

Dictating the Rules of Engagement for Contemporary Women

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Edited by

Vivek Kumar Dwivedi and Majed Alenezi

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This book is dedicated to the most important woman
in my life, Saumya.
—Vivek

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CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN CAN SPEAK AND RESIST: RE-READING MAHASWETA DEVI'S *RUDALI* AND *DRAUPADI*

DR JYOTSNA SINHA
CHESTA YADAV

Abstract

Women in various anthropological, historical, and cultural texts are represented from the male perspective. Their activities are invariably confined to private space in society, and they are rarely shown as playing essential roles in society. Thus, the representation of the trauma of violence is often out of sight and unspeakable. The article will use feminist theory to examine two novels, "Rudali" and "Draupadi" by Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi. The novels are the grand narratives of the invisible experiences of women who are at the periphery of society. The chapter will explore the complex ways in which the trope of oppression operates in Devi's work. In doing so, this article will highlight how Devi posits her female protagonists against patriarchal society and makes them a powerful critique of society. The study of the novels will also unearth Devi's strategies to destabilize the basic premise by constituting the female subaltern as a complex figure of femininity whose body is not simply the site of exploitation and torture but a transformative figure of resistance.

Introduction

From the Middle Ages to the present time, writers have used their pens as instruments to fight against society's ills to bring desired change in society. Plato, the philosopher of the Middle Ages, was the first social

activist to extend this ideology, advising the state to allow only those writers and poets who were closely related to social and political issues to write. The tradition of writers as social-political agents has been followed by the acclaimed writer-activist from West Bengal, Mahasweta Devi. The word activism is derived from the German word *Aktivismus*. It implies intentional action or effort to promote social change in society. Mahasweta Devi, as a social activist, highlights underlying social problems and gives voice to subalterns by highlighting different ways in which they can overcome oppression.

Women have been given much power by nature but extraordinarily little by law. Gender oppression can be explained as a form of oppression in which women are identified with performing gender roles exclusively assigned to females; taking care of children, feeding and cleaning them, and performing chores. These roles assigned by society demand that women must respond to the personal needs of men. Hence no power is given to them, and they are not free to exercise their rights. Absolute power and control lie in the hands of males. If a woman tries to break free from her duties and demand her rights, she is subjected to abuse and violence. When one looks deep into gender oppression, one finds it in religious ideas and beliefs. Many mythological books also mention a clear-cut distinction of gender. These books lay down the duties of the people and the concept of superiority and inferiority. For example, in *Manusmriti*, the law book of Hindu says,

All husbands must exert total control over their wives; even physically weak husband must strive to control their wives. (Chakravarti 1993, 578)

This shows the position of women in this phallogocentric society. The institution of religion gives a lower position to women, designating them as inferior to men. According to Hindu scriptures, a woman's first duty is towards her husband. The condition of women who live at the margin of society is the worst. Marginalized women are those who live on the borderline created by society in terms of caste and class. Such women are often unseen. Their suffering has long been accepted as right by society. Moreover, these women have no control over their own body. In Anup Baniwal Vandana's words:

The colonial and patriarchal discourses that are largely premised upon a series of binary oppositions, such as colonizer/colonized, imperialism/nationalism, man/woman, public/private, centre/periphery produce a violent hierarchy. In this hierarchy, the colonized, the marginalized culture, the women are

branded as a deviant/disruptive group both socially and culturally. In such binarism, one term forcefully governs the other. (Vandana 2007, 6)

Women's position in society is binary, and the status of marginalized women is more so. They live on the edge of dominance and hardship. Although every woman in society is guided by law, marginalized women are as dominated as indigenous women, they are oppressed not only in one layer, but multiple layers. However, not all women passively accept the ideology of patriarchy and the role assigned to them by the institution of society and religion. Nancy Chodorow, the well-known feminist writer, makes a careful study of the treatment of women in society, and finds that a woman is always seen as a representative of her family while her domestic duties involve ongoing concerns about children, and atonement to adult masculine needs. Further, it is also believed that domestic activities involve repetitive and routine continuity. As a result of women's domestic commitment, they have been treated as secondary citizens and given second place in society, while men rank higher.

Social norms draw limits on women's writing. Art, like literature, is an agent working to deconstruct society's social and political system. Nevertheless, the same artistic expression used by women to fight against marriage, home, family, and motherhood, is unacceptable. The limitation of women's voices is the outcome of paternalistic society. Women are kept in isolation, in layers of private spheres approved by males to enforce the power relationship and gender prejudice. Still, there, the act of writing takes place. Yet, the voices of the society control and limit the ideology of women, giving them limited space to express themselves, which leads to misrepresentation of women and women's power. However, the very act of writing by women is an act of empowerment and identity. With this, it is also an act of resistance, defence, and subversion. To destabilize the institutional image of females, women writers over time have been writing to make themselves visible.

Mahasweta Devi's stories are grand narratives of the invisible experiences of women who are at the periphery of society. During her lifetime, Mahasweta Devi travelled to remote villages and tribal areas of India to get empirical data on the condition of women. Additionally, she also formed groups and organizations for women to uplift their status in society. To refer to Vandana:

[Devi's] journalistic reports on exploitation and expropriation, deprivation and degradation, edits journals carrying subaltern voices and translates the issues and the people she is concerned about into the narratives and characters of her fiction. (Vandana 2007, 27)

Re-voicing the suppressed voices raises the question of subject formation. Mahasweta Devi's works stand as a powerful tool to subvert authorities of the upper class of the society, particularly upper-caste women. M.N. Chatterjee in his review of *Re-Reading Mahasweta Devi* states that women are much stronger than men, according to [Devi]. But, within the more inferior class, their suffering multiplies, not only because they belong to this class, but also because of their bodies. Thus they suffer double oppression. No wonder the most familiar stories of victimization revolve around their falling prey to male lust. Mahasweta Devi's works personify the minor details of these women's everyday struggle, suffering, and endurance. Her stories speak of women's powers of endurance and resistance. As Vandana explains in her article:

Mahasweta's fiction aims at inverting such hegemonic, over-privileged, ever-signifying system of relationships and attempts to bring low what was high through the strategies of subversion and reversal. Her stories come across as the post-colonial, subaltern, gendered responses that serve to topsy-turvy such hierarchical structures, generating aesthetics of opposition in the process. (Vandana 2007, 6)

A reading of Mahasweta Devi's works reveals that gender oppression occurs at two levels: familial and social/cultural. At the familial level, women are deprived of the right to education and freedom, and are often considered a burden on the family. At the socio-cultural level, women are restricted from taking part in activities outside the house. However, Mahasweta Devi, as a dedicated and ardent writer, fearlessly and boldly describes social issues of the society in her fiction and non-fiction. Mahasweta Devi is one of the best-known writers from India. She is one of several inventive, creative, profuse, and bestselling authors of short stories and novels in the Bengali language. What makes her different from other writers is the activist zeal in her writing, which represents her involvement with the problems of the unprivileged. In most of her works she tries to tackle and address the turbulence of gender in the historical context of Indian society. She is a mixture of activist and writer, and for many years, she was writing, fighting, and working for the marginalized. She worked for those whom media and the mainstream keep forgetting. The article explores the complex ways in which the trope of oppression operates in Devi's works, and how Devi empowers her female protagonists and makes them powerful critiques of patriarchy. In doing so, the article argues that these stories decolonize established laws of society. The paper will analyse two of Mahasweta Devi's works, *Rudali* and *Draupadi*, to explore how her

literary works are concerned with women's lives in society and how they are interconnected with the common thematic thread of Devi's activism.

Female self and rebellion in Draupadi

Oh yes I am wise, But it's wisdom born of pain. Yes, I've paid the price, But look how much I gained If I have to, I can do anything. I am strong I am invincible I am woman. (Helen Reddy)

'Man' is a universal term which has been used since the time of evolution to represent both genders. However, society has been divided into unequal parts, where 'man' implies male, and 'woman' implies female. Humanity has devised rules and regulations of actions, desires, and thoughts, to prolong this ideology, thus making women victims of humiliation, torture, and exploitation. Ram Ahuja said:

[...] a lack of seriousness of the problem, the general acceptance of man's superiority over woman because of which violent acts against women were not viewed as violent or deviant, and the denial of violence by women themselves due to their religious values and social attitudes. (Ahuja 1987, 1)

The worst nightmare a woman faces is male control over her body; giving him power to control her if he wants. Rape is a form of violence which is against gender, religion, and ethnicity, yet still most rape cases are not reported. There are three reasons for a woman to be silent: the rape victim is afraid of social stigma where society will blame her for the rape; the victim is protecting her family from social disgrace; or the victim is intimidated by threats she is receiving from the culprit. The hopelessness of rape ensures more mental trauma. In post-rape depictions, Devi's fiction is neither unspeakable nor silent surrounding the trauma. Instead, Devi boldly articulates the trauma, and vehemently accuses and condemns the rigid structures of caste, class, and patriarchy which are the root cause of violation in India. Females in Devi's fiction are complex figures of femininity. Though their bodies are exploited and tortured, they become fighting figures, and destabilize society's construction. Thus, Devi is challenging the very agent of degradation. In boldly challenging the agent of women's torture and trauma, the victims in her work provide alternative models.

Draupadi is the story of Dopdi, a woman from a marginalized Santhal tribe. The name 'Dopdi' is a mispronunciation of 'Draupadi' by rural tribal people. Devi situates her work against the Naxalite movement of the Bangladesh Liberation war and the ancient Hindu epic *Mahabharata*.

When the story opens, Dopdi is introduced as the widow of Dulan. Two men in uniform are engaged in a conversation revealing the Naxalite activities of Dopdi and Dulan, who have murdered Surja, a wealthy landlord in their village, and seized his well. Suraj was an opportunist who was not ready to give drinkable water to the Santhal tribe during a drought. Water plays an incredibly significant role in the plot. Water, synonymous of life, and an inevitable part of human civilization, is often caught in the pangs of the caste system. Caste-based discrimination leads to water-based discrimination, where people from lower castes do not have access to water. In the book, Dopdi and Dulan, with other lower caste people, hatch a plan to surround Suraj's house and kill him in the night. This forces both Dulan and Dopdi to go into hiding.

Tribal uprisings against wealthy landlords had brought out the government's fury, which had led to 'operation Bakuli' – 'Kill the Naxalites' (also referred to as 'Naxals'). The Naxalites symbolize groups that commit violence against feudal landlords and people in power. They represent the most exploited people of society; Adivasis, Dalits, and the poorest of the poor. Naxalites claim that they are fighting against exploitation to create a classless society. However, they are considered inhuman, savage, and ferocious by society. On May 2 1967, in Naxalbari village in Darjeeling District, local goons of the upper caste attacked tribal people. The attack came because tribal people were granted land by the government, which had earlier been the right of only upper caste people. In this case, the upper-caste goons were defeated, and the tribal people claimed their land. This was called the Naxalbari Uprising. Over time, the word 'Naxalite' came into speech. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Naxalite moment was viral. People started fighting for the rights of tribal people and landless labors. Many people supported landless peasants and tribal people as they witnessed their dream of a great nation shattered by colonial politics and the socio-economic status of India. In response to the protest, the government deployed a police force to stop it. The methods adopted were vindictive and ruthless. Speaking on behalf of the tribals of India, Devi says:

Theirs is a faceless existence. They are in India from ancient times for thousands of years. Yet, mainstream India has continually refused to recognize them [...] we have refused to acknowledge their worth, have made them bonded slaves in the unorganized sectors, have evicted them from land wherever we have founded industries, or built dams. Having been denied fundamental human rights, they have joined the floating population of the other poor who follow the contractors and go anywhere for a pittance. (*India Together*)

Dulan and Dopdi, with others, wanted to fight against operation Bekuli, but the power suppressed them. During the operation, Dulan is killed in a fake encounter, but Dopdi runs away. Senanayake, the chief of the police, tries everything he can to catch her, and a price of 200 rupees is put on her head, alive or dead. Senanayake's theory of life does not coincide with his ideology. The following lines highlight contradiction between his theory and practice:

Whatever his practice, and theory he respects the opposition [...] He hopes to write on all this in the future. He has also decided that in his written work he will demolish the gentlemen and highlight the message of the migrant workers. (Devi 2015, 103)

Theoretically, he supports peasants, but practically, he does the opposite. Under his leadership, the force is able to capture and kill Dulan Majhi and set a trap for Dopdi. But all the traps set by Senanayake are futile. Dopdi continues to help oppressed tribal people and fugitives who hide in the forest, to fulfil her husband's task.

In the first phase, the fugitives, ignorant of the forest's topography, are caught easily. By the law of confrontation, they are shot at the taxpayer's expense:

Now it seems that they have found a trustworthy courier. Ten to one, it's Dopdi. Dopdi loved Dulna more than her blood. No doubt it is she who is saving the fugitives now. (Devi 2015, 104)

In the second part of the story, Dopdi is all alone, living in the forest. With heavy thoughts in her mind, she meets Mashai Tudu's wife. Mashai tells Dopdi about Senanayake's plan to capture her, and how people are searching for her day and night. She urges her to run away from the village, But Dopdi stands her ground and says:

When they 'kounter' you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound. Killed by police in an encounter [...]. (Devi 2015, 106)

The word 'kounter' here refers to the ill-treatment of revolutionaries at the hand of a force, leading to death or imprisonment. The ruling class has often used what French Marxist philosophers called the repressive state apparatus. The primary function of the repressive state apparatus - government, courts, the police force - is to work for the interests of the upper class by repressing the subordinate social class using violence. The ruling class controls the repressive state apparatus because they control the power.

'Konter' is a product of a repressive state apparatus. When tribal people like Dopdi stand against society's ills and loudly demand their social and political rights, they face backlash from feudal lords. Dopdi, instead of surrendering herself to the law, is ready to face everything that is coming her way. She says:

[...] tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will 'kounter' me. Let them. (Devi 2015, 105)

Senanayake succeeds in catching Bakuli, Dulan and other males, killing them callously, but the men in power rape Dopdi. Senanayake orders his men to "Make her do the needful". Her hands and legs are tied, and she is gang raped. Her oppression represents the present-day social system. Her thighs and pubic hair are matted "with blood two breasts two wounds". Devi brings legends and mythical figures in a contemporary setting to show past and present, and the way women have been objectified from the past to the present day.

Dopdi is the tribalized reincarnation of the mythical Draupadi. Draupadi is a mythical heroine from the ancient epic *Mahabharata*. Mahasweta Devi refers to her protagonist as Dopdi throughout the story, but after she is raped and tortured, Devi prefers to call her Draupadi, after the proud heroine in the epic *Mahabharata* in which she plays a central role. Her older husband, Yudishter, gambles everything he has, including her, making her the slave of Duryodhana. He orders his younger brother Dushasana to disrobe Draupadi. When she loses all hopes of being saved, she prays in silence to Lord Krishna, who answers her prayers by blessing her with more and more sari cloth. Thus, Lord Krishna saves Draupadi from public humiliation, and no one is able to disrobe her or degrade her. However, when Mahasweta Devi rewrote the epic of *Mahabharata* from a subaltern perspective, her heroine does not receive any divine help in any form. Instead, she is brutally gang-raped several times. In her portrayal of Dopdi Mahasweta, Devi recreates and destroys the figure of the mythical Draupadi. First, while the divine intervention of Lord Krishna saves the mythical Draupadi, Dopdi is gang-raped by the people of law and order – the men in uniform – for several days. Secondly, while *Mahabharata*'s Draupadi pleads with the God to save her dignity, Dopdi uncovers her ravished body, and fights against those people instead. By showing the rape of Dopdi, Devi presents the harsh untold truth of revolutionaries. She accurately recounts how marginalized women are treated within the system, and are sexually assaulted and murdered. No one from the government or the agency suffers any guilt or charges. Ultimately it is the victim who is shamed. In Devi's rewriting of this episode, the men rape Draupadi, but in the end she refuses to clothe

herself and insists on remaining naked and degraded. She no longer needs a male deity to rescue her.

In her foreword to Devi's story, Spivak writes:

It would be a mistake, I think, to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is (as heroic as) Draupadi. She is also what Draupadi — written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power — could not be. Dopdi is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction. (Spivak, 1998: 11)

Thus, by invoking Draupadi's story, Mahasweta Devi is commenting on masculine power and female honor. In Indian culture, a woman's body is not simply a female body. Rather it represents the honor of her family and the community. Salman Rushdie writes:

In honor-and-shame cultures like those of India and Pakistan, male honor resides in the sexual probity of women, and the 'shaming' of women dishonours all men. (Rushdie, 2005: 6)

Given this women's brutality in rural India, where behaviour like the stripping and parading of women is common, Draupadi's shame represents women and her community. Looking from this viewpoint, the rape of Draupadi is an act of harm to both her and her community. Hence all efforts are made to kill her spirit. Men butcher Draupadi's body to shame her. At first, it seems that Draupadi feels shame, but soon she realizes her power and makes her body a weapon.

Something sticky under her arse and waist. Her own blood [...] How many came to make her? Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts and understands that, indeed she's been made up right. It would please Senanayake now. Her breasts are bitten raw. The nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six seven. Then Draupadi has passed out. (Devi 2015, 109)

Devi denies the rapists the power to shame their victim (Gunne and Thompass 2010). As a writer of social activism, Devi presents a bold understanding of the trauma of rape and a powerful condemnation of the structure of patriarchy. For her, the idea of rebellion is not an issue because this is the only way the transition of females can take place from the pathetic abusive state. Dopdi rejects clothes after her rape by men.

The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? Where are her clothes? Won't put

them on sir. Tearing them. [...] What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again? Are you a man? [...] What more can you do? Come on, 'kounter' me- come on, 'kounter' me. (Devi 2015, 110)

Rape is not just gender violence but ethnic and religious violence on the female body, and here, Devi does not let her heroine suffer in silence. Dopdi is raped repeatedly by several men as she loses consciousness time and again. However, with her unconquerable spirit, Dopdi faces all her rapists. Devi attempts to shake people's conscience and make society understand, realize, and identify, the trauma of unheard voices. She gives voice to the voiceless community and does not portray Dopdi, as a passive and submissive woman. Her naked body is a symbol of an active agent rebelling against society.

Moreover, her female body breaks the customary belief of what womanhood is. Michael Foucault entitles it as an “instrument – effect”. It explains the reverse mode of protest. Thus, by citing Draupadi's story, the author breaks the notions of female honor and masculine power, which are impaired in the figure of Dopdi, who is raped, and no male God comes forward to rescue her. Although Dopdi is unarmed, her resentful spirit makes Senanayake tremble. Dopdi mocks Senanayake, who fails in his masculine duty of safeguarding women's honour. In Indian culture, the men of the community must preserve the honour of women, and thereby preserve the honour of the village. Women are kept inside, their faces covered with veils. Thus, exposing a woman's body is an act of shame, because it represents much more than just her body. It is the honor of the whole community. When Dopdi refuses to clothe herself, she stands in front of Senanayake without feeling ashamed of herself, or the whole community which she represents. Dopdi's body becomes an instrument to strike back. She realizes her inner strength, and is aware that her existence is meaningful and can reshape her life according to her perspective. This is not self-therapeutic ‘speaking up’, but rather a sharp rage against violence wrought by the male on the female population. I argue that the complex metaphor of rape used by the author in her work, empowers her protagonist, making her a powerful critique of the patriarchal system of exploitation. Dopdi does not show any concern for the different injunctions of culture and stands against violence. In doing this, Devi decolonizes and rebels against the order of society. Dopdi's speech after the rape is exceptionally significant. As Elaine Scarry famously reported, torture destroys the victim's capacity of language to articulate the situation. The tortured victim is reduced to a state where she is speechless, and all that is uttered is cries and moans. Dopdi's speech as a revolutionary act is particularly significant, since it is associated with

betrayal in the story. When contemplating what she might do if she is tortured, she concludes:

[I]f mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. (Devi, 2015: 132).

Repeated assertions against betrayal through the act of speaking — ‘Nothing must be told Not a word must be said’. (Devi 2015: 132)

Dopdi pays a heavy price for her silence. She is committed to not give any information and thus she is brutally raped by guards. She catches her lower lip so that she will not even ask for water when she is extremely thirsty. The self-imposed rule of Draupadi is broken at the end of plot.

Female Community Resistance in *Rudali*

Gender ideologies and cultural structure have transformed society into a ‘masculine terrain’, where the physical and sexual exploitation of women has become an ordinary day-to-day activity. Women are subjected to various discriminations – menial wages, unemployment, domestic violence, etc. In today's world, every man takes pride in giving equal opportunities to women, but in reality, not every man is ready to improve society. The cultural and social norms of India have remained the same for ages. Despite the so-called progress after independence, gender oppression, caste discrimination, and capitalist injustice inhabit the contemporary modern world. Women from the lower class of society are doubly marginalized, due to their gender and type, leading to multiple forms of discrimination. Mahasweta Devi's stories are usually about the tribals, especially the women, fighting against oppression, exploitation, and rebelling against any form of authority and domination. Urmila Chakraborty in “Art as Protest: Social Commitment in the novels of Mahasweta Devi” published in *Indian Women Novelists*, strongly feels that: “Literature [...] becomes, for Mahasweta Devi, only a weapon, a weapon with which she wants to fight alongside the oppressed communities for achieving liberation from slavery and oppression” (Chakraborty 1993, 166).

Mahasweta Devi amplifies the voices of subaltern women in society, fighting with them against the patriarchal norms. The resistance and struggle to fight against all forms of oppression, in Vasantha Surya's opinion:

Mahasweta Devi endeavours to show [...] how people are trampled down, and how they scramble out of the way. You get the feeling that she wants to

clear the air of all ideas of 'art', 'theatre', literature', and 'entertainment', and surround her readers and her audience with the unmasked real world. (Surya 1997, 9)

Rudali by Mahasweta Devi explores the exploitation of women through different social institutions of society. Devi passionately believed that society would not develop or transform until an individual takes a step. The novella *Rudali* depicts an unsentimental narrative of the hopeless life of Sanichari and lower caste women under the patriarchy in the latter half of the 20th century.

In the novella, Sanichari belongs to the lowest class of Dushads and Bhangis. Her life is full of struggle, and she lives in poverty like other members of her village. Her mother-in-law calls her “daian” because she was born on Saturday. It signifies ill luck and bad fortune. Sanichari is accused by her mother-in-law of killing everyone.

You'll kill off everyone else, but you'll stay alive, you daain. As it is, you've finished off your father-in-law, your brother-in-law, and your husband. Now you'll devour your son. (Devi 2015, 96)

Such comments make her life more miserable, but it is also important to note that every family member is dependent on her. In the first half of the play, Sanichari uses Chakki to bring financial stability to her house. She works on Chakki for the whole day, by grinding wheat to make money for her family. The act represents the reality of the lives of subalterns and how their lives are turned into a battle for survival.

When her mother-in-law dies, she hopes for a better future with her husband, but later in the novella, her husband also dies, due to cholera because the priest gave him contaminated milk offered to Lord Shiva, leaving her a widow. Sanichari, as the widow, has to follow the austere rules of ancient Indian widow culture. Widows are often considered untouchable, and bad omens; they are kept away from functions and are often avoided at all costs. After a husband's death, women are stripped of wealth and dignity and are forced to live a life in abject poverty. Vrindavan, a small village in India, is one example of a place rife with widows whose families have discarded them. In Indian culture, widows are denied the use of spices and condiments, salt, and honey. They are forbidden to wear ornaments, flowers, or colored clothes. Widows in India have no joy in their lives and experience unhappiness, sorrow, and hunger. Low caste women often experience oppression and exploitation more than other members of the community. The Pundit of Tohri forces Sanichari to carry out the last rituals of her husband in Tohri which costs her a rupee and a quarter. Later, the

Pundit forces her to perform the last rites again, according to the rituals of the village, for which she borrows twenty rupees from Raitvtar. He makes her sign a contract to repay fifty rupees through bonded labor for five years, and she has to sell her Chakki to get more money. Selling the Chakki to complete funeral rituals represents how oppressed people sell their happiness, joy, and their only means of livelihood. The novella represents the gendered subaltern's condition of unimaginable material misery and oppression. Therefore, Sanichari, like the vast majority of Indians, is emotionless. Sanichari sums up her life in a few words:

If my bahu had been halfway decent, I would have been better off. As it is, I divided my time between cleaning up my in-law's shit and piss and tending to my udhua. My son died; my daughter-in-law ran off [...] I brought up my grandson, looked after him till he was a young man, and then he went off with this no-good magic men [...] My whole life has been spent working, working [...]. (Devi 2015, 120-121)

The novella *Rudali*, by Mahasweta Devi, shows how women even from the upper caste are oppressed in this phallocentric society. Upper-class women may feel privileged, but are still bound by the social and cultural norms that affect lower caste women. For example, the wives of Malik-Maharaj are jealous of one another, and one wife is looked down on, and not given respect in the family, because she gave birth to a girl child. This is a typical social attitude towards every woman in a patriarchal society; that the birth of a girl child brings misfortune and hardship in life. Another way women are exploited is by forcefully pushing them into the profession of prostitution. Dulan blames the moneylenders for the conditions of prostitutes. The landlords use lower caste women for their desire and discard them after their need is over. Some of them even give birth to children. Some women run away from their homes and accept the profession of prostitution unwillingly, as a better option for making their livelihood. These women become prostitutes to feed themselves and save them from starvation. Young women of a village, having no clothes, no food, and no self-respect, turn towards prostitution. The prostitutes do not earn enough to fill their stomachs, nor do they regain their self-respect. They are also an outcome of the exploitative system of wealthy people. Mahasweta Devi's work highlights two significant aspects of social criticism. First, she boldly goes against established norms of society, which neglect people based on their birth. In her work, she goes against established ideas of society, and works for the unprivileged, so that they can uplift their status and identity in society. She is not merely giving an account of their lives; instead, in a way, she is finding alternative possibilities inherent in the system, with which

females can change their situation. Devi shows different ways for females to improve their conditions. The whole story, in one sense, gives various options on how they can do this. Secondly, Devi shows a way of hitting back at patriarchal society by combining prostitution and mourning. Sanichari and Bhikhni are among a group of widowed women and prostitutes known as Rudalis, and they become the most popular. The upper class consider it an honor, and spend money on fancy funerals, thus giving Rudalis opportunity to earn money.

The tradition of mourning has remained an essential part of life around the world, including Europe, Africa, New Zealand, and Mideast Asia. The books *Eschyleou le Grand Perdant* and *Dialogue avec Alain Bosquet* by Ismail Kadare state that tragic theatre originates from the funeral songs sung by mourners. Since death deprives a person of the chance to sing of his virtues, others speak over his corpse. *The Hindu*, dated 06. 08. 2006, featured an article, "A Wail for their Survival", focusing on the practitioners of the Oppari tradition, which is a folk tradition practiced in south India. The article highlights the lives of women in traditional mourning. According to their tradition, as they sing, they beat their breasts - the Oppari is not complete without the latter.

"Does it not hurt- this self-flagellation?"

"Of course, there is pain. Sometimes much pain. But what do we do? This is our profession, we must sing and beat our breasts to earn money" Sellamma says, "Often, we have had to rub ointment and pour warm water on our breasts so that the pain goes away". For Sellamma, a diabetic, it can worsen; she must take injections when the pain intensifies. "Not that I can stop even if I want to. Who will buy my medicines, and what about food?"

Anjalai, meanwhile, squats on the sand again, her legs weak from standing for some minutes, "I am getting old, you see", she says apologetically. The lack of an heir to carry the legacy forward does not bother them as much as you fancy it would, because for them, it is about survival - not of an art form, but of the artist. Such professional mourners are found all over India in Rajasthan, Bihar, Punjab etc.

Dulan, in *Rudali* is another crucial character who brings forward the ideology of mourning tradition. When Madho Singh, a wealthy landlord, is murdered by his son, Dulan takes advantage of the situation and tells Sanichari and Bikhni to become Rudalis by foreseeing a good business plan. The same son who killed his father now organizes a grand funeral and calls hundreds of Rudalis to wail and cry. Dulan negotiates the terms and conditions for both women:

DULAN: Sarkar, first the payment terms ...

BACHANLAL: What terms do you expect for these old hags?

DULAN: Sarkar, these women may look old, but wait till you hear them mourn! You 'll find yourself shedding tears! BACHAN: Okay, they'll get some grain.

DULAN: That's not enough, Sarkar. I've heard that a full two hundred rupees have been allocated just for Rudalis. BACHANLAL: Okay, okay, five rupees as well.

DULAN: Only five rupees! For women from decent homes! you must give them at least twenty rupees each, Sarkar.

BACHANLAL: Are you mad? Twenty rupees each?! Okay you can take thirty for the two of them. That's all.

DULAN: Thirty rupees, rice and clothes.

BACHANLAL: Not rice, wheat.

DULAN: Give them rice, Sarkar. They've got good, strong

BACHANLAL: Dulan, how many bastards died to give birth to you?

DULAN: Twenty-two, Sarkar....

(Devi 2015, 136).

Dulan does not spare even Sanichari and Bikhni. He also takes his share from the deal. Dulan, as their guide, dresses the women in black and arrives at the house of Madho Singh. Sanichari and Bikhni's dramatic wails and cries impress the spectators. Soon the two become the most famous Rudalis of the village; every death in a wealthy family fetches them money, food, and clothes. Mahasweta Devi changes the Sanichari's image from a helpless victim to an empowered woman who can now decide independently. The title 'Rudali' refers to the custom where lower caste women are forced to cry and wail over the dead bodies of caste masters. In the novella, Devi equates the profession of mourning to physical labor. Anjum Katyal, in *The Metamorphosis of Rudali*, quotes Devi's own words regarding the story of the Rudali. She asserts that it is a play about "how to survive". This idea is depicted through Dulan, "look, buddha's ma. It is wrong to give up on lands, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land; you must not give it up [...] Rich people forget to cry on the corpse on their loved ones because they are busy finding the key to safety" (Devi 2015, 120). This comment exposes Dulan's ideas and understanding of labor relations. She fully appreciates Rudali as a profession in the same way as any other work in society. Through the novella, it is not only one person that the author is helping, but the whole community. Sanichari and Bhikhni can now set their own rules and rates for mourning.

Just for wailing, one rupee. '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 of six rupees. At the kriya ceremony, we want a cloth, preferably a length of plain black cloth. (Devi 2015, 123)

Devi expands the idea of community and to include prostitutes, women who are often considered outcasts. Bhikhni went to prostitute quarters and called them to become Rudalis and cry on the corpses of dead rich people. Bhikhni explains to Sanichari how socio-economic causes have forced them to adopt this profession, and that they are also human, like everyone, and can change their profession and economic status in society. In this text, Devi talks about the notion of optimism, that there is hope even in the worst circumstances. The strategies of the struggle for survival are the main argument of the writer.

Mahasweta Devi shows a way to fight back by integrating mourning and prostitution. While one gives them an outlet to voice their pain and sorrow and mock their masters, the other makes them suffer. The author manipulates the patriarchal norms and rules to favor the one trapped in oppression. Sanichari rises to the occasion and seizes the opportunity by making crying an act of revenge. A woman who has never shed a tear in her life on a family member's death is now a professional mourner, and has reversed society's views by empowering herself and the community. The system of our society is framed in such a way that it helps exploitation and makes the lives of lower-class people difficult. The main axis in the novella is Sanichari, whose life is a tale of a lower caste woman who has moved from oppression to empowerment.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi, a social activist, has combined her activism with literature. Her works result from social, economic, and political systems that take pride in suppressing a section of society. A wave of gnawing anger, directed at a system that has failed to help these people, forces her to put forth an impertinent question “I cannot help but ask, again and again: Why do the big swindlers and power wielders go unpunished? Why do these communities pay the price all the time?”

In a video interview on tribal welfare, Deviu answers with conviction when questioned: “Are you challenging the Habitual Offenders' Act as law?”, “We have challenged the Government of India. We have placed [...] demands that this Habitual Offenders' Act must be removed from Indian Police Academy textbooks. Such cruelty and torture and atrocity must be stopped. These people must be seen as common Indian citizens”.

Mahasweta Devi traces the everyday life of subaltern without any trace of romanticism and sentimentalism. Her main concern is to highlight the condition of poor, uneducated, landless, and marginalized people at the hands of the civilized world. Her writing not only documents the

downtrodden subaltern, but also comments on the condition of our society by giving alternatives to improve it.

Mahasweta Devi's works portray women both as the victims and potential subversive agents against the Brahmanical patriarchy. She places her gynocentric stories around the framework of the socio-economic structure. The issues about women that she highlights are mainly of the rural bonded labor, and tribal women who are exploited and considered a waste. In *Rudali*, the play addresses social suppression, and locates the value of mourning in a valueless society. For members of the upper-caste, mourning is a path to exhibiting wealth. However, Devi challenges the oppressor-based society by empowering Sanichari. Social exploitation does not prevent her from getting what she wants. She learns ways and means to twist the situation in her favor, the hard way. Moreover, she earnestly tries to convince prostitutes to join the profession of mourning by assuring them that this will give them a better standard of living and that they will get back at the people who oppressed them. Sanichari's wisdom lies in the fact that, after gaining adequate means of survival, she makes an effort to uplift a group of women who have been abused and suppressed. Sanichari does not accept her situation. Instead, she fights back against the oppressor who tried to make the world a dark place by secretly exploiting that oppressor. The exploiter who earlier used her, is now at her doorstep requesting a favour.

In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi travels back in time to bring past and present together in one frame, and shed light on the events that led Draupadi to rebel and stand against society. Dopdi's reaction in the plot challenges male-dominated society. Her nakedness, where she flaunts her femininity as a powerful weapon, is a universal protest; she shakes the values of patriarchal society and claims that no amount of cruelty in the world can make her surrender. Her act of defiance is a mark of a resilient spirit. She neither accepts her shame, nor silently fights against the power; instead, she boldly confronts the oppressor leaving him in awkward terror and fright. By depicting the plight of women, and empathizing with them, she turns the tables on society and fights against the norms. The female protagonists of her works are archetypal representations of the suppressed, exploited, women of society. Her protagonists are emotionally strong personalities, stronger than their male counterparts. Having been thrust into the world of men, they stand in the centre of society.

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CHAPTER TWO

SHIFTING NARRATIVES – STIFLED VOICES SPEAK

DR. KANTHIMATHI KRISHNASAMY

Abstract

Tamil literature is replete with narratives on, and of, women. The representation of women in literary works underwent considerable change from the earliest Sangam age to the present day. The representation has oscillated through the ages, from dignified and venerated, to denigrative and vulnerable. This is seen more prominently in the poems written by the greatest poets in Tamil literature right from the Sangam age to the present. Androcentric poetry eulogising men, and gynocentric poems extolling the virtues of women, are in abundance. Though women were eulogised for their virtues, they were conditioned to speak with restriction, keeping in mind the ideal traits of women - *accham* (timidity) *madam* (coyness) and *nanam* (naiveté). This paper dwells upon the new age poets whose stifled voices have broken the fetters in their rage and shaken the foundations of the Tamil literary scenario by speaking boldly about body and sexuality, the areas that were hitherto considered taboo. Their poetry does not conform to the tenets laid down for 'good' women, thus bringing a renaissance in Tamil poetic tradition and a determined move towards Tamil Feminism. Modern Tamil women's poetry has overtly articulated the voices of the suppressed and the silent, amidst strong opposition.

Women Poets from the Sangam age to the present

The entire gamut of Tamil literature has a rich history of Tamil life, customs, and beliefs, deeply embedded in its works. The Sangam literature is the ancient Tamil literature roughly spanning from 500 BC to 300 AD. Sangam literature was composed by Tamil poets belonging to both genders,

and from various professional backgrounds. It depicts women as having equal status and with respectable positions in society. The Sangam poetic canon consists of nearly 30 women poets. Some of the prominent women writers are Avvaiyar, Nachchellaiyar, and Kakkaiyapadiyar. The tradition of Brahnavadinis existed in ancient India. Brahnavadinis were women ascetics who practiced celibacy and dedicated their life to the pursuit of knowledge of the Brahman, the ultimate reality (according to Upanishads).

Early Tamil poetry speaks of brave mothers and courageous wives. Women soldiers showing heroism in battlefields are depicted in *Purananooru*. According to the classical work, *Aganaanuru*, women had the right to choose their husbands. Despite all this, in the literature produced during this age, the strict norms and regulations - specifically those restraining the freedom and rights of women - are on full display. Male domination and authority over the female are only more pronounced and glaring. We can see the enormous burden and responsibilities placed upon women in the name of culture and tradition, while men were fairly free of all these. We can see in these works the pain and untold suffering of women who were stifled of their voices and desires to live the life of their choice. From restricted and constrained lives, to a more vibrant and unfettered rage breaking the chain of bondage and suffering over the ages, we see a consistent and a determined effort by women to break the fetters. Women have tried to unshackle the restraints. They have, time and again, endeavoured to establish a voice of their own announcing to the world that they can no longer be contained and are no less than men in all walks of life. The change over the centuries has been nothing short of revolutionary. Tamil epics like *Silapathikaram*, *Manimegalai*, and *Kundalakesi*, have eulogised the feminine characteristics of women. Though women have tried to resist the unfair treatment that they have undergone, there are a very few instances in literature and reality.

Silapathikaram voices the pain of virtuous Kannagi. The story revolves around a couple, Kovalan and Kannagi, whose happy life is disturbed by the dancer Madhavi. Kovalan's infatuation with Madhavi ends in a bitter way, and he comes back to his wife, who uncomplainingly accepts him. Kovalan is accused of stealth and is prosecuted. Kannagi comes to know of this, and fights for justice to the King. In rage she rips off her left breast and throws it in anger, where it burns the town of Madurai.

With her own hand she tore the left breast from her body.
Thrice she surveyed the city of Madurai,
Calling her curse in bitter agony.
Then she flung her fair breast on the scented street... (*Silapathikaram*
translated by Prof A L Bhasham)