

CARVING THE NICHE OF THEIR OWN: EMERGENCE OF SUBALTERN WOMEN AGAINST HEAVY ODDS

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Abstract

The meaning of the term subaltern is used today in a broad sense which brings more diversity to subaltern studies. Subaltern literature reflects the pain and suffering undergone by the people who have been marginalized and suppressed from the main stream social activities by hegemony for various reasons such as race, colour, caste, religion, language and gender. Mahasweta Devi's works have always been a critique of the social order in a caste-based society. In her plethora of writing, she always exhibits concealed sufferings and agonies of the landless farmers, tribals, bonded labourers and suppressed women. In this research paper, I have attempted to analyse Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* which has taken up a center stage in the realm of subaltern literature. This study highlights the subaltern women's predicaments and how the female protagonists in this novel fight against heavy odds erected by patriarchal set up to seek an identity of her own with an urge to defy the well-established gender roles.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Patriarchy, Gender roles, Empowerment, Metamorphosis.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'Subaltern' denotes a person holding a subordinate or an inferior position. 'Subaltern Studies' gained momentum in the last part of the 20th century. Antonio Gramsci, (1891-1937) an Italian Marxist, thinker adopted the term 'Subaltern' in a sense of 'inferior rank', to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union, who were subjected to the hegemony of the ruling class. The working class includes peasants and workers who were denied of hegemonic power. The term 'Subaltern' has been adopted by a team of historians who are known as the 'Subaltern Studies Group' who aimed at promoting a discussion on Subaltern themes. They used the term 'Subaltern' to refer to the prevailing subordination in terms of class, gender, race in the South Asian Society. The group consisted of such members as Ranjith Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey.etc. The concept of 'Subaltern' gained more prominence and currency with Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" (1985). In this essay, Gayatri Spivak, an Indian literary critic, a practical Marxist feminist, focuses on some of the problems of the Third World Women. Her opinion is that if in the context of colonial production the Subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the Subaltern as a female is even more deeply in

shadow. To Spivak, Subaltern women are subjected to oppression more than Subaltern men; they do not have proper representation and are not able to voice their opinion. Spivak's writings reflect the background of women's struggle and oppression in the third world countries. These problems have never been mentioned nor discussed in the third world countries. Spivak expresses with anguish that female subalterns have become ghosts in society. Robert J. C. Young in his commentary on Spivak observes that Subaltern woman has her identity within the patriarchal and imperial discourse.

REPRESENTATION OF SUBALTERN WOMEN IN POSTCOLONIAL PERIOD

Women writers in the Post-Colonial period like Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, have depicted women's problems and express their concern in their novels. Kamala Markandeya, who introduced the sub-genre of feminist writing in India, advocated the concept of feminine autonomy. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala's novels have the themes of clash between traditional codes and modern aspirations. Describing the plight of women in the Patriarchal society Nayan Tara Sahgal explains how man plays the role of the master of woman's life and the creator of destiny, and regrets that a divorced woman becomes stigmatized in this society. Mahasweta Devi is regarded as the voice of the Subaltern and her female protagonists struggle to cope with the discriminatory practices in order to survive with dignity. In her novels Arundhati Roy portrays the doubly marginalized women subaltern as they are oppressed by the native cultural and the dominant forces of patriarchy. Amitav Ghosh in his novels like "*The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*", *The Hungry Tide*, portrays his women characters as revolutionaries who seem to be aware of their milieu and their vulnerable positions and are desperate to establish an identity outside traditional domestic sphere. The burning issues of woman emancipation and woman empowerment against the background of changing global politics run undercurrent in all of his fiction.

RUDALI: SUBALTERN WOMEN'S QUEST FOR SURVIVAL

Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in the city of Dacca in East Bengal. Born into a literary family, she was influenced by her early association with Ganantya, a group who attempted to bring social and political theatre to rural villages in Bengal in the 1930s and 1940s. She used her socio political writings as a tool to

give voice to the voiceless subalterns, who are subjugated and silenced by the society. Many of her stories are about tribal fighting oppression, resisting exploitation, rebelling against authority.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*, is a piece of short fiction in Bengali which was adopted and produced as a play in Hindi by Usha Ganguly of Calcutta Theatre Group Rangkarmee in December 1992. *Rudali* is a chronicle of oppression, exploitation and surviving strategies of marginalized section of society. As the author herself asserts in one of her interviews, "Rudali is about... "how to survive" ... "bread and mouth". By showing the dire poverty of the villagers, the ways in which they are exploited, the burden of ritualized religion, the absolute power of the upper caste Malik- Mahajans, and the corruption within the privileged classes, the author construct a powerful indictment.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* gives a realistic picture of the inevitable struggle of the women against the degradation of the females by ninety nine percent of the male Chauvinists in our country. It is not only a story of an endless suffering of a poor and low-caste woman but it also voices a strong protest in the form of Sanichari against the ill treatment of women.

Mahasweta Devi's women characters in this novel have life affirming values. Though oppressed, mocked at and persecuted, they never give up struggle and hope for a better future. Sanichari takes the responsibility of shouldering her man in every situation of life. She accepts her subaltern and sub-servient position to her husband but morally and spiritually she is superior to him. She maintains the family where as men in her life fails to perform their duties.

Rudali is about an afflicted, doubly oppressed and marginalised 'dalit woman' of Eastern Indian village whose life tale has been a saga of suffering and pain. Sanichari is a victim of that dichotomy where woman is worshipped as goddess and whipped as a slave. Her life was an endless tale of suffering, misery and struggle. She lived all her life in poverty: "Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like, the other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty" (54). She was considered unlucky from the day she was born and she had to bear the pangs of superstitions of the villagers. She was cursed, manhoos, doomed to suffer because she was born on an unlucky day Saturday, hence her name, Sanichari. But she did not believe in such superstitions blindly like the other villagers as she asserted: "Huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that

made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday-was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongri, Bishri-do any of them have happier lives? (54)

So, she was a wise, rational and practical person. She had always been an honest, faithful and true partner for her husband. She had that positive image of an Indian woman whose day began with her husband and children and also ended with them. She was quite contented with her married life and her husband despite her poverty. She could sacrifice anything for the sake of her family. Sanichari and her husband were quite compatible with each other and both of them worked equally hard, but together, for home and livelihood. She left her six years old son at home and went to Malik's estate where she chopped wood, fetched fodder for the cattle, and at harvest season worked shoulder to shoulder with her husband. Together the two of them erected a hut on the piece of land they had inherited after the death of her brother-in-law. She drew decorative pictures on the walls, he planned a vegetable patch in their courtyard, she arranged to rear one of the malkin's calves.

She was quite an emotional person just as any other Indian woman but the constant appalling conditions of poverty, misery, suffering and exploitation by Malik Mahajans had hardened her to the core of her heart. Mostly she had to make compromises all the time with her pain and loneliness which had made her quite practical and emotionally strong person. When her mother-in-law died she did not cry because she had no time to cry over her demise. At that time, her husband and his brother were in jail because of Malik Mahajan. Her mother-in-law died in great pain of starvation, crying out for food. In the pouring rain at night, Sanichari had to make necessary arrangements to perform the death rites before the daybreak, without any grains in the house and without any support of the family members. Within three years, the brother-in-law and his wife were dead too; "There was no crying over those deaths either. Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the Shradh?" (55)

When her husband died of cholera after drinking the milk used of Shiva Idol on the Baisakhi fair at Tohri, she was again made a victim of the superstitions mistaken to be religion. The panda of the Shiva Temple at Tohri insisted her to make ritual offering before returning to the village. Even a spartan offering of

sand and sattu costed her heavily. And when she returned to her village, the priest of the malik mahajan again scolded her for disobeying and insulting her local priest by ignoring him to perform the last rites of her husband who belonged to his village. Then, to make for it, she was forced into debt to Ramavatar and she became a bonded labour on his fields and she had to waste her five precious years of the life in his fields. And after paying for her husband's Shradh, she was worried about how to feed her little son that she never had time to cry for her husband.

She loved and valued her son so much that she could not even think of losing her son. She tried hard to save her son. When Budhua died, her daughter-in-law also left leaving behind a crying son in the lap of Sanichari. This time also, Sanichari did not cry for her son. With the death of Budhua, she again lost a sympathetic, supportive, caring companion without whom she could not imagine her life. She brought up Haroa, her grandson as best she could. When Haroa turned fourteen, she managed anyhow a job for him with the new malik mahajan. The boy worked hard initially but gradually he got bored and lost all his interest in job. Then Sanichari warned him that she would never let him stray from the right path. This showed her concern and possessiveness towards her grandson. But, ultimately, he ran away leaving her alone once again. She was a strongminded woman with a strong determination. She did not let it go like that. She tried her best to search him but all in vain. She did not cry for him also. She managed to live by her own.

Sanichari had a wonderful relationship with her childhood playmate Bikhni, who rediscovered each other after such a long time as aging, lonely women and decided to team up. Sanichari gave her shelter and company. Both of them provided emotional and financial support to each other. It was Dulan, who at every stage contributed to the growing empowerment of Sanichari, and showed her how to adapt and cope. With the help and advice of Dulan she changed her mind from helpless despair (mourning her fate) her dead past, her dead husband to a realisation that actually she was angry about the unfairness of the situation and he also provided her with a survival strategy, a way of turning the situation around so that she was using the system instead of just being used by it. He suggested them to adopt the business of Rudalis. Initially, she showed some apprehensions about this profession but Dulan again made her understand that no work is good or bad for the appetite of stomach.

On hearing that she felt an earthquake within and she exploded: “Cry? Me? Don’t you know? I can’t shed tears? These two eyes of mine are scorched?”. (70) But then on Dulan’s insistence and advice she thought that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them. This was again the question of survival for her. So, she agreed to do this business. She decided that she would do her duty with utmost determination and potential.

METAMORPHOSIS OF SANICHARI

Both of them, Sanichari and Bikhni became a professional team and they ran their business quite successfully and gradually their reputation grew as rudalis. Then again she had to bear another set back of her life when Bikhni died suddenly. She again lost an understanding and loving companion and a partner also. But many deaths, deceptions, injustices had hardened her endurance and self-control. Sanichari did not want to die like that. And why should she die? If Sanichari had survived so much grief, she’ll survive the loss of Bikhni’s death. She devastated, but she won’t cry. “Money, rice, new clothes-without getting these in return, tears are a useless luxury”. (89)

It showed that she had now become quite a professional who did not want to shed tears without being paid for them even at the deaths of her dear ones. But, her story had always been a story of survival. On Dulan’s advice, she once again restored her courage and got ready to continue her struggle for survival. The words of Dulan make it clear, “Don’t weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better, we understand hunger”(116). And now she also thought of expanding her business and livelihood. For that she offered an additional service for wailing on the deaths which was to be provided by the prostitutes of the village. These prostitutes had also been the victim of the upper class people of the community and had been exploited to the extreme. On Dulan’s idea of incorporating these prostitutes in the business of Rudalis, she took immediate steps towards the management of prostitutes because she wanted that being the victim of these malik mahajans for so many years these prostitutes should also get up to take their revenge on them. After her discussion with Dulan, Sanichari’s lingering inhibitions were removed regarding the inclusion of prostitutes. She was confident, in control, empowered. She was relaxed and friendly, invited two ex-village girls, Parbatia and Gulbadan to join

them-openly calling the former bahu and emphasized that this profession would stand them in good stead when, like here, they age, and other means of livelihood fail them. She offered to empower them as she herself had been empowered. And when confronting her social superiors she spoke up boldly, manipulating the situation cunningly to trap them in their own hypocrisy-if they restrained her they would expose their own greed. So they could only watch helplessly as she wailed away their hopes of a profit on the side as we witness in the last scene when she entered with nearly a hundred rudalis to mourn the death of the Malik Mahajan Gambhir Singh. Gambhir Singh's nephew and his Gomastha were very much worried about the supposed payment to rudalis:

The randirudalis sounded his swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground. The gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double! She and the nephew were reduced to helpless onlookers (117).

Sanichari manipulated the situation, to turn it in favour of her and trapped the oppressors in their own hypocrisy. She emerged as a natural leader to the randirudalis.

CONCLUSION

It was Sanichari, fully alive to the ironic overtones of this ritualized, commercialized system of lamentation, which foregrounded its subversive potential when she urged the prostitutes to use it as a means of revenge. Now, the custom of the rudali had been politicized. Not just a mean of survival, it was an instrument of empowerment, a subaltern tool of revenge. Sanichari played a crucial role in this process. And we also witness a gradual process of metamorphosis in the character of Sanichari from a victim to an active professional woman. The novelist presented the evolution of a poor, low caste woman Sanichari who emerged at the end as better equipped to adapt, survive and manipulate the system-in other words, more empowered than she was at the beginning.

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