

The Role Of Sanichari In Mahasweta Devi's "*Rudali*"

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A prolific author of novels and short stories in Bengali, Mahasweta is equally well known for her original work among the most subjugated in the Indian society - the evicted tribals and the marginalized segments such as landless labourers of eastern India. Her stories vividly portray tribal's struggle and bring out history of subaltern. The suppression of downtrodden people by aristocracy is a dominant theme in the novels of Mahasweta Devi. She herself claims her work as a journalist and imaginative writer:

As a journalist I play the same role as an editor. I travel extensively in the villages and collect information about people's sufferings, complaints, political exploitation, their protests and write about these in the press...As an editor, journalist and writer, I experienced no conflict between the three roles.

Renowned litterateur and social activist Mahasweta Devi often narrates the brutal oppression faced by the tribal people at the hands of the powerful upper caste persons comprising landlords, money lenders and government officials in this belt. Like the most Indian English novelists, she is passionately concerned with the ferocious poverty and cruelties of caste, with dalits, untouchables and bonded labour. She contributed for tribal upliftment and aroused the conscience of the literate Indians to the problems of struggle, oppression and exploitation caused due to the evils of caste system.

Her novel, *Rudali* reflects the theme of social consciousness. In this novel, Sanichari, is the central figure who plays prominent role of a dalit woman. She is a poor woman caught in the net of the age-old caste system. Through her, Mahasweta Devi brings out an authentic picture of dalit community. Her problems are common to her class, caste and gender "Like other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty." The name of village is Tahad where ganjus and dushads are in the bulk. Sanichari resembles the other villagers in her appearance, clothes and habits of speech. In the very beginning, she is presented as 'voiceless' dalit woman undergoing suppression but onwards she becomes an empowering agent of revolt against age-old social customs. The novelist undoubtedly exposes the deceit and corruption of the feudals against the lower castes.

The *mela* was a grand affair. The Shiva idol was being bathed in pots and pots of milk donated by the rich. This milk had been collecting in large tanks over the past few days. It gave off a sour stink and was thick with buzzing flies. People were paying the pandas money to drink glasses of this milk and then promptly falling sick with cholera. Many died including Badhua's father. It was during British rule. Government officials were dragging the victims off to the hospital tents. There were only five tents. There were sixty to seventy patients. The tents were cordoned off with barbed wire. Sanichari and her son sat and waited beyond the barbed wire. They come to know that Budhua's father had died. The government officers didn't give her any time to shed tears. They burned the corpses quickly. The novelist spotlights vicious discrimination, greed, cruelty and power of haves to manipulate policy against the helpless and hopeless wretched class. Even Sanichari has to pay twice over for ritual offerings. She is enforced to borrow money from Ramavtar when the local village priest, Mohanlal threatens her to offer pinda- daan "Can a Tohri Brahman know how a Tahad villager's kriya is done? By obeying him, you've insulted your local priest!" She borrows Rs

20 but has to pay Rs 50 through labouring in the fields of Malik- mahajan over the next five years. The lower class struggles a lot even for little indulgences like bangles or a comb. On the other hand, malik- mahajans squander a large amount of money on luxuries amenities. They spend money on funerary ceremonies as it is symbol of their status:

When someone died in a malik-mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family. The status of *rudalis* also rose. The price for this was paid by the *dushads*, *dhobis*, *ganjus* and *kols*, from the hides of whom the overloads extracted the sums they had overspent.

The novelist presented malik- mahajans like Ramavtar Singh and later his son Lachman Singh as dominating every aspect of the lives of the low – caste villagers. The malik-mahajans exploit them for their selfish motives. Sanichari's life is an elaborate discussion of struggle and exploitation. Her relations and relatives are constant source of suffering for her. Her mother in law always cursed her for being ill-fated and as a daughter –in- law she could not have freedom even to speak "Huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law?!" Her mother in law died when her husband and brother in law were in jail. Ramavtar Singh sent them in jail for the loss of some wheat. She could not weep even on the death of her brother and sister in law because she is tense over the fact that Ramavtar is frightening to expel all the *dushads* from the village:

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 *shraddha*? In this village everyone is unhappy. They understand suffering.

The entire theme of the novel is a powerful indictment on the imposed old traditions and rituals on the name of religion. The novel shows the absolute power of haves and bribery within the privileged classes. The author vividly portrays how the rich manipulates religion to their selfish motives. Religious conviction also works against the poor class as they become permanent slaves of *zaminadars*. They are forced to borrow money from them to carry out demands and obligations. They have religious fear and superstition. When Sanichari's mother-in-law dies at night, in the pouring rain, Sanichari faces lot of troubles in performing necessary rituals before daybreak, with no grain in the house. Nobody was there for her help. Even *sattu* and sand becomes expensive for the exploited class. In spite of working hard in the fields and houses of *zamidars*, these poor people cannot eat and wear properly. On the other hand, the *zamidars* and *mahajans* lead a luxurious life as Gambhir Singh pays Pandits and Astrologers to find out the cause of his terrible disease. Pandits find out that he has injured a pregnant cow as a boy unknowingly. This is his only sin. She points out:

...malik had committed dacoity when his father was alive, in the time of the British that he murdered hundreds of citizens of independent India, that he stole Lachman Singh's father's horse, that he burned down many *dushad* settlements with his own hands, that he ruined hundreds of young girls, he's a big sinner.

These lines unmistakably show brutality, fearlessness and veniality of mahajan-class. Dulan is a mouthpiece of Mahasweta Devi when he accuses and condemns the double standards of the advantaged classes. He throws light on the present conditions and analyses how they are caused:

The tale Dulan told them was very significant; it explained clearly how the ruthless Rajputs infiltrated this remote area of tribals and from zaminders gradually built themselves upto the status of jotedars establishing themselves as the masters of the area.

He brings in light how the Rajput soldiers sent by the Raja of Chhota-Nagpur burnt entire village and murdered the innocent tribals. The Raja of Chhota-Nagpur instigated them to claim as much land as they could usurp by throwing swords in the air:

There may be litigations and ill will between the maliks, but they have certain things in common. Except for salt, kerosene and postcards, they don't need to buy anything. They have elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land. They all worship household deities who repay them amply- after all, in the name of the deities they hold acres which are exempt from taxes and reforms.

Dulan serves as a candid character in the novel. He attacks on wickedness, greed, corruption and indifference of aristocratic society. He tells Bikhni, Sanichari and his wife that malik-mahajans create prostitutes as they always keep women for their own luxury and pleasure. In her stories, Mahasweta Devi shows that zamindars and jotedars exploit of poverty and helplessness of dalit women. Without any conflict, they usually reconcile to the lust of *zamindars* and *jotedars*. So prostitution becomes their meagre means of livelihood. It encourages brutality, dehumanization and exploitation of downtrodden people by the upper-dominating class. Anjum Katyal in his essay *The Metamorphosis of Rudali* says:

We see women from the villages who have become prostitutes – they have mothers and families within the village community, histories which locate them in the community. Some have been used by the malik-mahajans and then discarded; some have mothers who were kept women and are forced into prostitution in their turn; others become prostitutes because they have run away from home, looking for better options to the humdrum circumscribed existence their poverty and social class locks them into.

Mahasweta Devi accuses the Malik- Mahajans of being responsible for this tragedy of women. Dulan shows his sympathy for prostitutes that they are poor working women being forced to follow this shameless occupation.

In *Douloti* she highlights an issue of bonded labour in the scenario of post-1947 India. The novella is an indictment on social corruption as the protagonist Douloti resembles a number of Doulotis and Ganoris spread all over the nation. Douloti belongs to a harijan class.

Like Munavar, the brothel-owner, Baijnath Mishra forces each girl to take dozen of customers every night. In order to earn more money, he thinks that it is more profitable to reduce their rates and take more customers paying more money. Consequently, the girls turn into old, wobbly things. Douloti is only in her mid- twenties but looks sick, old and unappealing. Now she cannot attract even a one – rupee customers. So, she is discharged by her ruthless owner who earned a lot of profit through her.

This is a climax of brutality and criminalization on the part of the dominating aristocratic-class. By the end of the text the custom of *Rudali* has become a weapon of revenge. Sanichari motivates prostitutes to use it as a means of revenge. Mahasweta Devi says:

...The background of *Rudali* extends much beyond [the story]. I have travelled the whole of palamau extensively by foot. I have seen all kinds of exploitation including bonded labour... A good number of my stories, including '*Bichan*', '*Shikar*', *Jagmohan's death*, *Shishu* and *Rudali* are placed in this particular locale.

Thus, the novelist drops the curtain on the clamoring jubilant cries of the outcast bonded together to reverse a howl of grief into a howl of triumph.

WORK CITED

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