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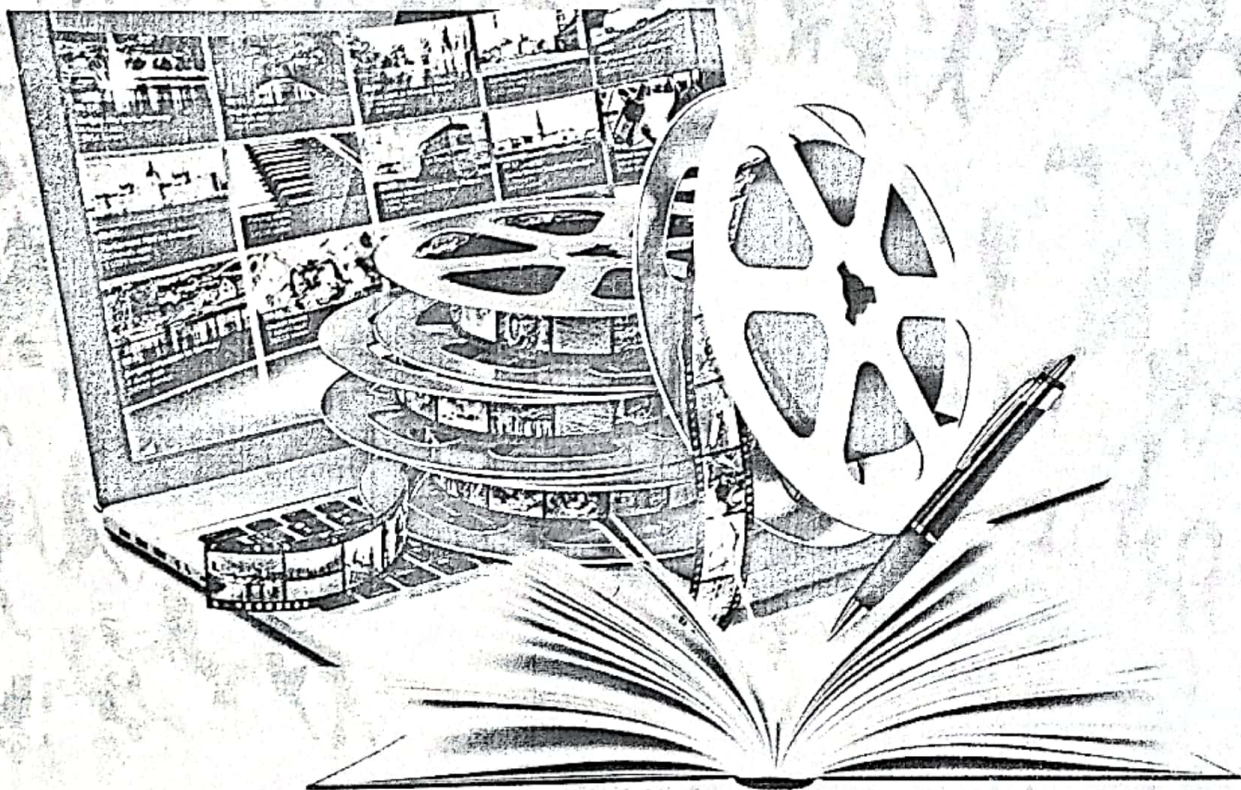
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Journey from Gender Segregation Towards Empowerment in Mahasweta Devi's Selected Short Stories

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Mahasweta Devi's short stories signify the position of women from the marginalized sections of society. The world of her short stories is that of the exploited and the dehumanized. Here sexual exploitation combines with class and caste subjugation to relegate the woman to the lowest rung of the village hierarchy. She essentially reduces the hierarchical structure of Indian society into two stark and rigid categories, the dominator faceless and unchanging and the dominated -helpless, writhing and increasingly stripped of identity. In the short stories such as "Rudali", "Draupadi" Stanadayini (The Breast Giver) and "Sanjh – sakaler Ma" reflect these facts.

Mahasweta Devi in her dual role of narrator and documenter, de – sentimentalizes both. As an activist and writer, she achieves her purpose of replacing the normative urban perception of the eternal Indian village as unchanging, peaceful, nourished by tradition with her insider knowledge of rural Indian as a center of oriental despotism. This despotism is further nurtured by a religious system that feeds on the fear and superstition of the poor and illiterate and keeps the lowest classes within the Hindu hierarchy, prominently impoverished and subjugated. This is seen in "Rudali" when the ganju – woman Sanichari's family members die one by one. The exploitation by various priest leaves her little time to grieve. These women face gender segregation and sexual exploitation in addition to the usual caste and class subjugation at the hands of the dominator class and reducing them to the very bottom of the social pile. The author mentions in her several stories that women migrant laborers work more within the landlord's house and in his fields for lower wages than their male counterparts and become easy victims of the landlord's sexuality. The female bonded laborers in Rudali are used by landlords as mistresses and then caste off, leaving them no means of livelihood other than prostitution. In the story "Draupadi" the black tribal girl Dopadi faces repeated gang rape in the police station to cow her into confession regarding naxalite hideouts and identities of comrade.

The present paper aims to show how these women facing class, caste and gender segregation emerge from the very bottom of the social hierarchy to begin their journey to wards empowerment. The weapons they use in their struggle are those that the Establishment uses to subjugate and exploit them. Tears in Rudali, breast milk in Stanadayini, a black naked unarmed gang-raped body in Draupadi, a mother goddess image in Sanjh – Sakaler Ma are used by these women to reverse the underdog status imposed upon them by establishment hegemony. These weapons are need based and situation – oriented. Though this is a journey towards female empowerment, Mahasweta Devi consciously dissociates herself from the term "feminist" to describe this struggle. There are several stages in this struggle and several social psychological and physical milestones achieved by these women initially in denial of, and later in defiance of the establishment that exploits them.



Denial and deprecation of the crucial position of women in the village hierarchy is expressed

The opening sentences of the story "Rudali" firmly fix Sanichari in the socio-economic niche:

"In Tahad village ganjus and dushads were in the majority Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villager, her life too was lived in desperate poverty. Her mother-in-law used to say it was because Sanichari was born on an inauspicious Saturday, that her life was full of her suffering To herself she would say- huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law. You were born on Monday – was your life any happier?"¹

Sanichari is a bonded laborer toiling endlessly in the landlord's fields for a handful of sattu to repay a minor debt. One by one she loses every member of her family, her in-laws, her husband, even her beloved son Budhau. Her daughter-in-law runs away in search of green pastures and ends up in the prostitution. Her grandson escapes from enforced labor to the city. She does not cry. Life and its grueling struggle for survival do not leave her the time or the tears. The deaths plunge her deeper into debt with the landlord to meet the funeral expenses. As she tells Dulan her Ganju mentor;

"Cry? Me? Don't you Know? I can't shed tears. These two eyes of mine are scorched"² Dulan's answer sets her firmly on the path towards female empowerment: "Buddha's Ma, I'm not asking you to shed the tears you could not shed for Budhua. These tears are your livelihood- you'll see, just as to cut wheat and plough land; you'll be able to shed those tears."³

Sanichari and her friend Bikhni become rudalis professional mourners, mourning the unmourned dead of the land lords for money. They are thus ultimately able to reverse the dominator- dominated predator-prey roles within the village hierarchy. With the crafty eye of the subaltern, Dulan has spotted and nailed down the inherent weakness of the landlords as a social class, and engaged Sanichari to exploit it. "Amongst us, when some one dies we all mourn amongst the reach, family members are too busy trying to find the keys of the safe. They forget all about tears"⁴ Yet decorum and social prestige demand tears at a funeral and here is where the role of the professional mourner becomes necessary and the rich compete with each other for more and more money spent on hiring the services of the rudalis. Sanichari and Bikhni become the lead mourners in demand at every funeral scouring the market for news of the terminally ill, increasing their demand for food, cloth as mourning garb. They become more and more innovative in their mourning rituals fixing their rates for shading tears, beating of breasts rolling in the mud. They expand their community to include the prostitutes, who are not the separate class, but only the cast off mistress of the landlords. They acquire money, class and status in the hierarchy of the newly emergent power-structure. Sanichari is the pishident of the rudali- Randi union, is addressed as Huzoorin by the whores of the randipatti, given a cup of tea a biri and a mora to sit on and hospitality when she goes there to engage them in her band of rudalis. Empowerment has also brought about an attitudinal change in Sanichari. Hither to submissive, inhibited and trampled on by life as contrasted to the more aggressive and defiant Bikhni, She sheds her fear of social criticism and her despair and is able to manipulate circumstances for her own survival after the death of Bikhni. In the last scene these black clothed mourners take over the bloated and rotting body of the landlord in a symbolic gesture of victory, on one moved side, the game that is played out in the village hierarchy. In the end, Sanichari is the

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young prostitute leers and winks at the landlord's nephew over the corpse, the same nephew who has helped reduce her to prostitution. This makes it a journey of social, economic and sexual empowerment.

We see here the commodification of tears, the only item which life-long tragedy and deprivation has blessed the *Rudali* with plenty. Tears in "*Rudali*" have the same earning capacity and exchange values as breast milk does in the story "*Stanadayini*" (*Breast Giver*) and the mother goddess image in *Sanjh- Sakaler Ma*" In *Stanadayini* (*Breast Giver*)" a poor woman *Jasoda's* repeated gestation and lactation is put to use to earn money, taking advantage of the unwillingness of the women of the landlords family to nurse their young. A patriarchal society's reductive image of woman as mere womb and breast is put to use to acquire money and status for *Jasoda*. By the end of the story *Jasoda* is equated with her mythical counterpart and therefore becomes the universal mother, mother goddess, God incarnate. As *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* puts it. "The milk that is produce in one's own body for one's own children is a use-value. When there is a superfluity of use- values, exchange values arise. That which can not be exchanged"⁵

The story reverses Marxist Feminist thematics of the subordination of women by the wage-earning capacity of men, by making *Jasoda* the only wage earner for her family through the only means available to her. In *Sanjh- Sakaler Ma*," a beautiful young widow gains security, subsistence and power by casting herself in the role of a mother Goddess in the village with no more than a trident and a bit of red cloth around herself.

In the story "*Draupadi*" the tall, black, statuesque body of the tribal girl *Dopdi Mehen* is battered and broken by the repeated gang-rape at the local police station after the *Senanayak* orders the use of sexual assault as a weapon against the destitute for their demand for access to village water resources *Mahasweta Devi* universalize her predicament by equating her to her mythical counterpart. *Dopdi*, however, remains unbroken. Next morning, when summoned to the *Semamayak's* presence, she tears up her clothes and refuses water to wash her wounds. Tall proud and naked, with a half smile on her bloodied lips, breasts and genitals torn and bleeding , she walks slowly out to meet the horrified *Senanayak*. As she edges closer and closer pushing him with her breasts, she strips him of all rank and power of his manhood itself with a single query she asks

Marad Tu ? "(Are you a man?)

Why should I cover myself?" There is not a single Man here before whom I should be embarrassed to stand naked"⁶ And she chooses his spotless white shirt to spit a mouthful of blood and broken teeth. And the story ends with *Mahasweta Devi's* statement. "For the first time the *Senanayak* experienced fear terrible fear in front of an unarmed target."⁷

Throughout the story "*Draupadi*" the male genital organ is equated with the muzzle of the gun as an instrument of power Disempowerment of the agents of patriarchy is indicated through the castration image woven into the fabric of the text. Army men in olive green fatigues hidden in trees to capture *Dopdi* using her dead husband *Dulna's* body as bait, suffer excruciatingly painful ant bites in their genitals. Fear of *Dopdi* and *Dulna* causes the diabetic *Senanayak* to urinate repeatedly. The lack of knowledge of the forest and its tribals, the inability to fathom its Neanderthal darkness, the fear of the guerrilla weaponry perfected by these tribals the incomprehensibility of the tribal war cry" *Ma-ho*" are problems which the army is not readily able to solve. Whereas at the end of "*Rudali*" *Sanichari* emerges as one able to manipulate the system that threatens to destroy her, *Dopdi's* utter fearlessness itself renders the victimizer



powerless to destroy the victim. These are the ultimate goals of the government of women.

An important instrument of victimization within the established hierarchy of dominator and dominated is the defacing of identity. The dominator establishes himself, his value system and his culture as the 'norm' thereby reducing already marginalize social groups to a state of distanced" otherness". In Mahasweta Devi's stories the effort to re-establish identity by these marginalized sections is in defiance of the establishment attempts to destroy all distinctive characteristics of these individual social groups and compound them into one anonymous mass. In the story "Draupadi" the author uses the motif of blood as an important symbol of tribal identity. Dopdi Majhen has in her veins the true, undiluted black santhal blood of Champabhumu. The tribal elders protected the chastity of their women and the purity of santhal blood with poison-tipped arrows. A full-blooded tribal never betrays his tribal identity and Dopdi is proud of her santhal blood when somai and Budhna, her clansmen do turn police informers and betray her, she is neither surprised nor ashamed. They were bastards fathered by American soldiers during the war. The blood purity diluted and thus they are albinos to tribal culture. She herself swears an oath to her dead husband, whom she loved more than her blood Mahasweta Devi uses the term "raktadhik" to describe her love, rather than the usual epithet "pranadhik" she would allow herself to be captured or killed rather than betray her naxalite comrades thus though entering the forest which she knows as well as the back of her hand would have saved her life she tries to warn her comrades to change their forest habitat and allows herself to be captured.

Sanichari and Bikhni on the other hand are law cast Ganjus; product of an agrarian culture as opposed to the forest-related one of the tribal's. Their identity is reinforced through their irrepressible dreams of domesticity in defiance of social, economic and emotional pressures. As opposed to Dopdi and Dulna, who have consciously rejected domesticity in a reassertion of their nomadic tribal culture, Sanichari and Bikhni dream of a hut, of painting picture and designs on the cowdung coated floor, of growing chillies and vegetables in the courtyard. Sanichari dreams of a wooden comb for her hair, new shellac bangles from the fair in her youth. Life denies her, widowhood shatters her bangles and washes away the vermilion on her forehead. She dreams again this time of a peaceful old age, sitting in the winter sun with a bowl of sattu and her grandson's company.

To the marginalized sections of society facing social and cultural segregation, the community and its strong bonds offer important survival props. In "Rudali" when sanichari's relatives die one by one, the Ganju community rallies round her. Dulan establishes himself as her mentor, offering job opportunities a woman offers to breastfeed her motherless grandson. Another sells her vegetables at the village fair. Prabhu Ganju offers to shift her hut into his compound for her safety. Mahasweta Devi makes a conscious statement: "In order to survive, the poor and the 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 landlord."⁸

At the end of the story, Sanichari repays the generosity of the community by expanding its boundaries to include other deprived sections, the prostitutes of the rudalis. These female networks are built up through the implementation of essentially female attributes and occupations and help to establish an identity that is fundamentally at the state's expense as well as the purposes of their own social units and their own survival.

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- a. Mahasweta Devi, Rudali, Karuna Prakasani, Kolkata, p. 54.
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- c. Ibid . P.70
- d. Ibid . P.74
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- f. Mahasweta Devi, Draupadi, Kolkata. P.175.
- g. Ibid. p.190.
- h. Mahasweta Devi; Rudali . P.63

