

***RUDALI THE MOURNER: THE 'CRY' OF THE MARGIN***

**Dr. Mahuya Bhaumik**

Rudali, a custom of professional mourning prevalent among the lower caste women of rural Rajasthan for the deceased males of the upper castes, is a culture which can be regarded as a site of contestation where gender, class, caste and economic status are intertwined. This culture of publicly expressing essentially private emotional experiences- grieving and crying- is rarely considered as a creative practice. Abject poverty and social oppression drive these women to such a dehumanised state that they become compelled to earn their living by displaying their heart-wrenching sorrow in the service of the wealthy upper castes who can, as it were, purchase their tears. This practice can be read as the gendering of the bodily space and site that serves the purpose of patriarchal hegemony (Niranjana). The complexity of this issue of exploitation of private emotions and turning those into saleable commodities has been poignantly handled by Mahasweta Devi and Kalpana Lajmi in the short fiction and film bearing the same title *Rudali/ Rudaali*. Both the writer and the film director have shown passionate commitment in their exposure of the social injustices and exploitations through their creative works. Mahasweta Devi strongly believes that 'social injustice, communal discord and evil customs' should be the 'material'(Devi *Bashai Tudu* xviii) of Bengali literature.

Mahasweta Devi's primary focus is the portrayal of the community life of 'ganjus and dushads'(Devi, *Ganguli* 54) who form the majority in Tahad village. But ironically this majority is pushed to the margin by the malik mahajans who have 'elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land'(Devi *Ganguli* 73). This is in sharp opposition to the lives of the lower castes who inhabit 'decrepit mud huts roofed with battered earthen tiles'(Devi *Ganguli* 73). Exploitation goes to such an extent that a child Budhua is turned into a 'bonded labour'(Devi *Ganguli* 57) for five years since his mother, Sanichari, takes a loan of fifty rupees from Mahajan Ramavatar. This class exploitation is intrinsically linked with religious

atrocities as the loan is taken by Sanichari to 'appease' the wrath of the local priest since Sanichari has 'insulted' (Devi Ganguli 57) him by obeying a priest outside Tahad village and performed the last rites of her husband according to his dictates. This same religious and economic oppression can be observed in Sanichari's desperation to perform the rites for her mother-in-law: 'If the rites weren't carried out before the night was over, they would have to bear the cost of the repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight' (Devi Ganguli 55). Economic depravity of this class goes to such an extent that the villagers cannot even think of mourning at the death of their loved ones: 'Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shradh' (Devi Ganguli 55). Poverty and consistent sorrow have hardened these people so much that when a family member dies they heave a sigh of relief: 'Is it possible to feed so many mouths on the meagre scrapings they bring home after labouring on the malik's field? Two dead, just as well' (Devi Ganguli 55).

Mahasweta Devi stresses on the exploitation of an entire community and does not make any effort to individuate Sanichari, around whom the story revolves. She is introduced not through any personal details but by her caste: 'Sanichari was a ganju by caste' (Devi Ganguli 54). When Sanichari's mother-in-law accuses her of being ill-fated because of her birth on Saturday, Sanichari links her sorrow with all other village women by replying: 'You were born on a Monday- was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongri, Bishri – do any of them have happier lives?' (Devi Ganguli 54). This caste discrimination is so very much rooted in their daily drudgery that they genuinely believe that certain diseases are meant for the lower castes: '... I heard that the upper castes never got smallpox? That it was a disease of the poor and lower castes' (Devi Ganguli 78). Again, this caste-system is fraught with gender issue since prostitutes are considered to be a 'separate caste' (Devi Ganguli 80). Ironically this so-called 'separate caste' is a construct of the patriarchy, the awareness of which is a constant threat to the safety and security of the lower caste women. The entire community of ganjus and dushads know that the young women who go to work in the malik's fields never come back home. Initially they go to 'a nice house, then to the randipatti- the whores' quarters' (Devi Ganguli 60). However, what is admirable in the midst of all these deprivations and discriminations, is the solidarity of the community as a whole. Mahasweta Devi says that

it is a story about 'how to survive'(Devi Ganguli 9). This struggle for survival is a community effort. The writer observes: 'in order to survive, the poor and oppressed need the support of the other poor and oppressed'(Devi Ganguli 63). This bonding of the entire community is in stark opposition to rivalry and animosity amongst the members of the affluent upper castes: 'Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears'(Devi Ganguli 70). The death of the rich is fraught with other social complexities pertaining to the domination of the lower castes. This is brilliantly pointed out at the death of Bhairab Singh, when his nephew Lachman Singh laments: 'As long as you were alive, the lower castes never dared raise their heads. For fear of you, the sons of dushads and ganjus never dared attend government schools! Now who will take care of all these things?'(Devi Ganguli 68). So this lament is not the bereavement at the passing away of a near one; rather it is a lament because of the apprehension of the possibility of their position being at stake.

In order to conceal the family rivalry and the revelation of vested interest, the mahajans always make death a grand affair full of pomp and splendour: '... the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family'(Devi Ganguli 80). The prestige is further enhanced by the number of rudalis that can be arranged at the funerals who mourn at the death of their oppressor and earn their living. The mahajans who kick and beat the lower castes with slippers do not hesitate to give 'money, rice', 'clothes and food'(Devi Ganguli 70) to the rudalis for whom professional mourning is a regular business. This act of crying has no emotion involved in the process. It is for the 'belly's sake' since 'there's no bigger god than one's belly'(Devi Ganguli 69). When Sanichari is asked to perform as a rudali and she hesitates because she could never shed tears even at the death of her son, a villager explains: 'I'm not asking you to shed tears you couldn't shed for Budhua. These tears are your livelihood ... just as you cut wheat and plough land, you'll be able to shed these tears'(Devi Ganguli 70). So it is a professional performance for those women who have 'nothing to sell but their howls'(Surya 9). Significantly, this howling does not only symbolise a financial empowerment for them. But it is also a means to vent out their frustration and anger, their intense personal anguish through a public performance of crying. Again, the rudalis take this art form to such a professional level that Sanichari does not shed tears at the

news of Bikhni's death, though Bikhni gave a new significance to her life and had become an integral part of her very existence. Sanichari is devastated at the news of Bikhni's death but knows that tears are a 'useless luxury' (Devi Ganguli 89) not to be shed for their loved ones. Her sorrow is profound, but she refuses to cry. It is because wailing, for these rudalis, involve a public space, shorn of all emotions. They are conscious that this is the only time that they can negotiate with upper caste patriarchy according to their own terms and conditions: 'Just for wailing, one kind of rate. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees two sikkas. Wailing and beating one's breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground there – for that the charge is six rupees' (Devi Ganguli 75). Thus it is a complete subversion of the torture inflicted upon these lower castes when they accept their lot as rudalis and turn 'crying' into a means of protest thus turning social discrimination on its head. This subversion reminds me of Mahasweta Devi's Dopti who protests with her nudity, her body that had been the site of exploitation of the patriarch. Summoned by the Senanayak she walks naked with her two wounded breasts 'in the bright sunlight with her head high' and proclaims: 'There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me?' (Devi *Breast Stories* 36).

In *Rudali*, this subversion of exploitation attains a new height when it creates solidarity among the women of this community without any discrimination against the prostitutes. In fact, after Bikhni's death, Sanichari's social awareness increases and she starts empathising with her daughter-in-law who left her house and turned into a prostitute because of sheer hunger. As a strategic and conscious endeavour to create women's solidarity and power over the malik mahajans she collects the prostitutes who would wail over the death of a person who 'turned them into whores' (Devi Ganguli 90). Thus through the act of 'crying', the marginalised women of the society subvert the sheer hypocrisy of a particular occasion which can be read as a symbol of a patriarchal tortuous system. They create 'a sense of unified selfhood, a rational, coherent, effective identity' (Basu 123).

Kalpna Lajmi's handling of Mahasweta Devi's text in her film adaptation is marked by major departures like the portrayal of an alcoholic husband of Sanichari in place of the supportive one delineated by Mahasweta Devi. Lajmi's primary focus is on Sanichari while

Mahasweta Devi insisted on the portrayal of the community as a whole. Again, Laxman Singh has been projected by Lajmi as much progressive thus leading to a development of an emotional relationship with Sanichari, no trace of which can be found in Mahasweta Devi's writing. However, the most striking difference is the relationship of Sanichari and Bhikni. When asked by Sanichari about her secret of instantly shedding tears as a rudali performer, Bikhni divulges her secret of a kajal-like substance which creates a burning sensation and thus brings out tears. This addition of Lajmi is brilliant to show the thoroughly professional attitude of rudalis like Bikhni. While Mahasweta Devi's Bikhni inspires Sanichari to perform along with her, Lajmi turns Bikhni into the estranged mother of Sanichari, the death news of whom brings tears in the eyes of Sanichari for the first time. She cries vehemently giving expression to all the pent up feelings of suppression and exploitation she had been a victim of throughout her life. This cry has a cathartic effect on her and finally she gains in strength and self-determination to adopt the role of rudali. At the end Sanichari discovers the meaning of life and discovers the means of survival through crying for the dead. She turns into a professional rudali and adopts the profession so thoroughly that she does not even hesitate to use saliva in place of tears during her performance.

Thus in both the fiction and the film, 'crying' is fraught with multi-layered symbols. It does not stop being a tool of oppression, rather it turns into an instrument of empowerment for women who invert 'a howl of grief' into 'a howl of triumph'(Devi Ganguli 23-24). Hence, the voice of the margin cannot be suppressed; rather its voice of wailing can be read as an agency of subversion of the class, caste and gender atrocities hurled by the centre at it.

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**Bio:**

Dr. Mahuya Bhaumik is the Assistant Professor in Department of English at Derozio Memorial College, Kolkata. She has presented papers in various national and international conferences. She has also published articles in different journals. Her areas of interest include Gender Studies, Culture Studies and Postcolonial Literature.