

DECODING TEARS AND TRAUMA: REFLECTIONS ON MAHASWETA DEVI'S RUDALI

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Abstract

Literature is a depiction of reality; it mirrors life. Some realities are bitter pills to swallow, typically when tainted with injustice, condescension and patriarchy. The marginalised, poor, mentally ill, socially exploited or socially excluded, did not know of their rights in the past – nor were they enabled to articulate rebuttals, leave alone exercising their rights. Most offences against them are neither reported nor recorded. Women are situated at the fringes of society; working class Indian women who depend on petty jobs are in a precarious situation being rendered vulnerable on accounts of age, gender, caste, poverty, etc. Subaltern women are doubly marginalised being both subaltern and women. But when subaltern women suffer the horrors of dire poverty or bonded labour, they are subjugated to the utmost oppression.

For this paper, *Rudali* by Mahasweta Devi is analysed using the theory of trauma in literature. Alongside trauma theory, the methods of character study, thematic and textual analysis are chosen to conduct the analysis. *Rudali* is set in post-independence India where the maliks or upper caste patriarchy dictated norms; these included malevolent practices like bonded labour, forced prostitution, rudalis (hired professional mourners) for the deaths at the malik's homes. Mahasweta Devi stays true to real life while unraveling the story of Sanichari, her protagonist. *Rudali* is a blend of social realities and societal attitudes, such as patriarchy and hegemony, social ills and superstitions; and adversities faced by the vulnerable.

Adversities faced by these women are not addressed, nor are perpetrators justly penalised. Women are subjected to trauma which goes unacknowledged for long: this plays upon their behavior or attitude later on. Additionally, they may internalise trauma and do not voice it out or fight back. With change in contemporary thought, attitudes of people, education or other causes factoring in; the fates of the marginalised may change – this is brilliantly portrayed in *Rudali*.

Keywords: Trauma, subaltern, age, caste, gender, vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

Sanichari is the tragic heroine of *Rudali*. She belongs to a category that are exploited and discarded by powerful people (especially feudal rich men) around them. She has been judged by society for things that are beyond her control. The precarious aspects that place her at the precipice of vulnerability include gender and age, class or caste, the menial job she does, losses she incurs and her inability to stand up for herself. Even though the subalterns understand the nuances of patriarchy or the fact that they are exploited, it happens with time and help or advice from other people that they answer or strike back. This is embodied in the defiant spirit of Sanichari and her growth is deftly narrated in *Rudali*.

Rudali is a novella written by Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali author and activist; she is a leftist and specializes in the study of marginalised communities, Dalits, and particularly, women. Mahasweta Devi was born in Dacca, and moved to West Bengal. She lived in Adivasi villages in many Indian states and encapsulated their experiences in her writings. She wrote over hundred novels and twenty short story collections, of which the most notable include *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Rudali*, and *Aranyer Adhikar*. She went on to write over a hundred novels and twenty collections of short stories. Her short stories are renowned for their feminist flare and a brilliant portrayal of the human spirit and attitudes, culture, contemporary lifestyles and social evils. She claims that her stories are not hers but belong to the people of her country. She says that they accept exploitation but not defeat. (Bardhan 24) Dalits fall under the marginalised category which also can be termed the subaltern. The subaltern was conceptualised by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political activist and Marxist, in his illustrious book *Prison Notebooks*. The subaltern stands for the third-world countries or marginalised groups as well. Gayatri Spivak, who translated many of Mahasweta Devi's works, brought out her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which cemented her stature in subaltern studies.

Indian Journal of Gender Studies, appreciating the girth of Devi's oeuvre, observes: "Mahasweta Devi's work, deeply rooted in history, provides vivid portrayals of the rural underclass, her many characters robust even in their suffering and, of course, in their resistance."

METHODOLOGY

Trauma theory in literature was spearheaded by Cathy Caruth and later used by numerous other academics who delved into the literary analysis of depiction of trauma. An important facet of the Caruthian model is their focus on how trauma cannot be put into words, how language fails to express trauma or do it enough justice. The Pluralistic trauma theory sees literature as an outlet for trauma – and this is suited for analysis. The paper uses a blend of these to analyse the text. Recent scholarship has come to relook trauma, the effects of age on individuals, understanding the contestations associated with old age and trauma, the ways the old are rendered vulnerable through their age and experiences. Efforts are being made to attain a nuanced understanding of these concepts in this paper.

Trauma is described as a wound on both body and mind; the conscious and the unconscious of the person are intertwined. Trauma is described as the "wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known... it imposes itself again, repeatedly" (Caruth: 1996, 3-4)

Trauma may ensue from a disturbing happening that disturbs a person's emotions and their views about the world: "The concept of trauma, itself a source of critique, is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world."

Trauma studies attempts to investigate:

"...the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. Scholarship analyzes the complex psychological and social factors that influence the self's comprehension of a traumatic experience and how such an experience shapes and is shaped by language. The formal innovations of texts, both print and media, that display insights into the ways that identity, the unconscious, and remembering are influenced by extreme events thus remain a significant focus of the field." (Richter 360)

The method of textual analysis facilitates the selection, explanation and appropriation of instances from the text which are the situations where trauma and violence (which generates or engenders trauma) are witnessed.

ANALYSIS

Sanichari, the titular *Rudali*, is treated poorly from her childhood: the fact that she is born on a Saturday itself is seen as bad news; hence, she is named Sanichari after the ruling power of Saturdays – Lord Sani (*Sani dev*). Therefore, she does not need to do anything horrible to be called names or be ill-treated. She belongs to the Ganju caste and lives in rural Northern India where money, status and caste are given great importance. The methods of thematic analyses, character study and trauma theory are employed for making observations on *Rudali*. The paper depends on textual analysis: quotes from the text are picked to demonstrate proposed theories or ideas. The trauma theory as applied to literature is employed with specific instances chosen from the selected texts.

The protagonist of *Rudali* – Sanichari – is a poor subaltern female; being the breadwinner, she has to work to survive. She belongs to the Ganju community – a lower caste and is located at crossroads of age, class and social standing that makes her extremely vulnerable. She is oppressed and is exploited due to her being old, female, and belonging to the lower rungs of society. She learns to defy her subjugation with a socially acceptable profession of *rudali*, hired mourner that cries at the deaths of rich feudal lords or land lords. The arc of her story is interesting because of her efforts and how she changes her own destiny and also that of other women who are subjugated and doomed. Her journey from voiceless and vulnerable to articulate and powerful is awe-inspiring. "In the short story, the text sees an evolution in the central character, Sanichari, who emerges at the end as better equipped to adapt, survive and manipulate the system - in other words, more empowered – than she is at the beginning." (Katyal 3)

Sanichari is blamed for her mother's eloping, the untimely deaths of her members of her family; though she has not caused any of these incidents. Society and people around her believe that she is the reason for the death of her father, husband, brother-in-law, co-sister and son. A reader understands that she is subjected to fate equally as others around her, but she takes humungous blame and backlash from everyone including family. When her mother-in-law passes, she cannot cry: "Dragging the neighbours home with her, and handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry" (Devi 71-72)

Her husband dies and she is doomed to repeat the same experience as prior: “The government officers didn’t give her any time to shed tears. They burned the corpses quickly. They dragged Sanichari and Budhua off for a vaccination against the disease.” (Devi 73)

Fate and the world is so cruel to her that her tears dry up, she forgets to cry and mourn her loved ones as she is busy conducting their last rites or is engrossed in finding their dead bodies a cremation spot.

Sometimes trauma affects entire social groups based on a shared experience like an exodus, genocide, war, oppression, etc. the Dalits in India have been shunned as a caste category by the upper caste people. Jobs that are seen as “polluting” or beneath one’s dignity – scavenging, cremation – disposing the dead, guarding burial grounds, working on leather, etc., are delegated to them. Dalits have been abused and assaulted for generations; and post-Independence they have been given reservations to correct the wrong that has been done to them for many years. They have been traumatized and scarred by being socially distanced (most Dalits stay outside the village), offended through language (casteist slurs and rebukes), being made to serve as bonded labour, looked down on as a social category, etc. Individual and collective traumas go hand in hand, especially in scenarios where an individual is subject to high levels of stress and abuse solely by virtue of belonging to a social group:

Theories of trauma’s effects on the individual psyche in this model are often employed to explore the individual experience of a collective traumatic event in a text, thus creating a link between the experience of individuals and cultural groups or between the personal and political worlds. (Richter 363)

Sanichari is busy and has to take care of practical obligations such as looking after conducting last rights, arranging space for cremation, adjusting the money for giving the pandit, etc. To pay for the *pinda daan*, Sanichari spends money, but she has to borrow more, and this puts her into a terrible predicament, she borrows twenty rupees from Ramavatar Singh, the landlord: “she received Rs. 20 and put her thumbprint on a paper stating that she would repay Rs. 50 through bonded labour on his fields over the next five years” (Devi 74). Unfortunate events like deaths are followed by other difficult problems that come Sanichari’s way. She has to work as a bonded labour for a pittance of money she borrows. Therefore the personal and political in her life are connected.

Sanichari internalises her trauma. She is so stressed by circumstances around deaths in her family that she cannot cry. When her son dies, and his wife runs away, Sanichari who is hurt, sad and broken due to her age; she is left with a huge responsibility – raising her grandson. She tries to answer queries and fulfills her duties and conducts the burial of her son. She does not cry though, because there is no luxury to mourn her beloved child; she is too tired to cry:

Her bahu, her daughter-in-law, never returned. With the child in her arms, she busied herself cremating Budhua and fending off queries about her bahu. Through all this, she didn’t cry for her son either. Nor could she cry. She would sit, stunned; then fall into exhausted slumber (Devi 79).

Sanichari is a victim who puts up with taunts, rumours and attacks for long. She gives up for a long time, but she is forced to speak up after her silence gives her nothing. Back in the day too, she does let other people know that she does not bring ill luck: “Muh’ 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, Budhni, Moongri, Bishri - do any of them have happier lives?” (Devi 54)

When her entire family perishes and she is left to work to survive, Sanichari understands that she has to do something. She develops some confidence in herself. She puts her grandson to work, but he deserts her early. She is left on her own. She is unhappy throughout her life: she could not even buy a wooden comb for herself. She feels tormented to see her son waste away in front of her eyes. She wishes for her son to provide for her in old age and share *sattu* with her grandchild; she wonders if this desire is “ambitious” owing to her destitute fate as her son dies and daughter-in-law runs away leaving a babe for her to support (Devi 59). She doubts if she had sinned by wanting too much. After growing up, her grandson, Haroa, deserts her by running away with the magic-show fellows.

Only towards the fag end of the story does Sanichari have any respite. Sanichari meets Bikhni, her childhood friend, and the both develop a strong friendship. With the practical advice of Dulan Ganju, a well-wisher that belongs to Ganju community, Sanichari and Bikhni become *rudalis* – professional mourners – that are hired to mourn the rich after their passing. Sanichari’s comfort is her confidant and cohort Bikhni. “Everyone said – she’s led such a hard, sad life. But finding Bikhni has been a blessing” (Devi 110).

Being a *rudali* is a hypocritical practice – most of the rich that are dead, have been neglected or treated terribly, and not given medicine or treatments; but money is amassed to celebrate their deaths. The story uses this hypocritical practice to dish out irony; justice is served as the rich that ruin lives are fake-mourned. The story

tends to commodify tears and categorises them – wailing and antics like beating one’s chest or rolling on the ground are assigned different rates to be paid after the ceremony is completed.

Initially, Sanichari is not on board with the idea of becoming a rudali when Dulan proposes the idea. She explains her inability to shed tears thus: “Cry? Don’t you know? I can’t shed tears? These two eyes of mine are scorched?” (Devi 90). Also, she hesitates and thinks of prejudices against the profession ‘rudali’, and says “Won’t there be talk in the village?”

Dulan, however, convinces her and sends both her and Bikhni as rudalis to wail over the corpse of Bhairab Singh. Sanichari and Bhikni howled loudly and sang praises of Bhairab Singh. Sanichari is actually surprised at her tears, she thought: “perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them.” (Devi 93)

When Sanichari goes to the red-light area for recruiting prostitutes as rudalis for Gambhir Singh’s funeral, she is weary. She is hesitant to meet her daughter-in-law; and Dulan persuades her saying, “Don’t weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger...What one is forced to do to feed oneself is never considered wrong” (Devi 116). These words hold a real value because they are true. In her journey to financial independence, Sanichari empowers many other women, by freeing them from trades like prostitution. Vasantha Surya says the following about the novella and its theme of the rudali custom as a metaphor, praising Mahasweta Devi for crafting “a heart-rending ‘survival strategy’ or ‘coping mechanism.’” (10)

CONCLUSION

Sanichari is never appreciated by her family; there is a foreboding about her that she brings bad luck. Her neighbours take care of her grandson when she toils through the day. Her friend Bhikni appears as a beacon of hope and sees her abilities. Her reputation precedes her; even her grandson deserts her; her best friend dies. When she learns that Bikhni died, Sanichari reaches a breaking point and she weeps uncontrollably, her grief attains a release. Sanichari is the magnet for unfair treatment because she belongs to the lowest rungs of the society; she serves as a bonded labour when a landlord makes her work for years to repay him a debt of fifty rupees. She does not have the awareness to question what is being done to her. Years of horrible experiences, loneliness and tragic events toughen her up.

Sanichari takes power into her hands when she decides to become a rudali. Sanichari exercises agency and even though she gets independent, rumours spread about her. Once mocked for not mourning her deaths of close kin, it’s ironic she makes money through tears. Sanichari acquires fame for her weeping skills; her wailing is extremely loud and heart-wrenching. The rich of the village believe that the loudest mourned persons are the noblest. Sanichari recruits prostitutes as rudalis and they mourn the thakur who actually destroyed their lives, she questions hegemony, armed with tears, and serves revenge cold. Mahasweta Devi states in the text: “It is women who are ruined by Malik Mahajans who turn into whores”

As she receives blow after blow, she understands that she is truly alone; she banks on Dulan’s practical knowledge and acts wisely, thus making the decision to work smart. She takes up the profession of a rudali, enters homes that shunned her and mourns the deaths of people that she does not feel anything for. She does this for monetary benefit and this is a testament to her exercising agency. She charges rates in an incremental fashion based on how the women mourn, this is a great business model. With more money shelled out, more features of mourning are unlocked similar to the upgraded levels of a videogame (which could be paid for):

Just for wailing, one kind of rate. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one’s head, five rupees two sikka. 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.... you people are like kings, can’t get the goddess Lakshmi captive at home, you won’t miss it! And Sanichari will sing your praises everywhere she goes. (Devi 75)

She is the same person who could not cry when her husband dies because she was too busy arranging for his cremation, as she did not have time despite being heartbroken. Her trauma is what she is left with. Her emotions are so stifled that she is left to suffer and does not express them. But the day she lets her grief out, her feelings overflow, and she becomes an exceptional rudali eventually. Sanichari transforms her pain into her power; she goes on to empower prostitutes by recruiting them as rudalis (including her daughter-in-law who turned to prostitution) and helps them achieve financial gain. She finally accomplishes financial stability and societal standing by transforming her weakness into her strength, she is undaunted by tragedies that befell her, unbroken by the people that exploited her. She is a shining exemplar of strength, agency and daring. This change in her attitude, contributing to the wellbeing of other women and Sanichari’s journey despite her generational trauma are redeeming for her.

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