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## Reading the marginal in *Rudali*: A plea for survival

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### Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, one of the eminent writers of Bengal, was an ardent activist who dedicated her whole life to uplift the marginalized section of society. In her plethora of writing, she always exhibits concealed sufferings and agonies of the landless farmers, tribal, bonded labourers and suppressed women. Through her characters, she visualizes their exploitation and brings forth the dark reality behind the splendidly portrayed progress of the country. Her characters are rebels who refuse to acquiesce before adverse circumstances and confront with the exploitative system to assert their existence. In the novella *Rudali*, Devi elaborately manifests the question of survival through the portrayal of poverty stricken lower class Sanichari. This paper critically scrutinizes the hostile outlook of landlords and long struggle of survival by the protagonist.

**Keywords:** Survival, oppression, marginalized, hunger, poverty, sorrow

### Introduction

*Rudali* is a chronicle of oppression, exploitation and surviving strategies of marginalized section of the society. As the author herself asserts in one of her interviews, “*Rudali* is about...“how to survive”...“bread and mouth”. It is very important in my story The whole system is exposed through this”. In the beginning of the text, it is represented that the life of the central character Sanichari is the replica of her whole community. “Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villagers, her life too was a tale of desperate poverty”. (71). In the initial section of the novella, the author offers a translucent picture of socio-economic and psychological state of Sanichari. The reader gets acquainted with the superstitions of her community as due to her birth on inauspicious Saturday, she is blamed for her dire poverty and her miseries. But Sanichari doesn't agree to this preposition. 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 Monday- was your life any happier?” (71)

Through *Rudali*, Devi reveals the true nature of the subalterns and the exploitative power structure of Indian villages which is wholly opposite to romanticized view of countryside; unchanging, peaceful, coequal and happy. Ramavatar Singh is evocative of the hypocritical, corrupt and dominant class who can manipulate even the official system to have control on dispossessed people. “Enraged at the loss of some wheat, he had all the young Dushad and Ganju males of the village locked up” (71).

Poverty becomes a canker in Sanichari's life. It does not only deprive her of economic and social wellness but also encroach into her very private zone of emotions. When her mother-in-law dies of hunger, she doesn't cry because she remains busy in arranging the cremation. If she wastes time in crying and mourning, she would be fined to keep corpse over the night. Consequently, her emotions get suppressed under the brutality of the system. There is a chain of miseries in her life; the death of her mother-in-law is followed by death of her brother-in-law, his wife and unexpected death of her husband as well. But she can't shed tears on any sad demise of her loved ones. Her husband dies of cholera after taking contaminated milk offered to *Shiva* idol by the rich. She was obliged to make ritual offering in demand of local priest. Religion and superstitions are intermingled and commodified according to the interest of the moneylenders and the exploiters. The corruption in the system exposes when Mohanlal, the priest falsifies Sanicahri on the name of rituals. He says, “Can a Tohri Brahman know how a Tahad villagers's kriya is done? By obeying him, you've insulted your local priest!” (74).

Sanichari sets off her life journey in consonance with the deceitful system. Lack of options as she always has in her life, she is forced to be a bonded labour in Malik Mahajan's field as she has unpaid loan of 20 rupees. She gets trapped in such demean and corrupt structure where survival is the biggest question. Having such meager dreams of buying comb, bangles and eating *sattu* appear a talk of another world. She wants to buy a wooden comb for her hair, to wear shellac bangles for a full year. With the passage of time, her dreams change accordingly but neither of them is fulfilled. She hopes for better while dreaming, "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?" (77)

As the time passes, one day she decides to cry her heart out loud in response to the miseries that fate has endowed on her. Paradoxically, the real cause of her mourning is not the demise of her husband but the empty stomach which is the foremost cause of her grief. Survival is the only problem to be solved in her life. When she is asked about the reason of crying by her fellow worker, Dulan, the depth of the pain comes out in her statement, "You'll all go home with wages to show for labour. I'm slaving to repay debt. I'll go home with a handful of *sattu*-that's why I'll cry. Haven't I reason enough?" (75)

All the tragedies of her life have direct or indirect relation with the exploitative system of influential class. She is turned to mere a puppet in hands of dominant people. They use, exploit and victimize her according to their respective interests. Through this fictional narrative, the author gives the journalistic panorama of a developing nation like India where ethically everyone is treated equally apart from his/her caste, class and gender but the ground reality shatters the ideal myth of equality. The real face of this 'helping' system exposes its staunch hypocrisy and duplicity.

Sanichari is a kind of person who is very positive about enjoying a good and satisfied life despite of all the odds in her life journey. She always seeks for consolation in her dreams of a good life. Firstly, she centers her dreams around her husband but when her husband dies, she switches her dreams to live peacefully in the company of her son and daughter-in-law. Abject poverty and hunger smash all her hopes and expectations. Her son Budhua also dies of Tuberculosis, he gets inflicted with while working day and night in Lachman Singh's fields. The ruinous poverty makes her so numb that she becomes too neutral to extract any emotion.

The author tries to emphasize the value and importance of community as the only support system in the struggle for survival. While her own family members- her daughter-in-law and her grandson desert her by submitting to the harsh conditions of their life, members of her community and her neighbours always stand by her. When her daughter-in-law elopes after her husband's death leaving a toddler behind her, Sanichari determines to nourish the child with the support of her community. Despite of such poignant circumstances, she is able to condone the sorrow and to look forward in her life. All this becomes possible because of the cooperation and the protection of her peers and community. She feels immense gratitude in her heart for them when she says, "But there are some debts that can never be paid" (81). Anjum Katyal, the translator of the book, asserts that "Oppression is hereditary, for both the exploiter and the

exploited" (6). The whole text talks about the hereditary system whether in concern to lower class or to upper class. Ramavatar Singh exploits Sanichari by making her a bonded labour, his son Lachman Singh victimizes Sanichari's son Buddhua in the same manner as his father does until he (Buddhua) dies of tuberculosis. Disregarding all these things, Sanichari requests Lachman Singh to employ her grandson Haroa since there is no other source of employment. Question of survival is so important that all other torturous experiences of her life are bound to take the back seat. Her very words, "There is no one more unfortunate than I am. This is my grandson. Please find some work for him. Otherwise, how will we survive?" (82) divulge her desperate condition.

The hardships of her life and her doomed fortune make her completely lonely and weak. During her isolated and deserted journey of life, she comes up a chance to meet her childhood friend, Bikhni came as great relief in her life. The author puts light on the physical appearance of both Sanichari and Bikhni to make their deplorable condition more authentic; Sanichari is not individual in her category. With the passage of time, they both pledge to start their new life as a team with the support of each other. They execute lot of household chores so that they can feel comfort which was snatched away from them in the life struggle. All these incidents help Sanichari to build a tough persona in such a way that she personifies the philosophy that life must go on even though it is in its toughest phase. Gradually, Sanichari adapts herself according to the new conditions of her life. "No matter how grief-stricken one is, a work-worn body is bound to sleep well" (87).

Over a period of time, they again reach at the brink of hand to mouth struggle. This time they seek guidance of Dulan; embodiment of sharp acumen and the resistance for the cunning power system. He is also poor but he has ability to survive against the spiteful social and religious system. The significance of his role in Sanichari's life has been adeptly described by Katyal in her introductory essay, "At every stressful juncture of Sanichari's life, Dulan intervenes to advise, help, educate, enlighten" (12). He suggests them to employ themselves as '*Rudali*'. This advice trembles Sanichari's inner-self and she suddenly outbursts at Dulan, "Cry? Me? Don't you know? I can't shed tears? These two eyes of mine are scorched?" (90).

It is vital to note the irony and insensitivity of the ruling class that capitalizes even tears which are considered extremely emotional and sentimental while on the other hand, Sanichari, a personification of suffering and pain, feels difficulty to adjust herself in the new business of materialization of emotions and grief. The hypocrisy and cruelty of the power agencies are truly depicted in Dulan's words:

So what? In rich families, the son kills the mother, the mother the son. Forget about who killed him. Amongst us when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, the family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears. (90)

It is noteworthy that the whole text is prominently the survival narrative. When Sanichari hesitates and thinks of prejudices against the profession '*Rudali*', Dulan convinces her, "Don't weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger." (116). Gradually, Sanichari and Bikhni both agree to take up this profession. They become aware of

the tactics to manipulate the system so that they can also use it for their advantage. It becomes possible with the guidance and support of Dulan.

As always, fate doesn't come along with Sanichari as during her flourished business of wailing and mourning, her only partner Bikhni dies leaving her in the lurch of shock and ill-fate. Sanichari feels devastated but again this time she fails to cry. She thinks what she is today because of sorrows and pain therefore now additional grief doesn't move her anymore. By the time of Bikhni's death, she has become so emotionally strong, that she decides to live by herself and to elevate herself. She understands that filling belly is the most severe problem in the life; emotions, happiness and sorrow come after that. She says, "People can do anything- but if they can't eat, they die." (114).

At this juncture of her life, Sanichari completely transforms herself and learns to live life without any hope, emotion and affection. She adapts herself thoroughly in the business of wailing and employs her tears to earn her livelihood. She states, "Money, rice, new clothes- without getting these in return, tears are a useless luxury." (114). At the end of the story, she also dismisses all her prejudices against sex workers and considers them as one of her own community who are also dupe of the ruling agencies.

Thus, it is deemed that *Rudali* is a manifesto of duplicity and hypocrisy of the governing class. It is an indictment against the harsh victimization of threshold exploitation based on caste, class and gender. Through the protagonist Sanichari who evolves herself from being an oppressed to a survivor, the book unfolds the story of people who live on the margin. It evidently conveys the gravity of stomach issues which is the driving force of all the actions. This text portrays the fight for survival which forces Sanichari to use her helplessness as a subverting tool to make her own space in the corrupted world. Devi tries to emphasize on the point that India which is the rapidly developing country, still has such blots where the differences between the people of two classes are so wide that upper class people spendthrift money on just faked and shallow grandeur and show off while the people of lower class live in such penury that they have to sell tears to earn the daily bread.

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