

## **An Amplification of the Subaltern Voice by Mahasweta Devi in *Rudali***

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### **Abstract**

In *Rudali* Mahasweta Devi puts forward a critique of the hypocrisies of the society during the time of the prevalence of the zamindari system and also blatantly brings the oppressed women of the subaltern communities to the center. The demand for the wailing of the lower caste women like Sanichari, Bikhini and the whores from Tohri bazaar on the death of the wealthy zamindars mock the system that oppressed these people throughout their lives. This paper, therefore attempts to focus on the exegeses of the society and how Mahasweta Devi has turned the system upside down by projecting these otherwise subalterned women as Rudalis. The manner in which the author has projected crying as a symbol of strength for these women shows the subversion of the concepts of the society. The people who were looked down upon as ‘untouchables’ having been called by the group of people who had always subjugated the former to the funerals in the latter’s household marks the change in the role of the center and the periphery. Thus, the art of crying professionally had given the rudalis/ subaltern women the strength not just to earn their living but also the power to create their importance in the society that oppressed them.

**Keywords:** subaltern women, hierarchy, oppression, exploitation, emancipation

In the story “Rudali” Mahasweta Devi depicts the ‘untouchable’ women of Tahad village for their ability to weep out loud and honour the death of a zamindar. The way the author has subtly raised the position of the rudalis amongst the wealthy landlords is remarkable. The rudalis were placed at the receiving end because they could then put their demands on the basis of their performance at the funerals. The story subtly depicts the irony of the whole affair of employing rudalis to wail in order to showcase that the deceased zamindar was mourned highly. Moreover, the number of rudalis and their performance besides the other expenses in funeral raised the reputation of the zamindars. This fact that the rudalis, who were the subaltern women became inevitable or the central part of the ‘celebratory funerals’ of the zamindars is the concern here.

The otherwise insignificant women suddenly were in demand among the zamindars. With Sanichari as the protagonist Mahasweta Devi satirizes the shallow ideologies of the class of people that held themselves above other human beings on the basis of economic status. The fact that the zamindars as represented in Rudali associated the success of the funerals held on the death of their family members on the performance of the rudalis, who were appointed to cry whenever there is death in some zamindar's home, mirrors the sham in their entire affair of mourning.

From the day of her marriage Sanichari has suffered a lot. At the beginning of the story itself the narrator conveys the fact that she was so much bogged down by the responsibilities at home that she forgot to cry at the death of her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Not just that, she even did not realise that she forgot to mourn the death of her husband. Sanichari, while working in the field of Ramavatar mahajan's deeply felt that she should at least grieve over the demise of her husband. This is evident when the narrator points out that, "She told her fellow labourers, Today I'm going to cry my heart out for Budhua's father. I'm going to cry good and hard" (Devi: 75). However, although she had planned to cry for the loss of her husband after a year of her husband's death, yet she was not successful. Sanichari could not shed tears even on that day.

Ill fate did not leave Sanichari even then. Misfortune befell her again as she had lost her only son, Budhua to tuberculosis. After the death of her son her daughter-in-law went away leaving Budhua's son Haroa with Sanichari. The whereabouts of Budhua's wife was unknown to Sanichari and the latter had to raise up her grandson alone. With much struggle she had taken care of the child but that too went in vain when the boy ran away with a circus man leaving Sanichari to herself at her old age.

Accidentally, Sanichari met Bikhini, who had also left her home as her son did not treat her well. Learning about Bikhini's sorrow and loneliness Sanichari compassionately proposed that that the former can stay at her house. Bikhini had brought some money with her and both the women lived on that for quite some days. But they were worried as the capital was about to exhaust totally. Sanichari then decided to seek help from Dulan, another ganju from the Tahad village, for some work to earn their living. Somehow they were destined to be famous by their work as Dulan had casually suggested them to perform the role of rudalis at the funeral of malik-mahajan Bhairab Singh of Barohi village. Dulan advised the two women by saying:

The two of you go, wail, cry, accompany the corpse. You'll get money, rice. On the day of the *kriya* ceremony, you'll get clothes and food. (Devi: 91)

Sanichari was taken aback at Dulan's suggestion at first. But very diligently the latter associated the act of crying at the funeral with the ploughing of land and reaping of crops, which she had been doing for years. To this logic Sanichari succumbed and doubtfully she agreed. When they had wailed enough for the death of Bhairab Singh and were fed *chivda* and *gur* Sanichari felt as if the tears that she could not shed for her near and dear ones became helpful in earning a mouthful in her hour of crisis.

The fame of Sanichari spreads far and wide amongst the zamindars who started considering that holding lavish funerals and hiring the rudalis to cry in the ceremonies observed after the death of a person was a matter of their reputation in their society. From the beginning of the narrative itself the readers can understand that for Sanichari life was overwhelmingly practical. It is the practicality of her life she forgot to mourn the death of her mother-in-law, her husband and even her only son, Budhua. The irony of the life is revealed in her acceptance that the tears she could not shed on the death of her near and dear ones would then be useful in earning her a living. Sanichari realised that the stealthy zamindars who were exploiting the dushads and the ganjus could be made to repay at least a little by asking for more in the funerals. In such a situation the zamindars could hardly refuse. Gradually Sanichari and her comrade Bikhini, the famous duo rudalis, started fixing rates for their performance. They began voicing out their demands for crying in the funerals. Not just the money they also asked for rice, dal and oil. Mahasweta Devi through the character of Sanichari seems to have suggested that weeping or crying, which is considered to be a sign of weakness may be used as a tool of strength to retaliate the age-old suppression of the landed gentry.

The suppression of these subaltern women has become a ritual amongst the zamindars of Tahad village. The bodies of these women were not just used for physical labour in the agricultural fields, but those were also used as commodities for the gratification of the lust of the wealthy zamindars. When a Dushad or a Ganju woman's body was completely ravaged of her vitality or she got pregnant while the upper caste men had their pleasures these women were left out to die. In this context Dulan cites example of malik-mahajans like "Bhairav-Daitari-Makhan-Lachman Singhs" (Devi: 91), who treated the women they kept as cheap commodities. Among them Gambhir Singh had been the most notorious. Dulan mentioned:

The worst is Gambhir Singh. He kept a whore, had a daughter by her. As long as the whore was alive, he kept the child in comfort. When the mother died, he told the girl, a whore's daughter is a whore—practise your profession and support yourself. (Devi: 91)

The Tohri bazaar near the Tahad village was full of such women abandoned by the zamindars. Those women, in the narrator's words, were rotting. Somehow they were earning their living by prostitution. As depicted in the story the living conditions of the women of Tohri bazaar was terrible. Those bodies of these women were treated as re-used objects and so they were paid a negligible amount. This condition of the women who is placed at the periphery of the social structure has been pointed out in "Can the Subaltern Speak?":

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak: 82-83)

But Mahasweta Devi shows how the entire scene of the Tahad village changed as the heroine of this story, Sanichari came forward to take the lead and alter the fortune of the sex workers of Tohri bazaar. When she came to know that the zamindars were very fond of holding grand funerals on the death of their family members she discovered a profession. Sanichari became a rudali, a woman who is hired to weep and wail singing praises on the death of a person. As the zamindars were people who wanted to hold their fame high and wide they hired women like Sanichari in groups and asked them to mourn the death of a family member. Sanichari's fame as a rudali started spreading far and wide among the zamindars of villages other than Tahad. As she gained fame the demand for rudalis increased among the zamindars. The rudalis gradually became an inevitable part of the funerals at the zamindars. Holding grand funerals by spending a huge amount became a status quo among the malik mahajans. In this relation it is aptly said that, "Individualists (idiocentrics) are persons who are little concerned with the needs of the various groups they belong to; moreover, they feel proud of the success they obtain in personal competition" (Capozza: 63). This can be realised when the narrator tells that each family of the zamindars seemed to be in a competition to invest more than the other mahajan family at the death of their elderly. Ironically, the competition was so thick that zamindars like Nathuni Singh who inherited the wealth from his mother made the latter "to lie in her own excrement" (Devi: 99), and while she was still alive he prepared for a grand funeral. Moreover, his middle wife, who was the daughter of Chauhan Rajput also talked to Sanichari about a more lavish funeral for her father than her mother-in-law to show off the wealth of her paternal family to Nathuni and her co-wives. Funerals with the presence of the rudalis performing the mourning became such a necessity that the zamindars started the preparations while the person was living. The narrator refers to this by saying, "The whole situation was quite complex. When someone died in a malik-mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family" (Devi: 103).

In order to meet the rising demand for rudalis Sanichari approached the sex workers of Tohri randi bazaar to perform the role of rudalis in the funerals. There she also found her daughter-in-law. And the latter was among the low grade sex workers of Tohri, who were paid the least among the women living in the bazaar. The proposal that Sanichari and Bikhini had put forward before these women was like a ray of hope that could improve their condition of life. They were hopeful at this because they thought that they would at least be able to make for their basic needs. With this thought they consented to Bikhini. But they were also in a dilemma about their acceptance as rudalis among the zamindars. At this Dulan convinced them saying that, "Do you think we always had so many whores? It's these Rajput malik-mahajans who have created so many randis" (Devi: 94). He even told them how the mahajans came to power and took over the low caste people in Tahad. By narrating the story of the Rajputs infiltrating and taking over the innocent tribals of the area he encouraged Sanichari and Bikhini to express their angst against the perpetrators.

Inspired by Dulan Sanichari and Bikhini included the sex workers of Tohri decided to join hands with the former for their livelihood. They took it as a profession and became popular in no time. According to the narrator:

Business prospered. There was such a demand for the pair who wailed at Bhairab Singh's funeral, that it was almost like a war of prestige. Soon, not just the landlords and the moneylenders but the lalas and sahus (merchants and traders, who are just below the malik-mahajans in social status) began to ask for Sanichari. (Devi: 98)

This group of rudalis performed the mourning of the deceased zamindars so well that their fame reached far and wide among the zamindar families. With the demand for these rudalis rising, they too made categories of their performance of mourning. The charges for each category of their performances were different. They charged the highest for screaming and hitting their heads on the ground at the funeral of the dead malik-mahajan. Also they accompanied the funeral procession that took the body to the pyre.

Nevertheless, the performance of this group of rudalis was so genuine that in almost every funeral of the zamindars their presence became a mandatory symbol of prestige. Ironically, the women who were oppressed as indentured labourers became signs of the same zamindars' status quo. Subtly but vehemently Mahasweta Devi has uplifted the stature of these women who were always treated as lesser humans. The women who were nothing more than inanimate objects suddenly rose to fame among the zamindars as they changed their roles from the voiceless to ones with voice louder than expectation.

Hardly did the zamindars think that the women whom they had used as labourers and whores turned out to be the beings who glorified their death. These rudalis consistently sang the praise of the departed zamindar as they wailed the loss of the same. The people who gathered at the funeral were appalled at their performance. Moreover, the audience was spelled to consider at that moment that the dead person must have been one of the epitomes of goodness when alive. The rudalis who were otherwise pushed to the periphery on the basis of - firstly, for being women, secondly, for being women from the low caste (Ganjus and Dushads) and thirdly, as prostitutes – came to the focus as the central attraction of the zamindars' funeral. It is, however, remarkable in an ironic way that the people who had always subjugated and perpetrated the women for belonging to the low caste were somehow dependent on the latter on their last journey from their earth. This is due to the fact that the grand adieu/funerals of these wealthy zamindars were counted as being incomplete with the wailing of the rudalis. In this context it may be considered that Mahasweta Devi has altogether changed the role of the player and the played. By depicting the cries, tears and wailing of the rudalis not as their weakness but strength the author has in a way altered the positions of power. This can be conjectured from the fact that the rudalis in the story *Rudali* gradually but remarkably rose to the position of one of the most important elements of the lavish funerals of the zamindars.

Besides, the protagonist Sanichari refuted what her mother and other acquaintances prophesised. As she was born on Saturday, she was named Sanichari and it was also considered that she would lead her entire life with ill luck as her companion. She too after the demise of her husband and only son thought that may be the people who said that she her life will be an ill-fated one were right. But Mahasweta Devi shows how she did not give up to that superstition and daringly overcame all the obstacles that challenged her living. Nevertheless, she was devastated when her partner Bikhini suddenly died. She wanted to give up the job of a rudali. But again Dulan did not let her breakdown for the loss of Bikhini. He pointed out to Sanichari:

Can't you see how amusing it all is? One by one they're dying, you're going to wail, they're taking the pomp and splendor of the mourning so seriously, making it a matter of honour, they're fighting over it. (Devi: 114)

The author made her a heroine when the latter took up the role of the leader of the rudalis because what people counted as a person's weakness was used by Sanichari as a means of livelihood. This initiative of hers had emancipated a whole community of subaltern women who were traditionally considered to be weak, outcaste and commodities.

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