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Role of Mahasweta Devi's Aesthetics of Activism in Growth of Subaltern Indian Women: An Analysis of *Rudali*

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Abstract:

Activism stands for making efforts to promote, obstruct, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change. Different forms of activism are political activism, economic activism or aesthetic activism. In the post-colonial literature, writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, James Baldwin, Ken Saro-Wiwa have used their political activism for bringing revolutionary changes in the society. Mahasweta Devi, one of most distinguished Bengali writers of this century has continued the tradition of these writers through her art which has been hailed as her aesthetics of activism. Devi's main focus remains on radical feminist realism. The present paper makes a textual analysis of Devi's seminal work *Rudali* and explores how her aesthetics have played a determining role in personifying the idea of women empowerment in India.

Keywords: Activism, Aesthetics, Post Colonial, Feminist realism, Empowerment

Mahasweta Devi, a social activist was one of most distinguished Bengali writers of this century. She occupies a unique position among the important signatures of Indian literature of post colonial era. Born in Dhaka, British India in a rich Bengali family, Devi inherited artistic immensity from her artist father Manish Chandra Ghatak and social worker cum activist mother Dharitri Devi. In her adolescence, Devi saw her steady involvement with the social and political theatre of colonial India. Devi finished up studies with a Masters in English and pursued several careers like jobs in the central government, teaching, lectureship in a college was and a reporter of a Bengali daily newspaper from 1983-1984. Mahasweta Devi has been honored with various prestigious literary awards like Jana Pith, India's highest literary award in 1996, Magsaysay award, the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize in 1997, *Offiincer des Arts ez des Lettre* (Officer of Arts and Literature), France's second highest civilian award and in 2006, the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award in India. In recent times, she, along with Habib Tanvir, has been chosen as a National Research Professor, in appreciation of their unique contributions towards literature.

Devi was a prolific writer with almost twenty collections of short stories and close to a hundred novels to her credit most of which have been in her native language i.e. Bengali. Recipient of the various prestigious literary honors like Sahitya Akademi Award, the Bharatiya Jananpith Award, the Ramon Magsaysay Award and the Padma Vibhushan, Devi is recognized for starting a new budge in Bengali literature that combines together history, fiction and myth with a stroke of reality. In words of Ajay Shekhar writes in his article titled '*In Gender, Caste and Fiction: A Bahujan Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Rudali*' published in Economic and Political Weekly in 2006

“In most of her works, Mahasweta Devi has tried to tackle and address the turbulence of caste/class/gender in the historic context of the brahmanic caste patriarchy.” (Shekhar, Economic and Political Weekly 4422)

This is what Jyoti Yadav endorses when she says “Mahasweta Devi, veteren Bengali author is one among the appealing voices who questions the so- called developing, democratic and civilized nation called India. Marginals are still deprived of their fundamental rights even after so many years of freedom. Devi has tried to expose the feudal system which is anti-tribal, anti-women, anti-poor and anti-tiller” (Yadav158). Tony Beck and Tirthankar Bose in '*Dis-possession, Degradation and Empowerment of Peasantry and the Poor in Benglai Fiction*' (1995)

“In the 1970s itself , Devi achieved a new construction of the poor in Bengali fiction and her view of society is subaltern and prompts change as she relocates power and redefines human worth” (Beck 441-48)

Mahasweta Devi believes that art is not a profession to earn money and recognition rather it has a constructive purpose to bring transformation in society. In the post-colonial literature, writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, James Baldwin, Ken Saro-Wiwa have used their political activism. to bring revolutionary changes in society. Activism consists of efforts to encourage, obstruct, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change. Various forms of activism are political activism, economic activism or aesthetic activism. Aesthetic activism means creating art or literature with an effort to bring social, political, economic, or environmental change. Mahasweta Devi continued the tradition of these writers through her art that has been appreciated as her aesthetics of activism. The year 1965 gave a real shape to Devi's spirit of activism when she visited Palamau, a secluded and poor district in Bihar. She identified it as “a mirror of tribal India”. Here she had the first hand experience of harsh living realities of indigenous masses that were largely expelled from representative majority. Later on she noticed that other districts were also facing the same gloomy conditions. She directed a number of proletariat organizations to struggle against for justice.

Devi's first novel *Hajar Churashir Ma (Mother of 1084)* written in 1970 gave stirrings to her social and aesthetic activism. An internationally applauded film was also made based on this novel. Thus, she becomes one of the boldest female writers who initiated a battle against the

forces of oppression and suppression and used her pen to uphold the cause of millions of tribal Indian people especially women against social injustice, discrimination and poverty. Her writing reflects the spitefulness, filth and gloom in the lives of the tribal people and accuses Indian society for the shame it heaps on its most oppressed citizens. Her works often hold what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a prominent post colonial literary theorist states in *In Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993) a "problematic representations of decolonization" (77). Her aesthetic activism effortlessly endorses what Radha Chakravarty writes "Mahasweta's current reputation as a writer rests largely on her own self-projection as champion of the tribal cause and decier of class prejudice" (Chakravarty, *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers* 94).

Devi herself states in *Bitter Soil*

"[T]he sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies . . . My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters, or the exploiting system. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation furthers that burning anger . . . believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra-headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions." (Devi, *Bitter Soil* ix-x)

Talking about the empowerment of women through Mahasweta Devi's fiction one can say that her description of suppression of women particularly tribal women and their rebellion adds a feminist aspect to her works. Many of her stories have strong women characters as the central point, as in 'Draupadi,' 'Hajaar Churashir Maa,' 'Rudali', 'Stanadayini', 'The Hint', 'Doulati the Bountiful', and 'Dhouli'. In her dialogue with Garbielle Collu, Mahasweta Devi states what she thinks about women. In her view, "Women are much stronger than men. But, in the poorer class, their sufferings multiply not only because of their belonging to this class but also because of their bodies. They thus suffer double oppression. No wonder, the most common stories of victimization revolve round their falling a prey to the male lust" (Chatterjee 240).

In her view, the tribal life in India is an "uncovered Continent" ignored by the corrupt politicians and existing on the brink of disappearance. She gives a real picture of tribal India, caste and class struggle, and giving voice to those marginalized women whose cries of anguish go unheard in post-colonial independent India. Her stories and novels speak for the muted and the silenced, articulating the cruelties and oppressions of the feudal lords and Mahajans. Mahasweta Devi has never described herself as a feminist. This is because in her perception sexual exploitation always forms part of a much larger pattern of exploitation. She considers herself to be an activist who will make the best of her efforts to sensitize the nation as a whole about the status women should be given in the society and holding a mirror to the condition in which they are actually placed. The excellence of her aesthetic activism lies in the persuasive quality of her narratives

where on one hand, the vivid & realistic descriptions of women's manifold exploitations is rendered and on the other hand, an appeal is made to the female characters to struggle against such exploitation and to establish their place in the society.

Mahasweta Devi has taken up the cause of women's empowerment and the main focus is on radical feminist realism. '*Rudali*' a piece of short fiction taken up for the present study is a persuasive literary work written by Mahasweta Devi. It is a novella printed with other stories in "*Nairetey Megh*" in 1979. Mahasweta Devi originally wrote this work in Bengali language later on it was translated into English. It was also modified and created as a play in Hindi by Usha Ganguly who belonged to famous theatre group of Calcutta in 1992. Since then it has had well a good number of shows, playing to packed houses, and has drawn the attention of both critical and theater world. Devi speaks for the poor, neglected and oppressed women thus: "It is the women who are ruined by the Malik Mahajans who turn into whores. Nonsense they are a separate caste" (Devi 80). Anjum Katyal in introductory essay entitled "The Metamorphosis of *Rudali*" states thus

"In both manifestations of '*Rudali*', it has been a woman author who has shaped and reshaped this text which revolves around the life of a woman- the poor, low caste Sanichari. Each author has her own agenda and purpose which make their text conspicuously different "*yet underlying commonality is that they are perceived as women intensive projects and received as feminist texts.*"

(Katyal, *Rudali: From fiction to Performance* 1)

The work may be small in size but voluminous as a literary and social document. "*The multiple strands of Mahasweta Devi's agenda are all interwoven, logically implicated in each other.*" (Katyal 2) Its powerful story covers a number of significant themes ranging from miserable poverty to evils of caste system, from Indian funeral practices to role of women in dominant patriarchal society and emergence of new woman through personification of central character.

The plot of the novel is set in Tahad village of Rajasthan where central character 'Sanichari' suffers for generations together because of desperate poverty and stigma of low caste. Sanichari is born immediately after father's death. She is abandoned by her mother Peewli who elopes with her wealthy lover. On growing up, she is married to a man named Ganju who lived with his ill mother. Sanichari gives birth to a boy and names him Budhua. She goes by her ethics and commitments towards her husband and mother-in-law. Her ailing mother-in-law passes away. Sanichari is unable to cry as she needs to make necessary arrangements for the cremation of old woman "*when her mother-in-law died, Sanichari didn't 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, *Rudali* 54-55). The deaths of her brother-in-law and sister-in-law do not move her "*terrified of being driven out, Sanichari was on tenterhooks. There was no crying over*

those deaths either. Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shradh" (Devi, Rudali 55).

Years pass, her husband Ganju dies due to food poisoning - Sanichari is again unable to spare time and tears to bewail; *"The government officers didn't give her any time to shed tears. they burned the corpses quickly. They dragged Sanichari is.and Budhua off for a vaccination against the disease" (Devi, Rudali 56).* When her son Budhua dies because of disease of consumption and her daughter in law abandons her leaving a baby in her arms, she is again unable to lament.

"Her bahu never returned. With the child in her arms she busied herself cremating Budhua and fending off queries about her bahu. 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" (Devi, Rudali 61).

Year after year, the deaths in the family have turned Sanichari numb and insensitive towards miseries. Her mind is all the time preoccupied with the tensions emerging out of abject poverty, issue of survival and responsibility of looking after her son Budhua and her grandson Haroa after Budhua dies away, she feels as if she cannot shed tears. In words of Katyal

Oppression caused by malik-mahajan's social class is a constant presence in the story. Ram avatar is an embodiment of a system which dehumanizes, brutalizes, invading the most private space of an individual, the emotions, so that even grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival. (Katyal 4)

Every loss Sanichari suffers is because of the terrible poverty, the life and the lack of hope of any change or improvement. Her daughter-in-law Pratabia and her grandson Haroa both leave because they refuse to submit to the harsh conditions, even though their options are prostitution and insecurities of a wandering life.

Devi has used the technique of historicization to realize her plan of making 'Rudali' a powerful analysis of malicious power structures that are prevalent in the villages in name of development. The author has purposively intensified the sufferings of the women belonging to insignificant castes to make it a sad commentary on class differences in the region.

Sanichari is named so because she was born on unlucky day of the week i.e. Saturday or Sanichar. Her presence in the family is considered to be ominous portending some danger or misfortune. She is cursed, pestered and is doomed to suffer. But she herself is of different viewpoint. 'Sanichari' is not individualized in the story rather the author has deliberately placed her in her social, economic and religious context to underline the fact that her problems are not individual rather these are common to her caste and gender.

'Rudali' becomes a sharply mocking tale of abuse and struggle, and above all, of endurance. Also the characters become the powerful and realistic representatives of their particular castes and social groups. The narrative technique employed in the novella offers us an instance of "anti-

fiction". No doubt, the author has used some important elements of fictional narrative yet she ignores the conventions of story writing. The major part of work is written in form of journalistic writing with the purpose to report on the prevailing power structures in the isolated villages of North India in post independence era. Devi has exposed the nexus of caste, phallocentrism and feudalism in a simple and touching lyrical style. Tony Beck and Tirthankar Bose in *Dispossession, Degradation and Empowerment of Peasantry and the Poor in Bengali Fiction* are of view that

The plight of the muted and the silenced, the cause of the gendered subaltern, women's empowerment and radical feminist realism - these are some of the positions attributed to her fiction." (Beck 441-48)

The text of the story witnesses growth and development in the central character 'Sanichari who exhibits traits of new woman; better prepared to acclimatize, survive and use the prevailing cultural, social and religious system in power. Gradually, she becomes more empowered than she is at the beginning. Sanichari's friend 'Bikhni' is also an embodiment of new woman. She is empowered, self sustained and vivacious. Devi in an interview with Anjum Katyal in Calcutta on May 26, 1993 "Set against the exploitative system is the issue of survival. 'Rudali is about..... "how to survive"..... "bread and mouth". It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this" (Katyal 9).

To present her new women, Mahasweta Devi has used a significant means of narration i.e. is the building of character of Dulan who belongs to grassroots level. He is also poor and dejected but he has learnt the ability of surviving with the spiteful social and religious system. Dulan personifies the sharp acumen, the disrespect, doubt and resistance for cunning power system. He is a given the role of motivator. Dulan is the key person who brings total transformation in the lives of Sanichari and Bikhni. It is he, who at every step helps in the growing development of Sanichari and teaches her how to adopt and cope. The first real conversation between Sanichari and Dulan exemplifies this. Dulan makes it a point to divert Sanichari's mind from helpless bereavement towards a consciousness that in fact she's annoyed with the wrongness of the system. Furthermore, he also presents her with the plan of turning the situation around so that she is able to use the system instead of just being exploited by it.

If your mind is pure, the Ganga flows even through wood. Look here, Budhua's ma, there is no bigger god than one's belly. For the belly's sake everything is permissible. Ramji Mahraaj said so... Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears.... They have got hold of two whores. In the household of the masters, whores weep for the dead. These two were Bhairab Singh's whores at one time. Now they are wizened crows. They will be no good the two of you go, wail, cry, and accompany the corpse. You will get money, rice. On the day of the Kriya ceremony, you will get clothes and food.

(Devi, *Rudali* 69-70)

In every tense moment of her life, Dulan mediates to counsel, assist, instruct and inform. Then enters Bikhni in Sanichari's life. A new dawn comes in the life of Sanichari who needs the moral support very badly. Their reunion is of immense value in the novel as the story takes a U- turn by the appearance of Bikhni in the isolated world of Sanichari. They provide each other much needed company and pool their resources to struggle with poverty and desolation. Dulan persuades Sanichari and Bikhni to take up professional mourning as their livelihood. He teaches them to turn grief into a salable commodity. Initially, Sanichari expresses her uneasiness about this profession. She instantly reacts "*Cry? Don't you know? I can't shed tears? These two eyes of mine are scorched?*" (Devi, *Rudali* 70) Dulan listens to her tolerantly and explains the things in a sensible way: "*Budhua's ma; I am not asking you to shed the tears you couldn't shed for Budhua. These are your livelihood you'll see; just as you cut wheat and plough land, you'll be able to shed tears*" (Devi, *Rudali* 70).

Mahasweta Devi has highlighted the courage and strength of Sanichari and Bikhni in turning the professional mourning into a regular business. What is of interest in the story is the way Sanichari and Bikhni cash the chance to exploit their masters by turning a social ritual into a profession. In the feudal society, the death of a family member is the juncture for establishing caste superiority and honour. The loss of dear ones is simply an opportunity for the family members to calculate the amount of wealth they will be inheriting in legacy, so they will have no time and real concern to express their grief. They lament not for the dead, but in fear of losing their caste peculiarity and social advantages attached to it. But loud wailing shall raise their social prestige, so the professional mourners will have to be hired from the market at any cost. If Malik-mahajans have turned the grief into commodity and mourning into labour, Sanichari has also determined the rates of her business services. This exemplifies her empowerment and her potential in exploiting the system rather than getting exploited by it.

"Just for wailing, one kind of rate. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka, five rupees two sikkas. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka..."

(Devi, *Rudali* 75)

Slowly their professional group becomes famous and they have limited time for so many arrangements. Rudalis are not low-priced but their services are valued by all rich people as their presence is the symbol of status and prestige. The rudalis would weep and wail and hit their head in dust, would beat their breasts to create the mourning atmosphere. Their realistic cries, tears and screams added new seriousness during funeral procession. "Business prospered. There was such a demand for the pair who wailed at Bhairab Singh's funeral, that it was almost like a war of prestige..." (Devi, *Rudali* 75).

Mahasweta Devi has also emphasized the significance of community in the empowerment of Sanichari. Despite of her growing business, Sanichari have always considered the values like

community bonding, support, partnership and fraternity as the essential tools of survival. When Dulan advises her to become a rudali, she immediately reacts as one worry always remains in her mind. “Won’t the village speak ill of me? Dulan’s ideas encourage her and she becomes more confident and resolute in her business enterprise. All her inhibitions are removed and she becomes self assured. Sanichari convinces them saying that the marketable system of wailing is a cunning way to settle scores with feudal lords who had subjugated and sexually tortured them since ages. She invites two girls, Pratibha and Gulbadand, encourage them to join the team, and narrate all the future plans in open manner. Her approach was socialistic as she convinces them that this profession would safeguard them in calamity. Through the serious efforts of Sanichari, soon the custom of the rudali had been politicized. It was just not an instrument of empowerment but a subaltern tool of revenge. At Gambhir Singh’s funeral, gomashta commented thus:

Have you brought the entire red-light district with you? At least a hundred whore!
Sanichari said Why not? Malik said, make a great noise, a big fuss, something
people will talk about. Is that possible with mere ten whores? (Devi, *Rudali* 98)

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