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Abstract: *Rudali* by Mahasweta Devi is a testimony to the plight of the Ganju community in Tahad village of Rajasthan as projected through the life of Sanichari. The story narrates the dominance of the upper-class community in the public sphere and the gradual solidifying of class consciousness amongst the lower-class communities in the village, i.e., ganjus and dushads. In the beginning, the narrative unravels how the restrictions enforced in the public sphere lead to continued ostracization and subordination of the lower-class communities. By placing *Rudali* at the focus of the investigation, the paper seeks to trace the development of subaltern counterpublics who opposed casteism and ongoing oppression by formulating an understanding of the mechanisms of the system. The paper's main argument is that when passive citizens, such as Sanichari, become conscious of their rights and the oppressive sociocultural system, an active engagement emerges at the individualistic level which gradually affects the grassroots level of democracy and ignites a change, as witnessed towards the end of the narrative.

Keywords: subaltern; subaltern counterpublics; discourse; cultural theory

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, a well-known Indian Bengali author, and social activist, wrote the novella *Rudali*. It was released in 1997 and has been adapted into several different languages. Sanichari, a low-caste woman who becomes a professional mourner or "rudali" after losing her husband and children, is the protagonist. It is set in a remote village named Tahad in Rajasthan, India. Through her hardships and relationships with other oppressed women, the novella examines issues of caste, gender, and exploitation. Devi's literature is renowned for her candid and compelling portrayal of the life of oppressed women in India. Usha Ganguli, of the theatrical company Rangakarmee, has translated and performed *Rudali*. Director Kalpana Lajmi has also transformed the novella into a lauded movie of the same name.

Spivak's theory of subaltern argues that the dominant discourses have often silenced the voices of marginalized communities and excluded them from the mainstream social, political, and economic power structures. She argues that it is the intellectuals often partake in the practice of "speaking for" and "speaking about" these groups (Spivak 73). She critiques the act of "speaking for" marginalized groups as this entails instances when someone claims to be an unsolicited representative of the subaltern group. This is deemed problematic as it reinforces power disparities and muffles the voices of the subaltern. Conversely, the act of "speaking about" refers to instances in which someone discusses the experiences of a subaltern group without making a claim to speak for that group. If done in an ethical and respectful manner, this can be a helpful strategy for promoting understanding of marginalized groups and increasing awareness of them. The latter part of this theory is relevant to *Rudali*, as the narrative engages in the practice of "speaking about" and highlights the experiences and perspectives of women in rural India who occupy a subaltern position in society and whose voices are often silenced.

The primary premise of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory is the necessity of creating spaces for marginalized people to voice their opinions and contest established hierarchies of power. She advocates for such alternative spaces where subaltern communities can express their anxieties, ambitions, and personal experiences without being dominated or excluded. These settings become crucial for advancing social justice and destroying repressive ideologies. However, she understands

that creating these spaces is a challenging task that requires an intricate comprehension of language, power relations, and representation. Spivak emphasizes the significance of representation and language. She emphasizes how dominant discourses frequently enforce particular forms of expression and communication that might marginalize or eliminate subaltern voices. Hence, in order to ensure that all perspectives and varieties of knowledge are recognized and accepted, it is necessary to reevaluate language and representation in order to create spaces for subaltern groups. While the narrative of *Rudali* partially becomes such a space, the creation of space for the subaltern subject also takes place within the narrative. Sanichari, the protagonist, strives to find a place to express her grief and eventually builds one where she can not only do so openly but also make a profit by transforming her tears into a commodity.

Fraser's theory of the public sphere

In his 1962 book "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," Jürgen Habermas outlined his theory of the public sphere, which postulates the presence of a social setting where people can engage in rational-critical discussion and debate on issues of shared interest. A public sphere, which is known for its open and inclusive communication, is crucial to democratic governance. Locating its origin in 18th-century Europe, Habermas observes spaces like coffee houses and salons as a hub of different social strata exchanging ideas and inclusive political deliberation. He contends that the essence of the public space has eroded over time due to the rise of mass media, commercialization and the influence of market forces, placing profit over public dialogue, and state control. He argues that this degradation has resulted in a decrease in democratic government and asks for the public sphere to be revitalized through increased citizen engagement and participation.

While Habermas' theory has been critiqued due to its Eurocentric nature, it became foundational for other critics, like Nancy Fraser. By stressing the ways in which social inequality and power disparities can restrict access to public discourse and participation, Nancy Fraser expands on Habermas' idea of the public sphere. Fraser contends that structural disparities frequently prevent marginalized groups from participating in public discourse, contradicting the idealized image of the public sphere as a forum for open and inclusive dialogue. Fraser also criticizes Habermas' overly idealistic interpretation of the public sphere as an area devoid of oppression or coercion. She contends that even in apparently open and inclusive venues, systemic injustices like racism, sexism, and economic inequality can restrict access to public dialogue and participation. Fraser urges a more complex understanding of power dynamics in the public domain in order to address this problem.

Fraser develops the notion of subaltern counterpublics to contribute to a foundational understanding of a diversified or alternative public sphere where marginalized communities can express themselves. Subaltern counterpublics are alternative discursive spaces where members of socially oppressed groups create and disseminate counterdiscourses, allowing them to develop opposing interpretations of their needs, interests, and identities. These counterpublics are places where marginalized people can contest prevailing narratives and develop substitute stories that reflect their viewpoints and experiences. Examples include self-produced media and spaces by feminist, LGBTQ+, and immigrant communities to communicate their ideas and contest the established power structures. These counterpublics are essential for fostering social change because they give marginalized groups a platform to express their experiences and contest prevailing narratives. They encourage inclusivity and resistance to repressive structures by facilitating the development of alternative forms of association and communication. Subaltern counterpublics contribute to the restructuring of societal discourses and advance a more equitable and diverse public sphere by amplifying marginalized voices and confronting power disparities.

In the context of the Indian cultural practice of *Rudali*, subaltern counterpublics can be analysed as a means for subordinated women to contest dominant and prevailing cultural norms by creating alternative narratives encompassing their experiences. Lower-caste women are employed under the custom known as 'rudali' to publicly weep at funerals and other events. Due to their caste status,

these women are frequently stigmatised and alienated from mainstream society; Rudali gives them a way to make money while also serving an essential cultural purpose.

Rudali, though, can also be viewed as a subaltern counterpublic. The women in question develop an alternative narrative that economically benefits them by acting in front of an audience and dissenting against prevailing societal standards surrounding grieving and loss. The narrative of *Rudali* addresses the complexities in the formation of such a space. The economic preoccupation in the narrative is a constant throughout. When faced with a loss of a family member or loved one, everyone fixates on the financial repercussions of the event but their intention differs. Sanichari, belonging to a lower class, is compelled to do so in order to survive. On the other hand, the upper-class members fixate because of the hope of a potential inheritance.

However, it was this economic preoccupation that made the subversion of the creation of a subaltern counterpublic space possible. By enticing a 'war of prestige' in funeral rites amongst the upper class, Sanichari carves out a space where she is not only accepted within a public sphere that marks her as an outsider but also demands and rewards her for the same. She establishes a space for herself and her fellow women in her community and subverts prevailing caste, gender, and social status narratives. They reject systemic injustices that prevent them from participating in and contributing to public discourse by using their performances. This paper aims to analyse how the narrative of Sanichari in *Rudali* might be understood as a manifestation of subaltern counterpublics. Marginalised women challenge prevailing cultural standards and advance social change by developing alternative narratives that reflect their experiences and viewpoints.

Recognizing Marginalized Voices: Mahasweta Devi's Writing Style

Mahasweta Devi's writing style is reflective of her engagement as a journalist, writer, and editor. The first scene of the narrative is a testimonial for the same as it replaces the rustic and often romanticized notion of rural life with grim figures of the demography of population, food production, debt collection, and economic insufficiency. Her focus on narrating the struggles, exploitation, and discrimination comes from her journalistic impulse to unravel the truth, which is why Katyal describes *Rudali* as an "activist fiction" (5). She takes pains to dispel everyday misunderstandings about rural village life, indicating her awareness of her urban audience. However, this understanding does not result in any compromises which often results in negative criticism. To refute such allegations, Devi argues that rural life was unknown to urban people, which is why the depressing yet real facts are as misconceived as sensationalism.

Devi rejects the labelling of *Rudali* as a 'feminist' text, as she argues that gender is a component of the discourse of the class. In an interview with Anjun Katyal, she states:

When I write I never think of myself as a woman...These are stories of people's struggle, their confrontation with the system ... I look at the class, not at the gender problem... In *Rudali* you have a character like Dulan who knows how to use the system. In my stories, men and women alike belong to different classes. (Katyal 2)

The work's anti-fictiveness must be understood as a conscious strategy, a goal intended to achieve the appearance of documentary realism. The author structures other elements of the agenda, such as the criticism of the socio-economic system, around the progression of Sanichari's journey towards empowerment. She represents the politicised subaltern through the composite figure of Dulan Ganju. He guides Sanichari and Bhikni to monetise and gain profit out of their tears. He also told them the "significant tale" which provided a historical account elaborating on the construction of their current social hierarchy (Devi 73).

Structural Critique: Social Inequalities

Finally, the play's exploration of grief and mourning can be seen as a way of highlighting the emotional labour that is often expected of subaltern women. Rudalis, Bhikni and other women are

paid to perform grief on behalf of others, illustrating the ways in which subaltern women are often called upon to bear the emotional burdens of their communities. Through the character of Sanichari, the play also examines the personal toll of this emotional labor, as she struggles to come to terms with her grief and those around her.

One way Rudali demonstrates the silencing of subaltern voices is through the character of Sanichari, who cannot articulate her experiences of oppression and grief in a way that is understood or acknowledged by those in power. As Spivak notes, "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988, p. 308), and this is evident in Sanichari's struggles to express her own suffering and the suffering of her community. For example, Sanichari was not able to feel grief, she didn't have a system that allowed her to do so as she was burdened with responsibility. In contrast, Ramavtar tried to fit into the role of grief and transform his identity into that of a 'sanyasi.' Can we say it is because he had a designated space in the social structure that he could borrow the characteristics of another? While he had the choice to give up the monetary benefit after the loss of his uncle, Sanichari was forced to do so. Since he was voluntarily engaging in the act of giving up, he was manifesting traits of a sanyasi.

The notion of fitting into the social hierarchical structure also differs amongst classes. Bikini easily fitted into the rural life with Sanichari and was accepted within the community, despite not belonging to the village. She was regarded as one of their own and had succeeded in establishing a successful livelihood there. While the upper-class struggle with the notion of unity, compassion, and brotherhood within their own family. For instance, it was believed that Bhairab Singh was killed by his eldest son. It was also frequently noted that whereas lower-class people grieved at the loss of any member of their community, upper-class individuals were unable to cry at the funeral of a family member.

However, prostitutes constitute a complex case in the context of acceptance in the social hierarchical structure. The case of Motiya and Gulbadan is just one of the many that Mahasweta Devi addresses in her narrative. The place of prostitutes or 'randis' in the narrative is a grey area. The woman who involved themselves with the malik-mahajans were ostracised from their own community, as can be noted through Sanichari's fear when her daughter-in-law left to become a prostitute. However, these women may be allowed in the house of the upper class but are never accepted into the household. After Motiya's demise, Gulbadan was left with only two choices. Either she had to accept the proposal of her biological father's nephew, or she had to fend for herself by resorting to her own devices. Gulbadan was smart enough to learn from her mother's mistake and chose the latter. This choice reinstated her position in the social hierarchy from the earlier void to a sense of communal acceptance.

Resistance And Counterpublics

A subaltern counterpublic is an alternate sphere publicly curated by socially subordinated groups that develop and circulate an alternative discourse to oppose the dominant and established interpretations of their identities and needs. It often emerges as a response to the exclusion and often discrimination faced by the subordinated group. They challenge dominant discourse and provide fresh perspectives, thereby aiding in the expansion of public space.

Furthermore, the play's use of song and performance as a means of expression can be seen as a form of resistance against dominant cultural norms. In the context of rural India, where women's voices are often silenced and their bodies controlled, the act of singing and performing can be a powerful form of agency. As Bhikni sings, "I'll sing even if they break my bones" (Devi 42), her defiance against oppressive norms becomes clear.

The theme of dissent or rather transforming the community by altering the social norms is prevalent throughout the play. Dulan, a subaltern character who is well-versed in the system, continuously guides Sanichari and Bhikni on how to tackle the system. He talks about creating opportunities to earn money, instead of waiting for one. He also argues that the issue of morality should be a concern

for the upper class as their existence is centred around wealth and they have the luxury of ethics. The lower class is struggling to survive and the notion of morality becomes irrelevant as the matter of hunger is more integral and pressing.

Conclusion

Sanichari displays her wailing prowess with even greater vigour at the death of Gambhir Singh after the passing of her devoted friend Bikhni. She encircled Gambhir Singh's dead, decomposing body with the aid of other rudalis, sobbing and banging their heads on the floor. Anjum Katyal observes, "The Sanichari we encounter at the end of the story –out-going, shrewd, manipulative-is very different from the stoic, long-suffering but repressed woman we see earlier." (22). This transformation in Sanichari's character is not just a personal one but also reflects the larger social and economic changes that are taking place in the village. The work of rudalis, once a respected and necessary part of the community, is now seen as an outdated and unnecessary tradition. Sanichari's transformation is a survival tactic in the face of this changing reality, as she attempts to take charge of their livelihood and make it more prosperous. It has been established that the hiring of ruderalis is a "war of prestige" taken up by the upper class. By bringing over a hundred rudalis to mourn Gambhir Singh, Shanichari has raised the level of this aforementioned war.

By taking charge of her unfortunate circumstances, she has created a subaltern counterpublic space where she can challenge the dominant discourse. Earlier she was unable to express grief for the loss of her loved ones, over the course of the narrative she has transformed her tears into a commodity by gaining a knowledge of the system.

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