

**TRIPLE MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN MAHASWETADEVI'S  
*RUDALI*— A STUDY**

**Dr. P. Anandan**

Associate professor,  
SBM College of Engineering and Technology,  
Thamaraipadi, Dindigul

**Abstract**

The paper is a study of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* that provides a benchmark of triple marginalization of Dalit female by class, caste and gender. The short story *Rudali* has been well established with the portrayal of the sorry plight of two low caste women Sanichri and Bikhni. The paper brings to light the transformation that happens in the lives of these two low caste women when they adopted the profession of being wailers in the funerals of high caste landlords. They know that there is no chance for social and economic renaissance in their standard of living but their hope against the social and religious systems makes them true captains of their own destiny. In this respect, the text is examined critically to project the way gendered subaltern come up with the belief against the social and economic set-up where they live.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the true representatives of the voice of subalterns. Almost all the major characters in her works, Draupadi, Doulati, Dhowli, Gangor, Jashoda present a record of the economic, social and religious oppression experienced by the Dalit women. All these Dalit women are portrayed as submissive to the high caste landlords and to a certain extent the conditions of their lives presented in her literary works explore a well-established picture of their 'triple marginalization' by caste, class and gender. "Douloti the Bountiful" is one of her short stories is a best example that depicts the plight of subaltern women who are exploited sexually and economically. Hence the idea of Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" "...the subaltern as female even more deeply in shadow than subaltern men" is applied more suitably in the portrayals of subaltern women in Mahasweta Devi's literary works.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* is noted for the oppression of Dalit women by caste, class and gender. In other words it is 'triple marginalization' by religion, economy and society. In *Rudali* the 'triple marginalization' is experienced by the two Dalit females, Sanichri and Bikhni who belong to the major Dalit castes in their region respectively *ganjusand dushads*. These two Dalit women are projected in the novella as the representatives of the whole Dalit female community. It is a tradition followed in the past that, if any of the members of the upper-castes die, the

females from Dalit castes will be made to wail over the dead body. The death of the high caste landlords in the text is mentioned as the self-glorification of the Dalit women that wailing over their dead bodies is the only livelihood of Dalit women. It is the Brahmanic patriarchy that fulfills its wish to show its superiority by making the Dalit female wail over the dead body of high caste lords. The death of any of the members from the dominant upper castes is expressed remorse not over the dead But the remorse is over the fact that the death of any a man or woman seems to be a major deprecation to their dominance on lower classes is observed in the following lines:

Hai, Chacha! 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 govt. Schools. Now who will take care of all these things? (88).

A critical vision on the text shows rightfully that the cradle of the burdento the lower caste ganjus and dushads is the dead man, Bhairav Singh, the 'chacha'. Lachman Singh is his nephew who makes every possible effort to make his burial a grand occasion just to show their caste superiority. Sanichri and Bikhni are the two wailers appointed in the funeral of Bhairav Singh.

The transformation of Sanichri and Bikhni as wailers in the death of the high caste lords is articulated in a different stance in the novella. Wailing over dead bodies becomes a profession or a livelihood of the Dalit female and it is not an expression of a strong emotion of tribulation. The life of the oppressed and maligned Dalit women in the Eastern India is a saga of suffering, misery and struggle. Sanichri and Bikhni are such women whose life is an ever ending tale of crisis.

Sanichri is the protagonist of this novella who has been considered unfortunate from the day she was born and she is cursed to bear the agonies of superstitions of the villagers because she was born on an unlucky day, Saturday. But Sanichri is a wise, practical and rational person who doesn't believe in such superstitions blindly as it is asserted by her:

Huh! Because I was born on the 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)

Sanichri is always an honest, faithful and a good partner of her husband and children. She, in the hands of Mahasweta Devi, is well portrayed with all the positive images of an Indian woman whose day begins with her husband and children and also ends with them. Despite living in poverty, she is well contented with her married life and her husband. Sanichri and her husband are compatible with each other and they together work equally hard for their livelihood. In the seasons of harvest, she works shoulder to shoulder with her husband and she goes to Malik Mahajan's estate to chop wood and fetch fodder for the cattle. Both of them with their six year old son live in a small hut erected by themselves on a piece of land that is inherited by them after the death of her brother-in-law.

She is also an emotional woman just like any other Indian woman but the prevailing conditions of her life full of crises in the forms of poverty, suffering and exploitation by upper caste Mahajans has made it harden her to the core of her heart. She is emotionally stronger than any other woman around her that she compromises her life all the time with her trials and

tribulations. She sheds no tears in any of the death happens in her family. She doesn't cry when her mother-in-law dies meanwhile her husband and his brother are in jail. She states that there is no time for her to cry because she is only responsible to make arrangements for death rites and cremation. Her mother-in-law died in great pain of starvation. There are no enough grains in the house and she receives no support from any of her family members. The brother-in-law and his wife are also dead within three years of the death of her mother-in-law. But she has no time to cry as she with her husband is bothered about the arrangements for the cremation of the dead and to feed the neighbours cheaply at the Shradh:

Sanichri's brother-in-law and sister-in-law die, everyone explains the fact that she and her husband don't shed any tears by the sentiment that their grief must have hardened into stone within them, at the frequent deaths in the family. Sanichri, however, is relieved. Two less mouths to feed on the meager scrapings they bring home. At least, the survivor's stomachs will be full. (55)

Her husband also dies after some years. He dies of cholera after drinking the milk that was poured on shiva's idol on the Baisakhi fair at Tohri, she is again had no time to cry but worried a lot about how to feed her little son. She once again becomes a victim of the agonies of superstitions followed in the religion that are irreligious. When she returns to her village, the priest of Ramavatar's presiding deity, Mohanlal, scoffs at her:

What! A mere offering of sand, that too in river water! Is Budhua lord Ramachandra, repeating. His act of offering a pinda of sand for his father, King Dasharath! Can a Tohri brahmin know how a Tahad villager's kriya is done? By obeying him you've insulted your local priest (57)

By this way, the author projects the social oppression by religious system that attempts to make people move out of fear and superstitions.

She begins a new life after the death of her husband as a loving and caring mother for her fatherless son. Sanichri's son Budhua grows up into a young man and gets married with the passage of time. He comes to the position of taking the yoke of poverty on his shoulders. He works hard in the fields of Ramavatar's son Lachgman. Suddenly Budhua gets infected by tuberculosis and dies leaving his wife with a house and their six months old son behind. Sanichri again takes the responsibility of caring for her grandson Haroa. The boy grows up into a healthy youngman and runs away with a magic show people. Sanichri is left alone. Meantime she meets Bikhni, a childhood playmate of her. Bikhni is another dalit woman who shares the same plight like that of Sanichri. Both Sanichri and Bikhni form a team of rudalis, professional mourners in the death of the high caste lords. Sanichri and Bikhni are hired for the royal funeral of Bhairav Singh, uncle of Lachmansingh. Sanichri and Bikhni wail loudly on the way to the cremation ground. Now with every death in the village, the role of Sanichri and Bikhni as rudalis becomes more important. They are in great demand to wail over deaths because of their skill in wailing and weeping.

One day Bikhni comes up with 'good news' that Gambhir Singh is on his death-bed. It is possible within one or two days Gambhir Singh will die. In between, Bikhni wishes to meet his nephew-in-law. After a few days when Gambhir Singh is on the verge of death, Bikhni's nephew-in-law comes to tell Sanichri about the death of Bikhni that Sanichri gets shocked but doesn't shed any tears. Within seven days Gambhir Singh dies, the rudalis are called. Sanichri

pays a visit to red-light areas to fetch some rudalis. She finds her own daughter-in-law, Gulbadan among the prostitutes. They wail in the funeral of Gambhir Singh. Dulan is one of the main characters portrayed in the short story. He is a true mentor of Sanichri and Bikhni. He enters in the life of Sanichri and Bikhni when they need someone to lead them in a right path in the times of their dilemma in taking decisions. Anjumkatyal rightfully states on Dulan as follows:

Dulan embodies the resistant will, the sharp intelligence, the irreverence, the cynicism and the cunning that the subaltern uses to subvert the total control of the masters. He is also the oral narrator of their history. It is Dulan who at every stage contributes to the growing empowerment of Sanichri who shows her how to adopt and cope. Dulan and Sanichri interact as peers.

Dulan is the person who gives advice to the oppressed women to be professional rudalis. Dulan's voice is always to protest against the harmful nature of the society with its systems and he provides a critique of the systems that implement economic, social and religious oppression on the Dalit women. He asks the rudalis to unite themselves to be stronger enough to face the difficulties in the undemocratic social set up. He is the savior who saves these subalterns from their sorrows by his guidance that is full of practical knowledge and wisdom. AnjumKatyal highlights Dulan's voice as "His is a voice stripping away sentimentality and blind prejudice in favour of adaption and rational argument"

Dulan helps women in many ways. He aids the tribal women in keeping their memory alive by reminding them of the past. His intention in all walks of the life of these marginalized women is positive and progressive. He gives courage by his words when they are in the midst of despair. In each and every move he teaches, advises, educates and enlightens the oppressed women. After the death of Budhua, Sanichri's son, she is left alone by her daughter-in-law. Meantime Dulan meets her and gets her a job on the railway line. When Bikhni loses her money, she comes to Dulan who tells her to become a rudali. Dulan takes place in all the turnings in the life of these women. Hence Dulan, in *Rudali*, is a voice that raises a critique and condemn the upper classes by exposing the upper class' greed, hypocrisy and corruption.

The death of Bikhni, takes Sanichri's life and profession to next phase where her efforts become more vigorous than before. She emanates her professional skills of wailing the death of Gambhir Singh. Sanichri along with the new rudalis in the funeral of Gambhir Singh wail and hit their heads on the ground more vigorously as it is traced by AnjumKatyal:

The Sanichari we encounter at the end of the story –out-going, shrewd, manipulative-is very different from the stoic, long-suffering but repressed woman we see earlier. (22).

*Rudali* advances a true fact that protest against subalternity changes nothing in the lives of subalterns and gendered subalterns. Sanichari and Bikhni in *Rudali* stand for all the Dalit women whose living pattern has no change and it is almost same from the beginning till the end. It seems to be deceitful of human existence if there are any changes in the life of the subalterns in India. Despite being one of the world's biggest economic resources, India fails in providing the citizens with equal distribution.

There is no any reformer who has done a significant work for the development of the lives of subalterns in India. *Rudali* portrays women who only belong to the category of gendered subalterns and that of the women of vision for future. There is no way for them to step into the

next level by their identity because they are marginalized by multiple forms of oppression. It is a sorry fate of Indian women that only a few of Dalit women bid for top posts in the executive and political arena while others striving for bare survival. The stereotypical images of women in India have started breaking from the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century but Dalit women are still lagging behind by the unjust world order that follows the dominant factors of gender and caste.

Sanichari and Bikhni decide to step into do the job of rudali, professional mourner, for their bare survival that can be rightfully said the representation of deceitfulness, hypocrisy and dishonest of human existence in India. Sanichari and Bikhni express no discomfort in adopting this heartless job for their livelihood. As it is asserted in the text, "Considerations of the stomach are more important than anything else" (116).

It is Dulan who guides them to become rudalis but Sanichari is not contented in adapting the job and the respectability of this promising profession. She demurs "Won't there be talk in the village" (92). Bikhni seems to be more interested in adopting this profession. She more ardently and religiously steps into take responsibilities of the job. She is the one who brings news of death in the families of rich landlords who ask for rudalis. Sanichari and Bikhni start to do this heartless job full of soul and heart with the guidance of Dulan and they don't feel shy to bargain. Their demand can be felt on almost all the funeral occasions. Dulan stands as an authentic mentor to Sanichari even after Bikhni's death. He convinces and exhorts her not to give up her profession at any cost. Dulan articulates ". . . Your profession of funeral wailing is like your land." (114).

He is the person who emerges Sanichari to bring back her daughter-in-law in the business of wailing, who has become a prostitute after the death of her husband. Dulan has no blind faith in the abstract words like 'fate' but he is more rational and full of practical knowledge. Hence he claims that the word 'fate' has nothing to do with the sorry plight of Sanichari and Bikhni.

Therefore it is valid to claim that the tract of Sanichari and Bikhni in *Rudali* by Mahasweta Devi is truly matriarchal in a patriarchal set-up that attempts to destroy the stereotypical images of gendered subaltern. These are the women by their beliefs against the undemocratic social set-up raised their voice against oppression on Dalit women by multiple forms. Hence they formed a new trend to be followed by ascendants. They add value and purpose for their life. However Sanichari and Bikhni are the captains of their own destiny but they are aware of the fact that there is no chance for social and economic renaissance in their standard of living.



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