

## Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*: Wailing Motherhood

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### Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* has gained critical responses for raising the voice on behalf of the silenced subaltern individuals and communities. However, this paper attempts to analyse the text through the gendered lens of 'motherhood'. *Rudali* not only delineates the struggles and exploitations of the lower caste people and the outcastes, but the text also divulges the condition of mothers and their struggles of mothering. Mahasweta Devi, true to her strong writing agendas, has not written in favour of the mothers belonging only to the subaltern communities; she has taken into account of those mothers who are wealthy and belong to respected families as well as those who are defamed and disrespected and belong to the marginalized, red-light areas of the society. All the 'mothers' portrayed in *Rudali* have undergone similar ecstasy, agony, humiliation, dejection and rejection. The text leads us through motherhood as a 'community' and not just a biological attribute conferred with a namesake social status.

Keywords: Motherhood, Subaltern Voices, Caste Discrimination, Tradition, Culture.

Mahasweta Devi's works have always been a critique of the social order in a caste-based society. She has been widely read and acclaimed from the perspective of subaltern studies, feminism as well as postcolonial studies. Her works have given voice to the silenced souls of the socially marginalized as well as the tribal communities. In this research paper, I have attempted to analyse Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* which has taken up a centre stage in the realm of Subaltern Literature. *Rudali* has been scanned under the lens of gender and caste discrimination. The plight of the working class has been vividly portrayed and their inhumane exploitation at the hands of the upper caste *malik-mahajans* have captured the crooked face of the society at large. However, an observant eye cannot overlook the fact that the novella not only looks into the life struggles of the *Ganjus* and *Dushads* from Tahad village and the exploitation and ill-treatment meted out on the peasants who are working in the fields of the *zamindars* (landlords) and *mahajans* (money lenders) as 'bonded labours', but it also gives a profound insight into the plight of the low-caste women as well as the challenges faced by the 'deserted' mothers. The text depicts a different facet of this elevated, elusive pedestal created by the patriarchal society to entrap women in the labyrinth of 'motherhood'. *Rudali* not only projects the woes of the wailing women who mourn the death of the wealthy people, but also ruminates on the saga of those mothers who have been deprived of that venerated halo in spite of bearing a 'son'. This paper looks into the wretched situation of motherhood through the characters who are portrayed as 'mother'.

Motherhood is a natural, biological process – a gift of Nature. Unlike other nations, in India, motherhood is always revered and respected. This reverence takes an elevated status when a woman bears 'son' – an heir to carry forward the family lineage. Present day feminism debate on the "reduction of a woman's identity exclusively to this role – women are mothers and also women" (*Motherhood* 6). As Maithreyi Krishnaraj has expressed:

The feminism dilemma is how to retrieve motherhood as a source of emancipation, not by eliminating it as an obstacle but by redefining appropriate terms and conditions, and recreating a social structure that can make motherhood conceivably creative experience. ... This is different from the glorification of motherhood that equates it to self-denial. (37-38)

Mahasweta Devi neither glorifies motherhood nor does she attempt to portray that motherhood is a burden. To quote from an interview of the author conducted by Usha Ganguli, “Rudali is about ... ‘how to survive’ ... ‘bread and mouth’. It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this”. Hence, *Rudali* “explicates the various strategies of survival employed by the subaltern individually and as a community” (Katyay 11). Coincidentally, the subaltern individuals turned out to be ‘mothers’.

*Rudali* opens with the ill-fated life of Sanichari, whose name also carries the burden of her ill-luck. She lives with her husband and his family in the Tahad village. Her mother-in-law never let go off the chance of cursing Sanichari for being born on inauspicious Saturday and bringing her destiny of life-long suffering to add to the misery of her husband. As a young woman, Sanichari never dared to retort back but in her mind, she often contemplated why people born on other ‘auspicious’ days shared a similar fate with her. The agonies of her life increased in multi-fold with the death of her mother-in-law. The loss of some wheat enraged the *malik-mahajan* Ramavatar whose anger took a toll in the lives of the Dushads and Ganjus. All the men belonging to the lower caste were put behind the bar. Sanichari’s husband and brother-in-law were also a part of that group. Thus, began Sanichari’s constant companionship with drudgery and penury. In the coming years, the death of her brother-in-law followed by the death of her sister-in-law, did not make her grieve anymore. Grief and the harsh realities of life

had hardened her so much that she “had sighed with 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. At least their own stomachs would be full” (*Rudali* 72). However, destiny had something else in store for Sanichari.

Sanichari had to work hard “for the sake of a little security in her household” (*Rudali* 73). Her son, Budhua, was only six years old. In the Preface to *Motherhood in India*, Veena Poonacha alluded that, “The mother-child relationship is seen as the most sacrosanct of all relationships. Its mysteries have been extolled in religion, poetry and literature; the images of the Madonna with her child or that of Yashoda with Krishna are seen as sublime love” (vii). However, Sanichari’s motherhood did not reflect those images of happy and content mothers. “Leaving the little child at home, Sanichari labored hard .... She would go off to the malik’s house where she would split wood, gather fodder for the cows and in harvest season, work alongside her husband in the fields” (*Rudali* 73). The sudden death of her husband due to cholera bereaved her of everything she had in life. With the death of her husband, she was forced to take loan of Rs. 20 from Ramavatar Singh which amounted to Rs. 50 with interest and she was supposed to repay the debt by working as “bonded labour on his fields for the next five years” (*Rudali* 74). Even a moment to lament over her husband’s death was not at her disposal and when she finally had the time and space to cry her heart out and speculate over her own death, she was reminded by Dulan that “what would happen to your son Budhua?” (*Rudali* 75). Sanichari was caught within the web of motherhood and the powerlessness that the relationship had spun around her. Instead of mourning, she caught the reign of life strongly and moved forward with hopes stemming around her son. She took the advantage of the crisis in Ramavatar Singh’s household. Singh’s uncle was on his deathbed and he was in need of a calf to cross the mythical Baitarani river to

help him in his afterlife. Sanchari had a calf left by Ashrafi's mother under her care; she gave it away to Ramavatar and in return she asked to "wipe out the debt" (*Rudali* 76). At any other situation, Ramavatar would not have let go the debt so easily, but the emotional turmoil created by the death in the family made him falter and waived off Sanichari's loan. However, he was determined to extract the money from Sanichari. When his son Lachman got married, the expense of the musicians was paid by Sanichari and her people. The day to day encounter with misery and misfortune could not stop Sanichari – the mother.

Sanichari took care of her son's upbringing. Budhua grew up and followed his father's footsteps. He shouldered the responsibility of the family and in due time, settled down in his married life. But Sanichari was not pleased with her daughter-in-law's demeanor and her inclination to have unwarranted contacts with the people in the marketplace. As a mother, Sanichari was crestfallen to see Budhua toiling day and night, while his wife was apathetic towards him. Her agony inflated with Budhua's contraction of tuberculosis. She could discern that "her dreams of building a life around Budhua would never be fulfilled" (*Rudali* 77). Her dreams as a wife "to buy a wooden comb for her hair, to wear shellac bangles for a full year" (*Rudali* 77) had never materialized; the dreams changed with time. Now she dreamt:

Her son and daughter-in-law would earn enough, they would support her, she imagined sitting in the winter sun sharing a bowl of gur and sattu with her grandson – had this last dream been over-ambitious? Had she sinned by wanting too much? Is that why Budhua was wasting away before her eyes? (*Rudali* 77)

There was a tone of self-reproach in her regrets. This "self-abnegation that women internalize" (*Motherhood in India* ix) is evident from Sanichari's self-accusation for expecting too much as a mother. The image of a selfless, self-sacrificing and all-forgiving mother has

entrenched so firmly into the psyche of our collective consciousness that even a mother from the marginalized strata of the society is compelled to feel dejected. But that momentous feeling of dejection was shaken with the increase in Budhua's increasing discomfort. Sanichari's motherly concern made her disregard god and implored that she should have been sick instead of her son. Here, we see a strong filial bond between mother and son. While Sanichari was concerned with Budhua's health and wished to die and relieve her son from the illness; Budhua as a father speculated that if his mother lived, his son, too, will live. Budhua asserted to his mother, "No, Ma. If you live, my son will live" (*Rudali* 78). The *narir tan* or 'pull of the womb' is so strong between Sanichari and Budhua that, the latter had entrusted his son to the hands of his mother (i.e. the grandmother) and not his wife (the real, biological mother). The afflictions and gratifications of motherhood are borne by the women alone. Sanichari witnessed both these extreme emotions concurrently. Budhua had been a dutiful and responsible son; he went on to fulfill his deceased father's dream of having a vegetable patch in their small courtyard which bloomed and came alive with variety of vegetables – okra, eggplant, radish, chilly and pumpkin. The meagre moment of happiness did not stay for long with Sanichari. Her ailing son could not share the burden of their poverty-stricken existence. After his death, his wife deserted Sanichari and disappeared. When Sanichari returned home after meeting the *vaid*, she found "her son dead and her daughter-in-law gone. The baby was crying in the room" (*Rudali* 79). Like the previous deaths in the family, this time too, she did not have the time to mourn the death of her son. The loss of her son bewildered Sanichari and with her six months old grandson clung to her neck, life seemed arduous. As Maithreyi Krishnaraj opines, "Motherhood and mothering need support ... A man can run away from responsibility but only a few women ever repudiate their responsibility to their children" (*Interrogating Motherhood* xii), but in *Rudali* we see the

juxtaposition of both aspects. Sanichari's daughter-in-law abandoned her child and never returned, thereby, she severed all ties with her son and 'motherhood'. On the other hand, Sanichari's neighbours helped her in every possible way to mother her grandson, Haroa. Dulan's wife, known for her bad temper and quarrelsome attitude, not only took away Haroa to breastfeed him with the help of her daughter-in-law (i.e., Dhatua's wife) who was already nursing her child, but also cooked for Sanichari while she worked for her livelihood. Parbhu ganju suggested her to shift to his yard so that she need not feel alone and helpless and Natua dushad helped her by selling the vegetables in the market. Irrespective of all the differences and continuous disagreements among the villagers, they all stood by Sanichari when she needed the most.

The never-ending toil of Sanichari to give a better life to Haroa was wasted. In the initial days, Haroa obeyed her and went to work in the shop of Lachman Singh. After five months, he went missing like his mother. Sanichari went in search of him from one fairground to another, but in vein. Perhaps she was destined for something else. In one of those wild search hunts for Haroa, she met her childhood friend Bikhni. A small fight ensued between them when Bikhni bumped into her in the fairground. The recognition of each-other steer cleared the confusion, and both sat down to share their stories of misfortunes and misadventures in their lives.

Bikhni's life presented the other side of motherhood. She managed the household single handedly after the death of her husband. After three daughters, she had a son. Her meticulous planning and thrifty attitude helped her to progress and prosper in life. She took calves for rearing and gradually managed to buy four cows and two she-goats. Fulfilling the duties of motherhood, she ensured to settle her son and got him married. She fed the whole village after taking loan from the *mahajan*. Unfortunately, her son turned out to be ungrateful. He decided to

move into his in-law's house leaving Bikhni. When she proposed to repay the loan by selling the cows, the wretched son, took away the cows and the calves to his in-laws. Being a strong woman, Bikhni got rid of her motherly attachment with her son and sold the goats in the marketplace without the knowledge of her son. She rued on her fate and bemoaned before Sanichari – “Your son's no more, mine's as good as dead. Perhaps I'll go to Daltonganj or Bokharo or Gomo. Beg on some station” (*Rudali* 85).

Both Sanichari and Bikhni returned to Tahad village. Bikhni was happy to take care of the household chores. But life challenged them at every step. Bikhni's money came to an end and they had to look out for their livelihood. Sanichari took refuge in Dulan's advice. The first few suggestions were discarded by Sanichari because they were equivalent to fraudulence in the name of God. Dulan reproached Sanichari and offered them to become *rudalis* – the professional mourners for Bhairab Singh's death.

Sanichari and Bikhni nodded. For them, nothing has ever come easy. Just daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt is exhausting. Through motherhood and widowhood they're tied to the moneylender. While those people spend huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to gain prestige. Let some of that money come into Sanichari's home! (*Rudali* 95)

Thus, began the life of Sanichari and Bikhni as professional mourners and with the passage of time they claimed a top-notch position in their profession. “They were professional. The world belongs to the professional now, not to the amateur” (*Rudali* 96). They had fixed a rate for every act of mourning.

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.

At the *kriya* ceremony, we want cloth, preferably a length of plain black cloth.

(*Rudali* 97)

Their business prospered and there was a “demand for the pair who wailed at Bhairab Singh's funeral” (*Rudali* 97). The camaraderie and female bonding between Sanichari and Bikhni cut across the notion of that “an inescapable truth” of our society that “women often stand in the way of other women's development” (Ashapura Debi 22). Bagchi goes on to advocate that “Women need a special kind of self-sufficiency which can come only with the consolidation of female power” (Ashapura Debi 22) and *Rudali* portrays and validates this ‘female power’.

The life of Sanichari and Bikhni disclose the struggles, sufferings and adversities of the mothers from the lower caste community. Though their motherhood was challenging but they gave their best efforts to nurture their children. Sanichari's son grew up to be a sensible and responsible person; only death stood between the mother and the son and added to the aged mother's agony. Bikhni's son turned away from her and left her alone in her old age. According to the *Manusmriti* “reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after her husband has died” (186). Bikhni's son failed in his duties as a son. He turned into a savage, selfish, thoughtless and uncouth individual. Within this labyrinth of poverty and oppression, motherhood is seen ‘wailing’ loud and clear.

In stark contrast to the sons of Sanichari and Bikhni stands Nathuni Singh, the son, who belonged to the wealthy, upper caste family. Dulan narrated the story of Nathuni Singh and his dying mother. Nathuni Singh's mother was the only child of Parakram Singh and inherited all his

wealth; in turn, Nathuni Singh got everything from his mother. His mother was in deathbed, and he had already started looking out for *rudalis* and he wished to hire Sanichari and Bikhni. The narrator spoke in a flippant tone that, Nathuni was a “worthy son” because he had isolated his mother in “a single room at the far end of the compound” (*Rudali* 99) and tied a goat beside her bed.

No hakim, no *kabiraj*, no doctor. No herbal remedies, no medicines, no injections. She’s still alive. Meanwhile, he’s stocking up on sandalwood and sal wood for a sensational funeral pyre. Bales of cloth are arriving, for distribution at the *kriya* ceremony. He’s preparing to feed brahmans and purchasing loads of ghee, sugar, dal, flour. He’s buying utensils as well, to give the bramans. (*Rudali* 99)

The maltreatment of the mother did not end there. She was left to “lie in her own excrement all day” (*Rudali* 99). One of the dushad woman, Moti, was given the job to clean Nathuni Singh’s mother every evening. He was not willing to “spend a paisa on trying to cure her, but plans to spend thirty thousand on her funeral!” (*Rudali* 99). Nathuni Singh had even “taken away her warm quilt” and gave her a “thin covering” because he wanted his mother to “die quickly” (*Rudali* 99). Such were the rewards of motherhood.

*Rudali* gives a glimpse of the other side of motherhood where the mother is no more revered or respected. In her old age, when she needs the care and support from her family, mainly, from her son/s – she is left alone on her deathbed. Arrangements for her funeral are made even before she had left the mortal world. The romantic aura that has always lured women to beget sons and raise their status in the family and society, Mahasweta Devi is challenging the very notion of motherhood through *Rudali*. We are made to slowdown – to think and contemplate, how fulfilling and satisfying is it to be a mother? Does motherhood add to the glory

of a woman? Or is it another golden cage where women are left alone to reap the harvests of motherhood? Jasodhara Bagchi has cautioned “Experientially articulated this entire terrain of motherhood consists of agony” (*Interrogating Motherhood* 97).

Another dimension of motherhood is revealed through the survival strategies employed by the *rudalis* and the *randis*. Dulan always redirected the fate of Sanichari and Bikhni like an able guide. When they had started moving up in life, Dulan proposed to the duo to “form a union of rudalis and randis” (*Rudali* 103) like the coalminers. Sanichari was not convinced but Bikhni immediately grabbed the idea. She voiced her exasperation – “It’s the women who are ruined by the malik-mahajans who turn into whore” (*Rudali* 103). Dulan baited on Bikhni’s rage and narrated about Gambhir Singh of Nawagarh who had a kept woman, Motiya. Gulbadan was the daughter of Gambhir Singh and Motiya; she had her share of happy childhood in Singh’s house. But after the death of Motiya, Singh’s nephew pestered Gulbadan to become his kept woman. When Gulbadan complained against the nephew, Gambhir Singh threw her out of his house saying – “You’re the daughter of a whore, after all” (*Rudali* 104). When that same Gambhir Singh was on his deathbed, his nephew had followed suit of Nathuni Singh. Gambhir Singh made the arrangement of his grand funeral while he was alive and isolated in the shack in the yard. Sanichari and Bikhni were also hired for as *rudalis*. But before Gambhir Singh’s death, Bikhni yearned to go to Ranchi to attend the marriage ceremony of her nephew-in-law’s daughter. Bikhni confessed before Sanichari that her trip to Ranchi was an excuse to see her son, in case, he too, attended the marriage. After all, a mother’s heart would long to see her son. Bikhni left for Ranchi and promised to return within four days. Little did they know that, it was their last conversation.

Gambhir Singh's condition deteriorated; Sanichari met the gomastha and discussed the plans of the funeral. Four days passed and Bikhni did not return. On the sixth day, when Sanichari returned home, he saw a stranger at her doorstep with "shaven head, bare feet" (*Rudali* 112) waiting for her. The news of Bikhni's death shuddered her from within. "She felt a landslide within. But many deaths, deceptions, injustices, had hardened her endurance and self-control" (*Rudali* 112). Life had made her emotionally strong but Bikhni's sudden demise had taken away the ground beneath her feet. Sanichari turned to Dulan with a remorseful heart. Dulan, once again diverted her woes and insisted that she should take up the role of Bikhni and go to Tohri. It was a question of her survival and she had to go. The discomfort of confronting her daughter-in-law, who ran away from home and ended up being a whore in Tohri, unsettled her thoughts. Sanichari resolved to get rid of her anxieties and include her daughter-in-law as well. Her apprehensions of being defamed due to her association with the whores, Dulan reminded her that, "What one is forced to do to feed oneself is never considered wrong" (*Rudali* 116).

Sanichari took the initiative to visit Tohri and gathered all the whores including her daughter-in-law and Gulbadan. She urged them to take money from these cruel moneylenders and rub salt in their wounds. At least hundred whores gathered at the funeral of Gambhir Singh. They surrounded the corpse of Gambhir Singh and started wailing loudly. *Rudali* ends with the emergence of the muted voices raising their voice against the rich with their dry eyes and cry.

The gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double! He and the nephew were reduced to helpless onlookers. While hitting her head on the ground and wailing loudly, Gulbadan turned her dry eyes in the direction of the nephew,

cast him a leering wink and grinned. Then, listening to Sanichari's cry, she rejoined the chorus. (*Rudali* 117-18)

The veteran writer from Bengal, Ashapura Debi, in her inaugural speech delivered in 1989 titled "Indian Women: Myth and Reality" had articulated that "women lack loyalty to her own sex" (22):

Women seldom have groups or associations of a permanent kind. Each one is adrift in her own delicate little boat but there is no hardy vessel to carry them together on board. If we want this state of things to change we must have a strong sense of solidarity so that women don't have to turn to men every time they are trying to build something up. (22)

Mahasweta Devi had comprehended the situation of women. *Rudali* stands as a testimony to the realities of motherhood irrespective of whichever community the 'mothers' belong to. True to her strong writing agendas, Mahasweta Devi, has not written in favour of the mothers belonging only to the subaltern communities; she has taken into account of those mothers who are wealthy and belong to respected families as well as those who are defamed and disrespected and belong to the marginalized, red-light areas of the society. All the 'mothers' portrayed in *Rudali* have undergone similar ecstasy, agony, humiliation, dejection and rejection. The text leads us through motherhood as a 'community' and not just a biological attribute conferred with a namesake social status. Though Mahasweta Devi visualizes her work as a discourse of class and caste, and not necessarily from the gendered perspective, but in her attempt to debunk and attack the exploitative social system, she has also unmasked the lives of women, specially the mothers, who are also a part of this discriminated socio-political ecosystem.

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