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Evolution of an uprising Subaltern woman

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Abstract

Antonio Gramsci, was an Italian Marxist and communist who was imprisoned for a long time by Mussolini until his death at the age of 46. It was at this time he declared that the subaltern was the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence. In the post-colonial era, concept of gendered subaltern had a great significance, which implies that women had been doubly subalternized on the basis of nationality and gender. Mahasweta Devi has a prominent influence in subaltern women. Social realism is the main theme she focused on. As a social activist and a writer, she immersed herself in the life of India's poor who struggles against oppression and was successful in reflecting it in her works in entire depth. Mahasweta Devi's Rudali is a great example for it.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi,
Rudali, Subalternity, Feminism,
Sanichari

Introduction

"These Adivasis do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script. They compose the stream of events into song, into words, they become something... a continuity. Their history is like a big flowing river going somewhere, not without a destination. Not without". (Chotti Munda and his Arrow)

Mahasweta Devi is one of the most prolific writers of the 20th century, who brought Bengali Literature to its peak with the great representation of the several social issues that she had mentioned in her works. Devi is not only known for being a great writer who brings to her reader's sight the plights growing around them, but is also known for the role of an activist that she plays to fight and voice against these plights. Mahasweta Devi vividly portrays the sufferings and issues of the tribal society at the hands of upper-caste landlords, money-lenders and government servants. She has authored many books in her life time, and her death was truly felt in the literature community as a void that can never be filled again. Mahasweta's debut book in 1956 was a lucid life sketch 'Jhansi

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Rani' describing the bravery and martyrdom of Laxmibai.

'Subaltern' refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Subalternity is subordination, inferiority, exploitation, hegemony by the superior on the inferior which became inevitable in the present capitalist society. Antonio Gramsci coined the term subaltern to identify the cultural hegemony that excludes the common folk and social groups from the social, political and economic conditions of the society. The term 'Subaltern' originated from the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, a team of historians who aimed to promote systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian studies. Thus, subaltern studies became the model for historical research of the subaltern's experience of colonialism in the Indian Subcontinent.

There is no particular definition for 'Feminism'. But, one can explain it through various perceptions depending on different experiences faced by women. In general, we can say it is a means through which women tries to share their problems on both emotional as well as physical level to the outer world. Now a days, there is a misinterpretation that feminism is a theory that is against men and some other people think that feminism ask for superiority of women over men. It is actually an

awareness about the unequal power structures prevailing in the society. For example, especially on their salary matters, women and men are treated unequally. Feminists used their freedom and opportunity to wake women from dark patriarchal authority.

Rudali is a custom practiced in certain areas of Rajasthan. In this, women are hired as professional mourners after the death of a relative and they always wear black. The word 'Rudali' (roo-dah-lee) is literally translated as female weeper. They in turn publicly express the grief of family members who are not permitted to display emotion due to social status. These rudalis make a scene crying out loud and the impact of their mourning also compels other people at the funeral to cry. Mahasweta Devi's novel 'Rudali' was later converted into a film in 1993 by Kalpana Lajmi. It was released on 18th June 1993 in Hindi. Dimple Kapadia who starred in this film got best actress award. Even though Kalpana tried to bring out the struggles faced by the poor with the same intensity which is portrayed in the novel, it was a failed attempt. The main aim of Mahasweta Devi is to portray the evil practices prevailed in Rajasthan in the 20th century. But in the film Kalpana failed in its execution, presenting the reality and its treatment. She focused on how an actor or actress should be and brought two glamorous actresses of Indian cinema,

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Raakhee and Dimple Kapadia, to play the mother and daughter of the poor community respectively. The movie thus loses its purity or sense of reality. So, we can consider these both genre of Rudali as two independent works of different people.

The novel revolves around a woman named Sanichari and her transformation from a simple village woman to a Rudali who is strong and made crying as a livelihood. She became bold and made herself independent. The story is about the events that took place in her life which led to the transformation. Sanichari is a woman who had gone through lots of struggles and even lost her dear ones which the society claimed to be due to her ill fate. In all these dark side of her life she fought bravely and confidently to overcome all these misfortunes to become a Rudali.

Transformation of Sanichari as Rudali

Rudali is a powerful novel written by Mahasweta Devi in 1993. The story centers around a low caste village woman named Sanichari. She led a pathetic life as an oppressed person in the society and undergoes poverty, starvation, discrimination as a low caste woman. She represents a large number of women who lives in miserable condition in the post-colonial Indian society.

Sanichari, the protagonist of the novel lives in Tahad village. She was called

as ‘unlucky daughter in law’ as she was born on and named after a Saturday. Her mother-in-law used to say, as she was born on an inauspicious Saturday her destiny was full of suffering. Everyone in her family died or left her due to her ill fate. Her Mother-in-law was the first person to die. At that time, she couldn’t cry for her because if the ritual was not carried out before the night was over, they would have to bear the cost of repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. Within three years, brother-in-law and his wife were also dead. Even in this misfortune she never mourned because this time she had a sigh of relief that she need to feed only few members in the family. She even lost her husband during the Baisakhi mela at Tohri, by drinking polluted milk which gave off a sour stink, he got cholera and then later he dies. Even in this time she couldn’t cry. Government officers burned the corpse quickly and dragged her along with her son to take vaccination against cholera. When she came back to her village, the Priest of Ramavatar, Mohanlal gave her punishment to pay Rs.50 for next 5 years for insulting him by doing ritual offerings in Tohri itself. By this time, Sanichari’s grieves had hardened into a stone. She was not able to cry out all the griefs that she had burdened her heart over these years. One after other faith continues to torture her, but she never lost her hope. With all her strength and determination she fought against the mocking fate.

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Now she only had her son Budhua with her. But as he grew up, he was contracted with tuberculosis. Budhua's wife is like a 'daaini' or witch. Unfortunately, Budhua's condition got worsened and he gradually dies. His wife left the house and never returned after this. This time also Sanichari didn't cry. Budhua had a son 'Haroa' who was just six months old. Sanichari's only ray of hope was this child and she had beautiful dreams about him. Most of the neighbors supported her, Dulan's wife sent her meals of roti and achar and Natua sold her vegetables for her. Slowly, Sanichari became normal again. Haroa has grown up now at first, he obeyed his grandmother and did his job assigned to him very well and brought his salary appropriately. But later he got bored and spent his time following the magic shows and not going for work. This broke Sanichari's heart and gave him a thrashing. He again put his mind in the job but then he ran away.

The turning point in Sanichari's life took place by the arrival of her old friend Bikhni who undergoes almost similar fate as hers. That is when the uprising of the subaltern woman took place. Sanichari started a new life as Rudali along with Bikhni by collecting the basic necessities needed for their daily life. But unfortunately Bikhni also accepts eternal peace. This affected Sanichari's livelihood

and faces the question of survival and then she became determined and courageous to face anything. She by herself went to Tohri and visits red street to collect whores to work as Rudalis, and calls everyone including her daughter in law. All the whores gathered around Sanichari and listened to her. The voiceless Sanichari became voiced and she, who used to obey whatever high class people said, began to question them. This can be seen in the lines when Gomastha asked her if she brought the entire red-light district with you she replied telling, "why not? Malik said make a big fuss, something people will talk about. Is that possible with a mere ten whores? Move, move, let us get on with our work." Thus we can see an entirely different Sanichari here. The transformation that Mahasweta Devi brought here through Sanichari can be taken as a great model for every other Sanicharies living in each part of the world.

Conclusion

To conclude, Mahasweta Devi was successful in expressing the pain felt by subordinary people. Through this novel she gives oppressed women the courage to rise and shine by giving example of Sanichari. Even though Sanichari lost all her family members and hope of living, she faced life as it's the precious gift of God. She accepted faith and had a realization that nothing can stop her from anything. She challenged faith and this faith itself took her

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forward in life thereafter. The novel is a proof that Devi's writings are the dreadful weapon that she uses to uplift the marginalized, downtrodden people especially women.

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