

# An Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's Rudali: From the Voiceless to the Voiced

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## Abstract

*The Dalits have endured remarkable discrimination in our society that is fundamentally distinct from the crises of minority groups in general. The term Dalit is often synonymous with the concept of oppression. Dalit women are said to be the marginalized among the marginalized. This paper illustrates the marginalization that is a reality in the social space as reflected in the novel, Rudali. The upper caste men looked down upon the Dalit female body as an object to be subjugated and oppressed. The women in the novel suffer from a triple form of oppression that is of caste, class, and gender.*

*This research aims to zoom in on the subalternity and evolution of Indian women through the character, Sanichari in Rudali. It attempts to delve into how the far marginalized Dalit women have been able to gain empowerment in a patriarchal society. The oppression experienced by the Dalit women meted out to them by the male-dominated society and other elements of the patriarchal culture, made them powerless in the social, cultural, political and economic spheres. Sanichari represents the empowered lower caste women, who are torn between their professional interests and the problems in their family. The result of this empowerment brings forth the concept of the New Woman.*

**Keywords:** *discrimination, oppression, subalternity, patriarchal, empowered, new woman.*

## Introduction

The Dalits, often known as 'untouchables' in India and other South Asian countries, are considered by society as polluted and polluting. Dalit women are the caste system's most voiceless victims. They are thrice oppressed; for being Dalit, for being women, and for being poor. The struggles encountered by Dalit women are depicted in the novel Rudali through the protagonist, Sanichari.

Rudali by Mahasweta Devi is a powerful portrayal of the plight of the Dalit women in India. The suppression of downtrodden people by the aristocracy is a recurring theme in the novels of Mahaswetha Devi. Rudali reflects the social consciousness that records the struggles of the Dalit women and their empowerment. Sanichari, a professional mourner is the central character. She is the epitome of the miseries of the gendered subaltern. Like other Dalit women, she has lived through the issues of class, caste and gender. Sanichari's transformation from a helpless victim to an empowered woman is analysed in

this research. II Rudali: A Zooming in The Dalit women community has been subjugated by the caste system, treated as untouchables and had to undergo multiple discriminations including caste based sexual violence. They belong to the lowest ring among those oppressed and exploited. They are most often than not forced to do the most menial and hazardous jobs, and many are subjected to forced and bonded labour.

Rudali portrays the desperate predicament of Sanichari and her fellow lower caste women in a North Indian village. It records the lower caste women as the victims of the Brahmanical patriarchy. The subaltern view of survival is visible through the protagonist, Sanichari. She is a victim of class, caste and gender oppression. Generally, the Dalit women often become modern slaves and are the key targets for trafficking. They may also be born into temple prostitution as 'Devadasis' in India or be labelled prostitutes based on their caste status ("Dalit Women - International Dalit Solidarity Network"). In Rudali,

Sanichari finds her source of income in being a professional mourner who mourns the death of the social elites. Her life was full of miseries. It is seen that Sanichari was never able to cry whenever somebody in her family died. She has lost her relatives, son and husband. Her daughter-in-law leaves home leaving her son and becomes a prostitute. Sanichari engaged herself in cremating her dead son but never shed a drop of tear even after all these traumatic events.

Meeting Bikhni, a childhood friend of hers, paved the way for rediscovering herself. They together look after each other bringing forth the idea of sisterhood. The turning point in the novel is when they decide to meet Dulan, a male member of their community. Dulan is a very witty man who advises them to adopt the profession of Rudalis. It is through him they become professional mourners. Then take advantage of the upper castes by charging extra for every act like wailing, and hitting their head on the ground to make the funeral dramatic. It unveils the hypocrisy and the moral bankruptcy of the upper castes who would rather spend a huge amount on the funerals of their kin, than on saving their lives. The unexpected death of Bikhni takes another turn in Sanichari's life. Dulan persuades her to visit the whore bazaar to include prostitutes in her team. The story ends with triumph. It ends with the cries of a newly empowered group. This is Sanichari's team of Rudalis. Hence, Rudali becomes a story of the struggle and survival of the Dalit women.

### **Generational Trauma of the Gendered Subaltern**

The Dalit literature reflects the passiveness of the Dalits in fighting against the upper castes who victimized them. The Dalit women community has experienced a variety of forms of trauma, oppression and discrimination that leave traces on their psyche. The remarkable nature of Dalit trauma is that it is intergenerational. It is passed down from one generation to the other.

In a consumerist society people tend to sell their tears to satisfy their basic needs.

Rudali portrays the Dalit women who do not cry for themselves but their tears save upper class men from their shame. According to Ranajit Guha, a dalit woman is forced into a state of subservience with respect to her caste, her

sex and her poverty. With the society dictating her trauma, her health and well-being is most often than not ignored and her sexuality, a matter of mere societal consensus. Being born into a lower caste, through an institutionalised system of casteism and discrimination, there exists an internalised sense of subalternism within the subaltern. This is enforced and solidified through forced and voluntary subservience, observed and experienced throughout their lifetime.

### **New Woman: The Metamorphosis of Sanichari**

The caste system and patriarchy are inextricably linked. The Dalits being the lowest social group in the Hindu caste system were subjected to the practice of untouchability custom. It is more aggravated for Dalit women since they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy and untouchables are denied equal rights in many spheres. The roots of the Dalit women's subordination lie in the patriarchy as well as its interrelation with caste.

Additionally, the caste and untouchability-related subordination make the issue of Dalit women diverse from that of other women.

According to feminist theory, empowerment has its roots in both individual and social change (Kabeer 2001; Shah 2011). Sanichari is the epitome of the gendered subaltern. The major transformation in her life, from a victim to a fighter is subtly hinted at when she went to the Randi market to collect the prostitutes. By being a Rudali, she rediscovers herself as well as supports the Dalit women community to rediscover themselves. The woman who was unable to cry over her loss becomes a professional mourner who eventually traps the men of the upper castes in their own hypocrisy. At the end of the story, she emerges as a leader who makes use of her tears not only as a means of survival but as a weapon to strike back against the oppressors. The stigma of caste and gender are the main reasons for the powerlessness of women. Dulan, the male character in the novel represents the community that helped Sanichari to come out of her comfort shell. The theme of the oppressed using their trauma and the bounds enforced upon them as the inoculum to their empowerment, is one that we see in the works of Mahasweta Devi.

## Conclusion

The Dalit women are one of the most subjugated communities in India. The empowerment of these women is a significant subject that needs to be addressed. It is crucial to develop a society where the caste system does not exist and where people are judged based on their skills and not on their birth. There are numerous ways in which their lives can be enriched.

In India, several organizations work towards the empowerment of Dalit women. Apart from providing education, employment opportunities and healthcare facilities, they also provide legal assistance to these women to help them fight against oppression and exploitation from upper caste people. The female friendships or sisterhood are shown to be integral to the

lives of Dalit women who live through miseries, supporting each other as they confront their experiences. It is the empowerment of Sanichari that acts as a catalyst in the lives of the Ganju women who were finally able to fill a large void in them that generations of exploitation and trauma had created.

## References

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