



MAHASWETA DEVI'S RUDAALI: A DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE

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Abstract

This paper explores Mahasweta Devi's Rudaali, analyzing it as a discourse of resistance through the lens of caste, class, and gender oppression. The transformation of the protagonist, Sanichari, highlights the resilience of Dalit women in navigating systems of marginalization and exploitation. This study draws from subaltern theory and feminist perspectives to understand how Devi allows the subaltern to reclaim agency through solidarity and collective resistance.

Keywords: *Rudaali, Dalit Woman.*

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is a prominent figure in contemporary Indian literature, renowned for her activism and literary work that shines a spotlight on the marginalized, particularly Dalit women. In her novella *Rudaali*, Devi provides a powerful exploration of the intersection between caste, gender, and class oppression. The protagonist, Sanichari, a Dalit woman, embodies the struggles faced by women at the bottom of India's social hierarchy. Her journey from silence to empowerment is not only an individual narrative but a representation of the broader social issues affecting Dalit women, who suffer from multiple layers of exploitation.

The central theme of *Rudaali* revolves around the resilience and agency of Dalit women, whose experiences are often defined by exclusion, poverty, and gendered violence. Devi uses the story to critique the feudal and patriarchal systems that perpetuate these injustices, illustrating how solidarity and collective resistance can offer a pathway to empowerment. Through *Rudaali*, Devi allows the subaltern to reclaim agency, showing how even those who are most oppressed can challenge the forces that seek to subjugate them. This paper will explore how Devi constructs a discourse of resistance, focusing on themes of marginalization, solidarity, and empowerment, while situating Sanichari's transformation within the broader context of subaltern and feminist thought.

Oppression and Resistance in Rudaali

In *Rudaali*, Mahasweta Devi portrays the systemic oppression faced by Dalit women as a complex interplay of caste, class, and gender-based violence. As Thomas and Sebastian (2022) note, Dalit women experience "triple oppression" – they are oppressed for being Dalit, for being women, and for being poor. This concept of "triple oppression" is central to Devi's narrative, which emphasizes the compounded nature of their subjugation. Dalit women, in particular, are marginalized not only within their communities but also by the dominant social structures that define and regulate their existence.

Devi critiques the feudal and patriarchal systems that entrench this oppression, particularly the economic exploitation of Dalit women, who are often forced into servitude and denied access to resources or autonomy. The novella highlights the brutal realities of caste discrimination, where Dalit women are considered the lowest in the social hierarchy, their suffering invisible to the privileged



upper castes. In this context, Sanichari's life is not just an individual struggle but a representation of the systemic forces that keep Dalit women trapped in cycles of poverty and degradation.

Kumari (2022) observes that Devi's *Rudaali* is a narrative of resistance and self-reconstruction. She writes, "The novella examines how a subaltern low-caste woman resisted and reconstructed herself to emerge as a more empowered woman." Sanichari's journey, from a silent, oppressed figure to a self-empowered individual, becomes a metaphor for the broader struggle of Dalit women to reclaim their agency and voice. While the novella focuses on her personal transformation, it also emphasizes the collective nature of resistance, where empowerment is linked to solidarity among marginalized women.

The Role of Sisterhood and Collective Resistance

One of the most powerful elements of *Rudaali* is the relationship between Sanichari and Bikhni, with whom she forms a troupe of professional mourners. This bond between the two women becomes a symbol of solidarity and collective resistance against the forces of oppression. Together, they transcend the roles imposed on them by caste and patriarchy, finding economic independence through the commodification of their grief. Their mourning, which is traditionally a low-status, servile role, is transformed into a source of autonomy and financial stability.

The formation of the mourning troupe is significant because it represents a strategic subversion of a system that seeks to silence and exploit them. By turning a traditionally humiliating and marginalized activity into a form of economic agency, Sanichari and Bikhni challenge the Brahmanical patriarchy that seeks to subjugate them. Kumari (2022) further argues that *Rudaali* provides a platform for subaltern voices, noting, "The novella examines how subalterns can have the opportunity to speak at least in literature, opposing Spivak's assertion that subalterns cannot speak." In Devi's narrative, the women not only find their voice but also use it to resist the structures that seek to silence them, offering a nuanced critique of the social systems that oppress them.

Sanichari's relationship with Bikhni thus becomes a vital example of how women, particularly those from marginalized communities, can use solidarity to assert their agency. Their partnership challenges the individualized narratives of empowerment often found in mainstream discourse, emphasizing the importance of collective action in the face of systemic oppression.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudaali* is a rich and complex exploration of caste, class, and gender oppression, framed through the lens of resistance. The novella focuses on the transformative journey of Sanichari, a Dalit woman who moves from silence to empowerment through solidarity and collective action. By examining the intersections of caste, class, and gender, Devi highlights how Dalit women face compounded layers of exploitation, and how their resistance can take various forms, from subverting traditional roles to reclaiming agency through solidarity.

Sanichari's transformation, from a voiceless and oppressed figure to an empowered leader, exemplifies the potential for agency within even the most marginalized communities. Devi's work critiques the intersecting systems of power that subjugate Dalit women, while celebrating their resilience and capacity for resistance. Through *Rudaali*, Devi offers a powerful narrative of subaltern empowerment, one that underscores the importance of collective resistance and solidarity in overcoming systemic oppression.



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