

## WOMEN IN MAHASWETHA DEVI'S NOVEL "RUDALI"

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*Mahaswetha Devi born on January 1926 was not only a writer but also a socio-political activist. She was an Indian fiction writer in Bengali. She was a self-recognised communist and worked for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people. She wrote over hundred novels and over twenty collections of short stories. Her novel ' Rudali' deals with various themes which focuses on socio economic system of postcolonial India. It exposes the cruel power structure and corrupt ways of socially and economically dominant classes. It is a tale of exploitation, struggle and survival.*

*It is deeply ironical that in India, women are regarded as a manifestation of Goddesses and yet she is exploited and marginalized by the upper classes. Rudali records the transformation of Sanichari from a mere widow to a woman who is better equipped to adapt and manipulate the system. Rudali is the story of Sanichari who represents the lower caste women who has been surrounded by misfortunes all her life. The women of this novel are doubly exploited both as women and as lower caste. The struggles of countless women of poor and lower caste have been reflected in the novel.*

The present paper focuses on the exploitation of voiceless women who are present in the novel and tries to analyse how these voiceless subaltern evolve to a voiced empowered female who knows how to snatch bread from the exploiting. Rudali centers on the two women who developed a partnership for survival. The novel depicts the struggle Sanichari oppresses against poverty, humiliation in an exploitative patriarchal caste-based social system. Women is associated always with crying. But here the same weakness of women has been used to gain strength and empower themselves. Rudali literally means female weeper or weeping woman. This is a reference to a custom in certain areas of Rajasthan where women of lower caste are hired as professional mourners upon the death of upper caste males. These women are referred to as rudali. The struggle of subaltern woman for survival has been highlighted through the character Sanichari.

Sanichari is a lower caste woman who lives in desperate poverty. She is always blamed as unfortunate as she borned on Saturday. Even she knows that the life is same for other women who have born on other days she kept silent and tolerated the words of her mother in law.

In the life of Sanichari there is no end for the deaths of her loved ones. First her mother in law died then her brother in law and his wife died and her husband also died but she could not cry for any of these deaths because, during each death she struggled hard to do her responsibilities. So that she could not get time or situation to express her grief for the deaths. But people talk ill of her as she did not cry for her husband's death. But her responsibility to bring up the child and religious rituals to be offered made her stone hearted to remain calm after her husband's death. Every personal event in her life is interwoven with the exploitative system. Tohri and Tahad pandas exploited her by asking her to do the rituals. She took debt of twenty rupees from Ramavatar and made to repay it by rupees fifty as bonded labour on his fields over next five years.

But Sanichari a voiceless woman began to use the opportunities to empower herself. She took the opportunity to make her debt be wiped out by Ramavatar Singh. Budhua, her son grew up and he took the responsibility of the house and brought their angan alive with a variety of vegetables. He got married and she was like the woman who does not want to suffer and be in exploitation. That does not mean that she raised voice against exploitation but she wished the colorful life and left her dead husband and small kid and run away with the magic show men. One cannot blame her for her act because she does not want to be in hunger. But she also suffered lot in her life. She later become a prostitute and worked for only few paisas.

Sanichari had a dream of buying a wooden comb for her hair and to wear Shellac bangles for a full year but this dream never fulfilled and it got changed to have a life where she can sit in the winter sun sharing a bowl of gur and sattu with her grandson. But this dream also never fulfilled and made her think that as a woman especially as a poor woman she should not have any dream for her life.

After the death of her son she has to take the responsibility of bringing up Budhua's son Haroa. Crying is the weakness of women but Sanichari couldn't cry even in her son's death. The misfortunes and continuous deaths in her life made her to be hard hearted. The bondage and relationship between subalterns in the community can be seen when the Dulan's family supports Sanichari. A helpless women finds help in Dulan who has made her to get a job and his family took care of her grandson.

Haroa, her grandson worked with Lachman Singh but after few days he also left Sanichari and went away with the magic show lot. Sanichari searched for him but didn't get him.

Bikhni is another most important character in the novel who accompanied Sanichari. Sanichari was alone and she finds a supporter in her long lost friend Bikhni. Bikhni is also from lower caste who tried to empower herself after her husband's death. But because of repaying debt to Mahajan and her son went to live in his in-laws house she becomes unhappy and all alone. Both share their life and come to know that Sanichari is also all alone and Bikhni is also all alone. They both formed a bond and partnership and begin to live at Sanichari's hut. They both meet Dulan who is the only person in the community who has the capacity to guide his co-villagers to find livelihood.

Dulan educates and gives awareness to Sanichari and Bikhni about how to find opportunities to fill their stomach. He enlightens and empowers them to find easy means of employment using hypocritical social rituals. He advises both of them to work as rudali in the funeral procession of Bhairab Singh. He educates them that whores who are ruined by the Malliks are used as rudali. But those whores are dry, old and no strength so that if Sanichari and Bikhni perform well as rudalies they will get money, rice, cloth and food.

Usually the tears of women are considered as the symbol of their weakness helplessness. Here the same tears are used as their livelihood. Dulan conveys them to consider the wailing as a profession.

The lower caste women are so exploited by the upper class. Through the voice of Dulan the writer explains with example of Gumbhir Singh. He kept a whore and had a daughter but after the death of her mother he told his daughter that a whore's daughter is a whore and practice it. The girl begins to live at randi bazaar where she worked as whore for only five paise. This was the tragic life of lower caste woman in that society which was criticized and focused in the novel. Dulan also makes them realize that this life is not their fate as they are women of lower caste but these Rajputs occupied this area and become dominant.

Sanichari and Bikhni rise to the occasion and seize the opportunity by making it an act of revenge. She was compelled to go for this profession of a paid mourner because nobody is there to provide her basic things. This new profession gave them their first sense of mastery. They realized how they can use the opportunity to exploit the exploiters. Dulan made them understand how cruel those are and they need rudalis to prop up their honor so they got the way to fight on.

For Sanichari and Bikhni the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt was exhausting. These helpless women were tied to the moneylender by their widowhood and motherhood now they realized that these dominant classes are ready to spend as much as money on death ceremonies and why don't they get some of it.

Their fight or struggle for survival has begun by considering the rudali as a profession. With their good performance they enriched their self confidence and fixed different rates for their various performances. They have begun to demand the fixed rates and rice, dal, oil, and salt. Day by day their business prospered and demand has been increased for Sanichari and Bikhni for rudali work.

The rich people use to have many wives and they treat them not in a good way. There was no bondage, love and respect among rich people. They only care for money, wealth and status. These Sanichari and Bikhni understood their attitude and empowered to take revenge on the system which was responsible for the wretched condition of the lower caste women. For Malik Mahajan's the amount of money that they spend on death ceremonies rated their prestige of the family. But along with that the status of the rudali also rose.

Gradually rudalis and randis formed a union with the advice of dulan. He made Sanichari understand that the randis are ruined by malik- mahajans with the story of Gulbadan Singh and Motiya. He made realize that she has the responsibility of empowering these exploited whores. The cheap whores who are leading hard life only for few annas surrounded Bikhni who went there with an offering of a rudali work.

With this mastery over the profession these two became the leaders of the group. Gradually their reputation grew. The subalterns not only dominated by ruling class but also the nature and fate deceives them. Sanichari again becomes alone and helpless with the loss of Bikhni. Bikhni who goes to attend a marriage ceremony never returns and Sanichari comes to know that she is dead. Here Sanichari becomes alone but refuses to take a break and emerges as a strong woman to fight the fate. The question of survival stands before her so she herself goes to randis and continues the profession of rudali. With the moral support and education of Dulan Sanichari transformed from a mere widow to a woman who is better equipped to adopt and manipulate the system. She motivates the whores on how to surpass as false mourners at funerals. She takes hundreds of rudalis to funeral and made Malliks to pay each of them.

The play ends with these randis expressing fake mourning at the death of the very man Gambhir Singh who pushed them into this miserable life. They who were feeling helpless and leading miserable life begin to feel a sense of freedom and this alternative rudali profession helped them to get cash, food and clothes without selling their bodies.

What we can see here is woman who is doubly suppressed both as woman and as a low caste. Here she is not treated as an individual but used as a commodity and left as voiceless. But here Mahashwetha devi through the character Dulan makes the woman leader to understand this and educates them, guide them to get awareness about their exploitation.

Through him she made the women understand that this miserable life is not their fate but it is put on them by the upper class male dominated society. With this education, guidance, training the woman in the novel proved that if the subaltern gets the opportunity they can better use it and have the power and voice to empower themselves and also empower other women who are exploited.

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