

Lamentation as a Tool of Subversion and Empowerment: A Study of Mahaswetha Devi's "Rudali"

Jerrin Aleyamma John

B.Ed. Student

Mount Carmel College of Teacher Education for Women

Kottayam, Kerala, India

Jerrinajohn95@gmail.com

Abstract

One half of humanity is often referred to as the weaker sex owing to the categorization of certain traits of theirs as “weaknesses”, but these traits eventually turn out to be the tools for women’s empowerment. This paper attempts to analyse the empowering and subverting role of lamentation in Mahaswetha Devi’s “Rudali” where the act of mourning could be seen in different levels of meaning; lamentation as an agency for subverting the oppressor, the material prosperity gained by the mourners and the emergence of the Rudalis in deciding the prestige of the rich. The patriarchal notion regarding the sensitive nature of women categorize them as ‘mourners’ who wins through their ‘tears’ and “Rudali” reinstates this fact but in a new light. The protagonist Sanichari evolves into a strong and empowered woman who learns the commodification of grief and her lamentation destroys the hegemonic and oppressive rule of the exploiter. The ability to cry is transformed into a tool of subversion. Thereby mourning

and the mourners become a threatening factor for the oppressors as it becomes a display of mockery. The grief that crept into the life of the oppressed through the oppressors is eventually transformed in to a mourning of jubilation, subversion and empowerment by the end of the narrative.

Keywords: Lamentation, Subversion, Mourning of Jubilation, Empowered Women

1. Introduction

One half of humanity is often referred to as the weaker sex owing to the categorization of certain traits as their “weaknesses”, but eventually these traits turn out to be the tools for women’s empowerment. This paper attempts to analyse the empowering and subverting role of lamentation in Mahaswetha Devi’s “Rudali” where the act of mourning imparts different levels of meaning; lamentation as an agency for subverting the oppressor, the material prosperity gained by the mourners and the emergence of the Rudalis in deciding the prestige of the rich. Here the act of mourning is not treated as a derogatory or a passive action but is dealt with much delicacy. Lamentation is literally transformed in to a powerful tool at the hand of the women in Thahad village.

Devi has employed a journalistic style of writing where emotional and sentimental attachments are kept at a distance. She does not speak for a particular group rather her writing portrays her thoughts and vision more elaborately. Sanichari named after Saturn is the protagonist in the story. She is historicized by Devi as Anju Katyal points out; thereby Sanichari ceases to become the central figure but a representative of the people like her. Author does not enter in too much detailed explanation of Sanichari’s physical appearance but is often kept at a distance to give the impression that the recorded event is merely a case in matter.

This particular short story was first published in the year 1980 and could be seen as a clear depiction of the condition of the tribal lives. The work is an outcome of Devi's activism among the Tribes and must be seen in close relation with her other writings like "Mother of 1084" and "Draupadi". The Ganjus and Dushads are the major group of people inhabiting the Thahad village and the narrative is completely deals with their lives. The story is mainly concerned with the theme of survival as Dulan says, "...there's no bigger god than one's belly. For the belly's sake everything is permissible." (Devi 68)

2. Role of Lamentation

As the narrative continues, one sees the central concept or role held by 'lamentation' and that death and the inability to cry come as a recurring event. Here Devi is instating the idea of crying in relation to grief where both the actions are treated to be highly emotional. But, the reversal of the idea is what makes the narrative intensive and deep.

The most ironic part in the story is the fact that it is the woman who is unable to cry. A major "feminine" feature recognized by the society is the ability to cry by women. One of the popular ads titled #Vogue Empower produced in favour of women's protection and empowerment had a very ironic concept at its centre. The whole ad revolves around a phrase uttered to men and boys of different ages at varying situations. The phrase goes like "Ladke rothe nahi" (boys don't cry) where they ask the boys if "they are girls". Here the advertisement, produced in favour of women, articulates the notion of the patriarchal society regarding the feminine nature of women where; it's ok for women to cry or rather women ought to cry. But Devi shatters this notion and reinstates it in a new light. In "Rudali" we see Sanichari as one who is unable to cry, the narrative states "In all this, she didn't cry for her son either. Nor could she cry. She would sit like one stunned then fall into exhausted slumber." (61) Sanichari further explains her plight in a most poetic manner using images

from nature as she states, “She felt an earthquake within. She exploded. Cry? Me? Don’t you know? I can’t shed tears? These two eyes of mine are scorched? (70) But Devi transforms these concepts in anew manner where the women who cannot shed tears for her own kith and kin, sheds it for others as a commodity.

Hence lamentation grows as a major theme within the narrative which develops into a powerful tool at the hands of the Rudalis through which both subversion and empowerment are attained. The act of mourning ceases to remain as a depiction of the weakness of women but grows into a powerful agency.

2.1. Lamentation as a Tool of Subversion

Subversion is trying to undermine an established system or an institution. In order to understand the role of crying as a tool of subversion we need to understand what was subverted?

The notion of the society regarding the ‘tears’ of a woman are subverted in this narrative. Tears which are seen as a sign of weakness in women are contrasted by Devi as she praises the ability of women to cry. The act of mourning is not attributed with an emotional phase but is understood as a skill of a particular group of women. In most mythologies across the globe, tears had an empathising and sympathising power or in common colloquial usage the power to melt hearts. But here the lamentation is not out of grief but is an “occupation” and tears are commodified. As the narrative states, “Sanichari thought that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them.” (72)

The concept of a profession is seen in a new light in “Rudali”. A profession is often understood as one which needs either intellectual or physical action. But crying was never meant as a profession as it was understood as an innate feature of women. Here is where Devi introduces the Rudalis as “professional mourners” who are as professional in their jobs as any

other person. The ability to cry at different situations and in differing manners is portrayed as a skill rather than as a humane trait thereby subverting the notions of a profession. Dulan explains the professional aspect of crying to Sanichari in a language she understands, “These tears are your livelihood- you’ll see, just as you cut wheat and plough land, you’ll be able to shed tears.” (70)

The various hierarchies and hegemonic relations existing in Sanichari’s world are subverted as she decides to become a ‘rudali’. Devi places money at the centre of the growth of oppression. The Ganjus and Dushads of the Thahad village are continuously oppressed by the landlords due to their limited access to money. Gaining money was seen as a luxury by both the oppressor and oppressed, and hence the former made sure that the latter never had a constant access to money. In an earlier part in the narrative we see Sanichari entering into a bonded labour to pay off Rs.20 to Ram avatar Singh. But as she learns the means to gain it Sanichari is transformed into an intelligent woman who knows how to play schemes to save her money. Eventually we see a change in the plight of the ‘Rudalis’ and ‘randis’ as they decide to become professional mourners and this leads the landlords and their ‘gomasthas’ into tremors. Devi critiques the role of money in carrying out oppression.

The role of ‘fate’ in the lives of the Ganjus and Dushads is broken by Devi as she focuses upon the actions of the individual rather than the play of superstition. The narrative begins by explaining how Sanichari was named. She is named as Sanichari because she was born on Saturday and was named after Saturn and hence her mother-in-law believed that the miseries in her life are due to her birth on such an inauspicious day. But, we see the protagonist herself questioning the role of superstition as she understands that poverty and miseries are part of the daily life of her people. She says,

“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, Buddhua, Moongri, Bishri- do any of them have happier lives?” (54)

But Devi shatters the role of superstitious beliefs and emphasizes the actions of the individual. Sanichari is seen as one who grows into a person of importance through her actions and hard work. She becomes a person who transcends the superstitious beliefs surrounding her.

Lamentation becomes a tool of subverting these evil powers of the society. Just as mourning is treated as an agency of subversion it is also seen as a tool for women's empowerment.

2.2. Lamentation as a Tool for Women's Empowerment

Empowerment is a state which an individual earns through the passage of time as a result of their certain actions. Here we see the common women of the Thahad village and the prostitutes of the Randi bazaar growing as Empowered women through their tears. Thus the central question to focus upon is 'how are the Rudalis and Randis empowered?'

Empowerment begins with understanding of our self and in the narrative the women of Thahad village are empowered once they understand themselves. This understanding knows both your weakness and your strength and the various capacities hidden within you. Sanichari at the beginning is a woman who does not know herself, she finds her as a person who is unable to cry. But her conversation with Dulan changes her life as she understands that she too can cry. The knowledge that she too could shed tears is the phase from which Sanichari understands her real person. This eventually leads her to utilize all the opportunities that comes before her and begins to be a strong individual. As Dulan says, “We have to make our own opportunities.” (68)

The change that occurs in Sanichari becomes more evident as she transforms into a person who is intelligent and cunning. Intelligent usage of the opportunities and the ability to have a foresight is what makes Sanichari an empowered woman. The sudden action of Sanichari during the death of Ram avatar's uncle saves her from continuing her bonded labour. The change in Sanichari is largely due to her understanding of the plight of the people like her. As Dulan explains, "Don't weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger."(90)

The ability to transcend the materialist demands of the world or the so called 'worldly desires' is another trait that is developed in Sanichari. She desired of having "wooden combs and shellac bangles" and considered them as her greatest needs but once she faces the needs of survival she is able to transcend these worldly desires. The needs of the stomach become more important than those of the senses. Similarly the prostitutes of the Randi bazaar often considered them as useless beings whose position in the society would always remain in the lowest grade. But with the prospect of a new 'job', they too are able to move forward in their life. The Randis too are empowered as they realize that they too can transcend their limiting conditions.

3. Conclusion

An empowered person becomes truly empowered once they begin to act as an agency for others to empower as well. Sanichari realizes the prospects of being a rudali and hence passes on the legacy to others. She opens up a path for others like her to move forward. She acts more of like Dulan who helped her in life; similarly she too helps others to move forward. She teaches others how to harden themselves, "But many deaths, deceptions, injustices had hardened her endurance and self control." (87) And the greatest realization of

the battle in her life, the battle for survival and life becomes more important and she makes others know about it too.

Thus “Rudali” the story which deals with mourners eventually ends with jubilation. Lamentation slowly evolves into a lamentation of jubilation. The Rudalis uses each opportunity to cry as a chance to take their revenge upon the landlords who brought misery in their life. The Rudalis are attempting to break the hereditary nature of oppression where the oppressors and oppressed continues through hereditary. But, the tears become so powerful that it is capable of braking any obstacles and shackles in the life of the Rudalis. The joyous Rudalis cry out at funerals as “the malik belongs to us now” (91) where they assert their authority among the crowd. The wailings became chorus and the Rudalis remained as mourners only by profession and not by nature.

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