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Gender Discrimination in Mahasweta Devi's: *RUDALI*

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ABSTRACT

The aim my paper is to discuss the deep concerns about gender discrimination in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*. *Rudali* centers on the two women who develop a partnership for survival. *Rudali* is one of the haunting stories that come from remote villages in Rajasthan. The novel depicted the struggle Sanichari oppressed against poverty, humiliation and wrecked by an exploitative patriarchal caste-based social system. Damaged by their own family, community members or the ruling rich, these women either submit to a relegated existence, which became prostitutes for survival; or like Sanichari and Bikhni, challenges their subjugation. The novel represented the miserable condition of a low-caste starving family in post-colonial Indian society. It highlighted the particularly miserable position of backward class women in rural India. She had to sell her tears which she never shed at the death of her own people but the death of the landowners so that she could earn livelihood. This paper focuses the gender discrimination in the two women protagonist in the society.

Keywords: Patriarchal , subjection, humiliation, poverty, weeping, tears.

INTRODUCTION

The story *Rudali* revolves around the life of the poor, low caste, Sanichan. Many readers have looked at it as a feminist text, while the insightful minority has seen the universality in the theme. The opening scene situates sanichari in the socio-economic context. She shares her poverty with the rest of the population of the Tahad Village, where Ganjus and Dushads were in majority. Sanichari is a Ganju by caste. Sanichari gets her name from being born on a Saturday and her mother- in -law, Somri, finds fault with her for being unlucky:

Somri: Why shouldn't I say it? After all, you were born on an unlucky day, Saturday. It's your destiny to devour everyone around you.

Sanichari: And what great happiness did life bring you? you're Monday born, but you didn't get a better deal, Did you? Arre, I've seen what lives they all live, those born on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. As for you, you do nothing but bitch, bitch, bitch, all day long.

Sanichari is intelligent and would not attribute her suffering to her fate but is practical enough to assign it to the socio-economic conditions. Sanichari's family

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consists of her old mother-in-law Somri. Son Budhua daughter in law Parbatia, and grandson Haroa. Her husband had died long ago, and since then she had been the sole provider. Her son has been ailing with consumptive lungs and his wife, quite young has been allured by the moneyed Thakurs. She has been dissipating herself. Sanichari on the other hand has been leading a tough life like the chakki on which she grinds her grains. Soon her son dies and the daughter-in-law goes out of the house, taking away all Sanichari's savings, even as the husband's corpse is lying cold. The neighbours help Sanichari to do the last rites and to be on her feet again. Soon her mother-in-law dies.

Sanichari brings up the boy Haroa, and when the boy is a young man, instead of taking care of his grandmother, he walks out of the house after calling her names. Sanichari, quite old and tired of life, meets her old time friend Bikhni, accidentally on her way back from a mela. Bikhni's story is only slightly different from that of Sanichari. While Sanichari is alone with no one left to care for her, Bikhni's only son leaves her and she is on her own. Bikhni is a non-stop eater and a good worker. Sanichari offers Bikhni her home and in turn finds comradeship. Dulan, a neighbour, suggests that they take up the work of professional mourners or *rudalis* and earn well. While Sanichari hesitates, Bikhni takes the challenge and they together hit it off well as *rudalis*. Time passes. Bikhni decides to visit her son and granddaughter and soon Sanichari receives news about her death. Again consoled and egged on by Dulan, she goes to the whore's quarters to offer to the prostitutes the job of *rudalis*.

Initially, though it is a tough job for her convincing the whores to join her, soon she succeeds. She takes a crowd of prostitutes with her to mourn Gambhir Singh's death, and quite ironically, it was Gambhir Singh who had misused most of the women in the crowd. He had pushed them into whoring and one of them Gulbadan happens to be his daughter. The play ends with Gambhir Singh's corpse removed for cremation and Sanichari left in her space on the stage a space she has created for herself and poor people like her in a world ruled by the Thakurs and the other landed men.

Written in twelve scenes, the play *Rudali* is about how to survive in an exploitative system. The whole system is exposed in the play. The entire text is a critique of the socio-economic and religious system and the nexus between them. By showing the dire poverty of the villages, the ways in which they are exploited,

the burden of ritualised religion, the absolute power of the malik-mahajans, and the corruption within the privileged classes, the author constructs a powerful indictment. The villages have nothing but cynical contempt for the greed, miserliness and bankruptcy of their masters, though they are forced to submit to their power. Dulan is particularly outspoken about the warped way of the upper classes after a scathing account of how Nathuni Singh who owes all his wealth to his mother, is doing nothing to treat her, but spent thirty thousand rupees on her *kriya* ceremony.

The Thakurain, or the middle wife of Nathuni Singh, confirms it: "Son of my foot! Despatched his mother to a wretched but near the cowshed and left her there to die..." All day long his old mother would lie rotting in her own piss and shit, while her son counted the days till the old women popped off and he could lay his hands on all her wealth and the Thakurain herself has no authority whatsoever since she gave birth only to a daughter, which was her big crime. The landed gentry would spend lavishly on their funerals but would never think of parting with a decent sum to the poor. Gambhir Singh, who used to parade through the Diwali Mela on elephant back, dies. Dulan describes him as, "A big Zaminder- Lord of five villages. Swollen like a drum... but the old man's time has come... You'll have to go there when it's time to mourn. He's put is writing that he wants a lakh of rupees to be spent on his death ceremonies. He wants to wash away all the sins of a lifetime with a lakh of rupees."

Dulan tells Sanichari, "Arre, if you sit around waiting for Bikhni you'll starve to death. I'm telling you, his *kriya* is going to be a really grand affair! Three different kinds of bands, horses, elephants, grain and cloth are being disturbed to the people of all five villages- Sanichari, you'll make enough to eat for six months!" The contrast between wealth and poverty is so glaring and so also is the moral depravity among the rich. When approached by Sanichari, the whores hesitate to be the *rudali* and Gulbadan, when she knows that it is for Gambhir Singh, says: "Whether anyone else goes or not, I'm definitely going. It's my father who's dead, you hear? My father! The man who ruined me, who ruined my mother! How can I not mourn at his funeral".

Mahasweta Devi brings out through such poignant scenes and dialogues the social attitude widely internalised by women. Society holds a woman

solely responsible for all so-called ills and evils. The dramatist subverts the traditional claim and reinstates in its wake a new perspective. Meeting her long time friend, Sanichari narrates her story to her: "I never had the time to weep. They all died, one by one, my in-laws, my brother-in-law and his wife, my husband, my son. I didn't shed a single tear. Call me a daain -say it's as if I was born to devour others." When Bikhni agrees to stay with her, Sanichari finds her so helpful and concerned. "Bikhni, in my whole life, nobody has ever done so much for me. No one has even thought of me as a human being! you know, when I was a girl, my mother used to always tell me that a woman's worst enemy was other women..." Bikhni answers crisply summing up the past and revisioning traditional notion: "Arae, that's all stuff made up by men, Go on go to sleep."

The dramatist focuses on how awareness and knowledge empower human beings. Dulan gives the women tips on how to keep themselves about potential jobs by keeping an ear open when they go to the marketplace. He tells them to expand their business by hiring extra *rudali* from the whole bazaar. He teaches them how to make an ordinary work a profession and when Sanichari expresses her worry about being a *rudali*. He says: "I'm telling you, Sanichari, no god is more important than your belly. One does whatever it takes to feed one's stomach and asks his cut from their earnings of any job, he arranges for them, and finds nothing wrong with it. Since everyone from the prime minister down to the lowest untouchable takes cuts."

Dulan's voice criticises, accuses, condemns and highlights the moral corruption of the upper classes. Parbatia offers an example of people who err when their needs are in excess of what their daily life can give. The boy Haroa, with no one to guide him goes astray and goes in search of an easy life. Mahasweta Devi has undone the common belief that the prostitutes, truant and the poor are the 'other' and establishes that these are poor, working men and women, trying to fill their stomachs like everyone else. Sanichari and Bikhni work with them help them to get back to the community. The play closes with Sanichari, organising and training the prostitutes into a group. They are gathered into a space, which gives them respectability. The evolution of Sanichari also evolves a social ritual into a profession.

Sanichari whose poverty-ridden life is symbolised by the chakki, loses everything but it aware that society represented by the rich, the panchayat, has

always exploited her. She was forced to perform two-kriya ceremony for her husband, since the Tahad village panchayat felt that the Tohri village, where her husband died should not have conducted the kriya. Her awareness of exploitation at various levels does not make her cynical but more kindly towards people like her. She draws back into the fold her wretched daughter-in-law who left home, dying husband and an infant son to be a whore and Gulbadan, whose self-worth is shattered when her natural father orders her to submit to his nephew's lust. But the evolved Sanichari also is capable of seeing how the young, covetous Parbatia is lured by the lecherous, avaricious, milk-mahajans whose bodies would rot, bearing the stamp of their promiscuity and deviousness.

Sanichari and Bikhni learn to negotiate with the gomasthas, showing no hesitation or shyness: "Well, if we're to prostrate ourselves on the ground while wailing then its fifty rupees, and if we're to beat our breasts all the way to the cremation ground, then it'll be sixty-five, and..." Mahasweta Devi expands the notion of the community/ society to include the prostitutes, old women with years of woe on their back, and the marginalised in general, and she is firm in rejecting the label of feminist. "For you it may be important that this story is written by a woman... another woman has adapted it into a play... 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.

A story of survival, *Rudali* subverts the existing traditional notions of right and wrong. Parbatia, Gulbadan, Dolan and Sanichari are only trying to survive. The play is built on an unusual kind of sensitivity that is possible only for a person who has shared the agony of the people about whom he/she writes. It is little wonder, therefore, that Mahasweta Devi gave away the award money for tribal welfare, about which she made it her mission to write.

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