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In her famous essay "Can the subaltern speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes that....." the subaltern as a female is much more profoundly in darkness than subaltern males". But Mahasweta Devi's Dalit and tribal women decide to come out of this darkness, they subvert and deconstruct Spivak's notion of subalternity. All of her subaltern characters such as Jashoda, Douloti, Gangor, Sanichari, Bikhni etc. are victims of exploitative regional, social and economic power structures. Still they refuse to surrender and like Hemingway's Santiago emerge as invincible warriors. They prove that subaltern women in Mahasweta Devi can be destroyed but can't be defeated.

Born in 1926, Mahasweta Devi is a prolific writer and a legend of our times. She is the recipient of many coveted awards like the Sahitya Academy Award (1986), Bhartiya Jnanpith Award(1996), Raman Magsaysay Award(1996) and the Padam Vibhushan Award(2006). She writes in Bangla but her major works have been translated into English by the acclaimed translators and critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Samik Bandopadhyay. Mahasweta Devi is a reputed social activist wholly committed to the cause of tribal people and landless labourers. She has about a hundred fictional works to her credit including short stories, novels and novellas wherein she consciously raises issues related to the exploitation of Adivasis by the landed rich, bonded labour and prostitution.

For Mahasweta Devi, commitment to society is her prime concern. Her first hand knowledge of tribal people makes her writing a reality. She portrays exploitation, oppression and the struggle of downtrodden people. The theme of oppression in its different forms emerges clearly and loudly in her works. She projects the complexity of these different levels of oppression at class, caste and gender. She does not regard women as separate entities but regards their oppression as linked to the oppression of class and caste. In fact, She humbly refuses to be labeled as feminist. In one of her interviews she comments, "I am a writer. I don't isolate the woman. In my stories men and women alike belong to different classes". Her stories are about people's struggle with the system and their final survival.

In her writings she meticulously interweaves the issue of gender within the matrix of class consciousness. But this approach nowhere dilutes the cause of women. In fact, her writings are remarkable in the sense that they give voice to women's issues without compromising the author's social concerns. Through many of her female characters like Dopadi, Jashoda, Bednabala, Giribala, Shanichari, Bikhni etc. she exposes the oppression of women in rural and tribal India. She not only portrays the exploitation of women but shows all Indian women a way out also. Her stories are not about helpless victims. These are, in fact, the tales of survivors who struggle against heavy odds.

Rudali, a famous story by Mahasweta Devi, was adopted into a play by Usha Ganguly, a leading theatre director of Calcutta. It also became a hit on celluloid. The story revolves around the life of a low caste woman Shanichari (being born on Saturday). She loses everyone in the family one after the other. Every loss she suffers is due to hunger, poverty and exploitative social, political, religious system. Like all other women characters portrayed by Devi, she is not a helpless victim. Her Childhood playmate Bikhni becomes a partner in a journey to transformation. With the help of Dulan, the modern day 'Event Manager', the duo (Bikhni and Shanichari) start a joint venture and become professional mourners. Sanichari and her gang subvert and use the system which oppresses them. The way these women retaliate and survive makes them heroic figures. Women across all castes and classes suffer because of gender. Bikhni, Prabtia, Gulbadan, the wives and mothers of money-lenders, prostitutes, all fight against the system and emerge as winners.

The story is set in Tahad village where untouchables lived in majority. Like other villagers Sanichari also suffered due to poverty. Her mother-in-law called her 'manhoos' or inauspicious and held her responsible for the misfortune of the family. But others who were not born on Saturdays were equally unhappy in this village.

The fragile economic condition was the real cause of their suffering. Sanichari's mother-in-law, though not born on Saturday, died of hunger crying "food, give me food." When she died, Sanichari's husband and brother-in-law were in jail due to a conflict with the landlord Ram Avatar Singh. Sanichari did not cry because she had to make arrangements for the funeral. Sanichari even could not cry at the death of her brother-in-law and his wife rather she sighed with relief- "at least their own stomach would be full". However, she never thought that she wouldn't be able to cry even at the death of her husband. Her husband died of Cholera after drinking contaminated milk offered to the Shiva idol by the rich. At that time also she could not cry as she had to make arrangements for her husband's *shraadh*. She had to borrow twenty rupees from the village moneylender and to repay this sum she became a bonded labour for the next five years. Every loss and suffering in Sanichari's life is the result of a connivance between poverty and religion. She raises her son Budhua with great difficulty working as bonded labour in the farms of zamindars. Later on, her daughter-in-law, Prabtia runs away from home because she was not satisfied with a "poverty stricken existence". With this, the burden of rearing an infant grandson falls on Sanichari. She brings up her grandson with the help of community women who breastfeed the motherless baby. This boy Haroa, also leaves her alone. At this juncture, Sanichari's chance meeting with her childhood playmate Bikhni gives her a new lease of life to her.

The story reveals an unholy nexus between the socio-economic and religious system. The *malik mahajans* are socially and morally corrupt and use religion for their selfish ends. They exploit the poor people in numerous ways. They manipulate the situations, get the male members locked in jail anytime and the women become an easy prey for them. They make them work as bonded labour in their farms, sexually exploit them, keep them as prostitutes, discard them as and when they like. The village moneylenders are parasites of society who thrive on poor people's labour. It is not only poor and low caste women but women of money

lenders' family also suffer because of this unholy nexus. They disown their own daughters born of illicit relationships. Gulbadan's natural father Gambhir Singh calls her daughter a whore and orders her to submit to the lust of his nephew. It is also a curse to be old and sick for a woman in the house of rich moneylenders. Nathuni Singh's mother has no access to medicine while she is on the death bed. Her son is ready to spend thirty thousand on her funeral but "no medicine, no injection is provided to her when she is alive". Nathuni Singh's middle wife is denied respect in the house because she is the mother of a girl child.

Rudali is not about victimization of women characters. It is about their struggle and survival. Set against the background of the multipronged oppression, is the issue of survival of women characters. "*Rudali* is about..... "how to survive"..... "bread and mouth". It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this", says Mahasweta Devi. The story explains various strategies of survival exercised by women characters. Dulan, a male character, becomes an active agent in the transformation of Sanichari. He, in fact, embodies the fact that men have a key role to play in women's emancipation. Sanichari's son dies and her daughter in law leaves her at crossroads. At this time Dulan gets her a job at the railway track, takes care of her infant grandson and gives her surplus food to eat. But her sufferings continue unabated. Her tale of misfortunes reaches the climax when her grandson, now grown up, runs away from house. Incidentally she meets her childhood playmate Bikhni who was also sailing in the same boat. Bikhni becomes her confidant and other self. She comes to live with Sanichari, does household job with great dexterity and becomes her other self. When they face the issue of survival, Dulan presents a novel idea of becoming rudalis before them. Sanichari is reluctant in the beginning, but Bikhni with the 'devil-may-care' attitude readily accepts the idea. When Sanichari asks, "Won't there be a talk in the village, Bikhni dismissively replies, so let them talk!" The duo start their joint venture. Initially Dulan bargains on their behalf, but later on teaches them 'know-how' and the intricacies of the profession.

Anjum Katyal comments, "Dulan's intervention is positive. He succeeds in diverting her mind from helpless despair (mourning her fate, her dead husband) to a realization that actually she is angry about the unfairness of her situation and then he presents her with a survival strategy, a way of turning the situation around so that she is using the system instead of just being used by it".

Sanichari and Bikhni are in great demand because of their professional excellence. The world belongs to the professionals and not to the amateurs. Now they tactfully manipulate the system in their favour. When it comes to business expansion, Bikhni readily agrees to the proposal of involving prostitutes from Tohari. She herself goes and negotiates with them. Bikhni - Sanichari friendship is, in fact, a remarkable example of female bonding in literature. The author delves in detail on the sensitivity of this relationship. The role of the community in empowering these women is also underlined in the text. Haroa's upbringing would not have been possible without the help of village women who even breastfeed the motherless baby. Sanichari herself admits, "in order to survive the poor and oppressed need the support of the other poor and oppressed. Without that support, it is impossible to live in the

village even on milk and ghee provided by the malik ." Community, partnership and sisterhood become essential tools of survival.

After Bikhni's death Sanichari thinks of giving up her blooming business. But Dulan says, " Look Budha' Ma. It is wrong to give up one's land and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land. You must not give it up". She alone takes charge of her business. It is the fear of losing livelihood rather than grief of losing a comrade that affects her . Tears are now a prized possession, she can't waste it now. " If Sanichari has survived so much grief , she has survived the loss of Bikhni. She is devastated, but she won't cry. Money, rice , new clothes - without getting these in return, tears are a useless luxury" .

Sanichari is empowered and is ready to help other women. Her own struggle, her own life teaches her a lesson. She is now sympathetic to prostitutes. She recognises and endorses the view of Dulan. " What one is forced to do, feed oneself is never considered wrong." She herself goes to interact with prostitutes. She is not hesitant to visit the red light area. " considerations of the stomach are more important than anything else. She walked in calling Rupa , Budhni, Shomri, Gangu, where are you? Come along . There is a rudali work for you."

She meets her daughter- in- law Prabtia there and calls her" bahu". She invites her and others to join her business and brings them back under her banner. Sanichari organises and trains these women so that they can rely on their professional skills in the times of crisis. This extraordinary woman turns the common ritual of mourning into a professional business and helps other women in their survival. This commodifications of tears turns out to be a great help for these marginalized women.

Speaking of Mahasweta's writings Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak feels that "Mahasweta Devi' s writing and the activism reflect one another". The author does not portray women as helpless sufferers , rather she attacks the exploitative setup, participates in their struggle, supports their cause, shows them a way , inspires them to write the destiny as winners and survivors, wherein the howls of grief of the sufferers turn into the howls of victory.

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