struggle and exploitation. The personal life of Sanichari is a reflection of the system around her. Death is regarded as an important occasion for her as well as for the relatives of the deceased. Her life story is a sad, sorrowful tale of suffering, pain, exploitation and humiliation. Her daughter-in-law and grandson leave her and she has to struggle for survival. In her personal life, she has no time to shed tears because she has to encash her wailing in her role of a Rudali. She mourns for others and this becomes a source of livelihood for her.

The story of Rudali is also a powerful indictment of the socio-economic and religious system of eastern India. The text itself is a critique of the system.

"The burden of ritualized religion, the absolute power of the malik-mahajans, and the corruption within the privileged class"^[7]

through these the author constructs indictment of the system. The money lenders like malik and mahajans are shown as the controlling agencies of the economic system. The lower caste villagers become their easy victims. Religion and rituals become shackles for them. Sanichari is the best example of how the system oppresses and exploits a poor being. Throughout the narrative of *Rudali*, Mahasweta Devi concentrates on the problems and sufferings of rural women in India. The women characters are poor untouchable women and prostitutes. The author explains how women out of economic compulsions, become prostitutes. She explains the socio-economic causes that construct the fictional world of Rudali. Through the spokesman Dulan, the author calls the prostitutes and Rudalis as workers, working hard to earn wages. The author intends to uphold the dignity of women in all their social roles. She does not like to be labeled as a feminist but as one who takes the problems of women as a writer. The women characters get their mentor and guide in the form of Dulan who tells them how to use the system for their own benefit. The story is about the issues of survival and struggle. The author nowhere romanticizes her characters and situations. The characters don't remain fictional as they exist in real life. Thus the author exposes the sordid and harsh realities of poverty, exploitation and death with fidelity.

Conclusion: The women characters like Sanichari, Bikhni, Sanichari's daughter-in-law, and the other rudalis are shown as suffering from poverty and exploitation. But with the help of Dulan, her guide and mentor, Sanichari succeeds to overcome the oppression and exploitation that the system operates upon her. Through her resistant will, sharp intelligence, the irreverence, the cynicism and the cunning, she proves that the subaltern can subvert the total control of the masters. By using her sharp genius Sanichari gets the growing empowerment and shows how to adapt and cope. Finally she tells the other rudalis that their professional mourning is like working in the fields. They finally decide to form the union of rudalis.

References:

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