

# An Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's “Rudali” An Epitome of Class, Caste and Gender

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## **Abstract:**

Mahasweta Devi belongs to the post colonial literary world of India. There are many writers who belong to this era. The aim of the author is to show the powerful indictment of the socio economic system in India. The novel itself is an attack on the vestiges of feudalism of rural India. She has adopted various techniques like the use of black humor to show the position of subalterns. Rudali is a touching tale of the women whose life is fraught with poverty of many kinds. The women suffer whether as a mother, wife, grandmother and friend. The landlords of the upper class wait for the deaths in their families in order to celebrate their funerals in a grand way. The humanity loses here itself. Mahasweta Devi has dealt here with great achievement in showing the fake nature of the society. She has exercised all her potential to connect the surrounding to the mainstream.

The short story deals with two low caste women, Sanichari and Bhikhni who has been shown as the crystal clear example of the undefeatable spirit of human that never adopts escapist tendency even in the bad circumstances. The main essence is to show the change that come in the lives of Sanichari and Bhikhni after adopting the profession of wailers for the funeral processions.

## **Introduction:**

Mahasweta Devi is a unique combination of writing and activism. In her words, literature cannot be separated from the joys and sorrows of common man. She has depicted the real society and did not draw fictitious pictures of the sufferers sitting pleasantly in the society. She is a major literary face in contemporary literature. She was born on 14<sup>th</sup> of January 1926 in Dhaka. Her father was also a poet and her mother was a social worker. She has inherited a concern for the poor from her mother.

After the partition, she shifted to West Bengal with her parents. During the partition, she has seen the entire region with many socio-political changes. She has completed her Master's degree in English literature from the Calcutta University. In her writing career, she has maintained an Indian literary tradition. She has got many prestigious awards like the Jnanpith Award (1995), The Magsaysay Award (1996), Padamshri Sahitya Academy Award and many more. She has travelled in many remote parts of India to gain the knowledge of the lives of people and their problems. Her aim is to highlight the problems of low caste people. Mostly all her novels and short stories show that she is truly a representation of the voice of subalterns.

Mahasweta Devi here documents the socio- economic and religious oppression of the dalit women. Marginality, subalternity and dehumanization are the main themes in her fiction. The woman in this story suffers from oppressions such as caste, gender and class. The text itself glorifies the death of feudal lords to establish their caste supremacy. If any member of the upper caste dies, the dominant community will not show their remorse over the dead but his or her death comes as a major blow in terms of financial liability to the dominant class. Mahasweta Devi has been a feminist and her feminism is based on the opposition of denial of women by the male dominated society. The women here are seen as a commodity not as an individual. The elite members from her own society suppress and exploit her. We can see the voice of the voiceless women through her character.

### **Keywords:**

Subalterns, Black humor, Marginality and Dehumanization.

### **Rudali:**

Rudali is a feminist text of Mahasweta Devi, which shows the zeal of subaltern women to survive. The narrative revolves around a poor woman who is from the lower strata of the society. The text "Rudali" is about "how to survive" and "Bread and Mouth". The protagonist of the story is "Sanichari", one born on Saturday. She is considered as an unlucky woman whose presence is not considered auspicious. She is a low caste woman. The story evolves from voiceless to the voiced. Who knows how to cope with the devilish system of the dominant class? Hunger is shown as the greatest concern among these low caste- Ganju people.

She is shown as an epitome of pain and suffering. She is a professional mourner, who mourns on the death of rich people. Whenever someone dies, she is delighted because it has become a source of earning for her. Her personal life is full of sufferings. She has lost her relatives, son and husband. In her life, there is no end to deaths of the loved ones. The starting of the novel shows the death of her mother-in-law dying with the cry "Give me food". Her brother-in-law and his wife dies, his son dies due to tuberculosis, her husband

dies of cholera in the religious fair. Her daughter-in-law leaves home leaving her son and becomes prostitute after his son's death. Sanichari looks after her grandson.

Bhikhni, another character shares the same fate like Sanichari. They both start living in the Tahad village. The main turn in the novel comes when Dulan, the male member of their community tells them to take up the profession of Rudali's. Here Dulan is symbolized as the support of the community and tells the importance of sustainance. He helps them to learn the philosophy of life, to sustain even in the worst part of life and deal with the circumstances. They will do well in their profession as Rudali's. Some lines of novel are:

“Just for wailing, one kind of rate, wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka...

Wailing and rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees two sikka.....”(75)

The story progresses in a sardonic vein referring to the hypocrisy of the rich landlords, who would spend huge amount on the funerals of their near and dear ones rather than on the medicines and other life saving things. The competition is among one another to show off their wealth at the funeral ceremony. Nathuni Singh's mother who is on her death bed is not given any treatment. These lines reflect the pomp and show and falls ways of life of the upper class society:

“No hakim, no kabiraj, no doctor, no herbal remedies, no injections, she's still alive.

Meanwhile, he is stocking up on sandalwood and salwood for a sensational funeral pyre...

He is not willing to spend a paisa trying to cure her, but plans to spend thirty thousand on funeral” (77)

Here Sanichari and Bhikhni perform their jobs well getting good things in return. She reports to Dulan who gave her hint that she can form a union of Rudali's and become their president. Soon it is learned that Gambhir Singh, the rich landlord is dying. His nephew is his only heir and he refuses to leave any money behind for his nephew as he had isolated him in the shack of the yard. He tells his lawyer to spend at least a lakh on his kriya.

This system is used as the source of survival of Sanichari and Bhikhni but the fate of Sanichari recluded after the death of Bhikhni. Dulan persuades her to go to the whores herself. He convinces her that for the poor sense of right and wrong is useless. Consideration for the stomach is important than anything else.

Sanichari feels no hesitation in going to the red light area. She calls everyone including her daughter-in-law. The voiceless becomes voiced.

The novel ends up with an emphasis on women who are forced to become whores for some reason or the other.

## Conclusion:

The novel Rudali is a powerful indictment of the socio-economic and religious system. The novel itself is a critique of the patriarchal system and feudal system. Sanichari and Bhikhni themselves represent suffering. Death has been represented as the important event in the story of the rich. It is shown as an occasion of mourning but for Rudali's it is an occasion of jubilation because they get an opportunity to earn money.

Subalterns in Rudali bear the brutality of elite class. They lead their lives according to the wishes of the elite class. The author makes a satire on the hypocrisy of the rich people who start a competition to show off their status on the death of elders. All the women characters in Rudali have seen the miserable situation to maintain their existence.

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