Rudali: An Exploration in Culture, Gender and Agency

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ABSTRACT

Culture gives a sense of identity, oneness and belonging to an individual in this diversified world whereas, privileged class manipulatively wields culture as a powerful phenomenon to assert their supremacy by subjugation of underclass. Culture in negative context wreak havoc among beings by dint of class system and deepens the notion of gendered stereotypes and inferiority complex. Indian writer Mahasweta Devi as a social activist voiced on behalf of downtrodden women by delving deep into the notion of double marginalization which is justified in the name of culture. The story focuses on Sanichari who embrace a profession of Rudali to give vent to her pent-up emotions and to seek an identity in her ramified culture. This paper analyzes the nuances of cultural politics which bestows cataclysm through vicious stratification among people in community and draws attention to the naked backbreaking iniquity side of culture and gendered stereotypes.

KEY WORDS: PATRIARCHY, FEMINISM, CULTURAL HEGEMONY, CLASS DIVISION, POVERTY, CULTURAL BARRIERS.

INTRODUCTION

“Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, Culture and Cognitive Science). The above definition illustrates the demerit side of culture. That is to say culture is signified as a man-made concept which patriarchy use as a trapdoor to ensnare women both psychologically and physically by curbing any identity and individuality of their own. Culture and its practices gives collective consciousness and sense of belonging but on the other hand it bestows cataclysm through vicious stratification among people in community. Culture and patriarchy are inevitably intertwined with religion. Women are controlled by patriarchy in the name of religion thereby subtly inciting their fear in God.

Though at some point women desire to break the chain of confinement the fear of alienation and ostracism makes them slaves and puppets in the hands of patriarchal masters. Culture as a whole outwardly seems to be a

charismatic entity but if we scrutinize critically all its deficiency can be foregrounded. Indian playwright Mahasweta Devi's regional novel Rudali (1997) deploy Rajastani culture to showcase the nuance of cultural politics which patriarchy and privileged class uphold in pernicious manner to devastate the life of women in community. The research examines how culture gives men power to reign women and root stratification, poverty and injustice among community people. Besides, it spotlights how Sanichari by embracing profession of Rudali as survival strategy gained independence and made a monumental difference in the life of other women like her in the community.

Cultural Politics And Patriarchy In Rudali: Rudali typifies a custom-made practice in Rajastani culture where women of lower strata were professionally hired as mourners on death of upper-crust males and this practice foregrounds the crux which the fiction encircles. The protagonist Sanichari narration adds new dimensions to the plot as it gives a first-hand portrayal of what she and other women in her community felt and experienced under trample of cultural politics exerted by privileged class. Initially Sanichari played submissive role by adhering to culture and its norms but in the end she evolved as independent woman and empowered many women in her community. This transformation of Sanichari manifest woman power, ability, uniqueness and identity as an individual.

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Rudali is set in Tahad village where two caste systems were in majority. Mahasweta devi juxtaposes ineffectiveness of lower-class 'Ganjus' and efficacious class of 'Dushads'. The latter is skillful ruling class of dominance who exhibits feudalistic power in name of strong religious practices. They made Ganjus to believe that they are superior class like how British brainwashed and convinced the world of being racially superior and cultured. This belief instilled by Dushads in Ganjus made them vulnerable to their unscrupulous practices. The power politics played by Dushads is pictured via subjugation of Ganjus who were treated like slaves. Dushads baited and bounded Ganjus by evoking their fear and trust in religion.

If we scrutinize the reasons for Ganjus being subservient to Dushads poverty act as the casual agency. Dushads were once common people like Ganjus but with the aid of brutal force and mint of money they developed a class supremacy dominating the political, social and economic sectors. Antonio Gramsci statement illustrates how dominant class originated and gained mastery from neutrality to subjugate other class as follows, "Every social group coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (The Intellectuals p. 113)

Dushads trapped and controlled Ganjus by creating a situation where Ganjus were forced to borrow money to perform some religious ceremony which gives them acceptance and sense of belonging in a community. Dushads couldn't understand Ganjus and took them for granted because they have everything they want from labor, wealth, food etc. for which Ganjus have to work hard every day thereby pawning their freedom and self-regard. The following lines illustrate the affluent state and hypocrisy of Maliks (privileged class) as follows, Except for salt, kerosene and postcards, they don't need to buy anything. They have elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that who owns the gun owns the land. They all worship household deities who repay them amply after all, in the name of the deities they hold acres which are exempt from taxes and reforms. (p. 73).

An individual can tolerate anything but not hunger. This strategy was used by Maharajans to make Ganjus fall in a trap of bonded labor from which extrication was impossible. Sanichari who embraced the profession of Rudali to get rid of her hunger at the initial stage used it as a powerful weapon to take revenge upon Maharajans who culturally imprisoned her with religious bounds. Besides, the notion of death viewed by Dushads and Ganjus are stark contrast. For rich like Dushads it is a display of their affluent state. But for Ganjus like Sanichari it is a burden on one side and a sense of relief like two sides of a coin. To be precise the performance of religious ceremony 'shradh' for the dead is viewed

as burden by Ganjus because already they live in dire poverty and performance of shradh requires money for which they have to pawn their freedom and labor to Malik Maharajans. Whereas on the other side they feel a sense of relief if death occurs in their family because rest of the members in a family can eat enough from the meagre scrapings they get to sustain their life.

Mahasweta Devi used 'shradh' as a vehicle to scrutinize the operation of power politics of culture via religious fervor. Shradh is a ceremony of offering food to people in community as a way of paying homage to dead person. Malik Maharajans have no issues in performing shradh but for lower class like Sanichari the fear to perform shradh deprived her emotions and compassion for dead. When Sanichari husband died due to cholera by drinking milk used for bathing Shiva idol the priest of Tohri temple demanded Sanichari to perform shradh and she did with a little money she had. But, when Sanichari returned to Tahad the priest Mohanlal, again demanded her to perform shradh ritual in accordance to their religious belief by questioning Sanichari with authority,

What! A mere offering of sand, that too in River water! Is Budhau Lord Ramachandra, Repeating. His act of offering a pinda of sand For His father, King Dasharatha! Can a Tohri Brahmin know how a Tahad Villager's kriya is done? By obeying him you've insulted your local priest. (p. 57)

This explicitly illustrates how aristocrats of socially privileged class charges socially disadvantaged people like Sanichari as a slave by confining her in religious bounds. God who is known for compassion, benevolence and love is used as a trap to loom downtrodden people by privileged class. It is one of the subtle ways upheld by Maharajans to colonize lower-crust by enforcement of rigid religious system and thereby creating a situation where Ganjus have no other go than to rely on them. Emotions are naturally inbuilt in beings but aristocrats in Rajastani culture are forbidden to explicitly reveal their emotions for dead one therefore they have this practice of hiring Rudali who mourn on their behalf and act as a symbol of prestige. As Dulan says "In rich families, the son kills the mother, the mother the son. Forget about who killed him. Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears" (p. 90)

As already stated death is viewed differently by lower-crust like Sanichari when her brother-in-law and sister-in-law died, everyone explained the fact that she and her husband didn't shed any tears by the sentiment because their grief must have hardened into stone within them, at the frequent deaths in the family. But the truth is that Sanichari felt relieved because she has two less mouths to feed on the meagre scrapings she brings home and felt happy that at least survivor's stomachs will be full. Cultural politics vigorously reign in society by manipulatively making use of naïve nature of underclass

people by igniting a sense of inferiority complex and forcing them to rely on upper-crust to have survival in community and society as a whole.

Even today class continue to dominate as Richard Hoggart points out “Class distinction do not die; they merely learn new ways of expressing themselves.” Therefore awareness of subtlety of cultural politics and economic independence are the key factors to dismantle the system of hierarchy in culture. The problem with underclass is that culture is blindly followed as D’Andrae says “Culture is often said to consist in rules...These rules are said to be implicit because ordinary people can’t tell you what they are” (Culture and Cognitive Science). So to close this void of class difference empowerment of under-class and comprehension of man-made concept of culture intertwined with religion are inevitable.

Sexuality And Objectification In Rudali: Sexuality, a term used to denote an individual gender was made into a trapdoor by patriarchy to confine women identity and individuality. Because sexuality rendered the attributes of feminine and masculine as Beauvoir points out “The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality, the relation of the two represents both the positive and neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general: whereas woman represents only the negative defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity... A man is in the right being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined. So, there is an absolute human type, the masculine.” (p.20). Through sexuality men prescribed certain norms to women thereby ascribing certain characteristics and drafted principles defining how women should live her life.

The root cause of all issues which women faces are driven from this notion of sexuality which patriarchy in the disguise of culture and religion thrust on womenfolk as a licentiate for survival in male dominated society. The bias between male and female is deeply rooted in cultural construction as men have certain fixed ideologies concerning the nature of women, that woman is innately weak emotional, enjoys dependence, limited in capacities for work and even that woman is masochistic by nature. By birth woman doesn’t possess these traits rather society condition woman to be such in order to appease male whims and fancy as Beauvoir says “One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an Other.” (p. 283) Though many loopholes lies hidden in culture and patriarchy societal scrutiny in context of mistakes and problems will always be targeted on woman side.

The animosity of men against women is ignited by culture. Culture hand in hand with religion segregated duties between men and women thereby creating an imbalanced stereotypes. Generally culture in every context privileged men to have upper-hand against women and enabled society to view man’s injustice against woman in terms of sexuality as trivial and common. Culture created to symbolize harmony and unification was kept in line by upper-crust to serve their own needs and desires at the cost of lower-crust sufferings and traumas. Culture which upheld morality turns blind eye to the victimization of women in notion of sexuality. Rudali foregrounds the greatest injustice of sexual objectification and harassment meted out to women who are deliberately drawn to the disastrous profession of prostitution after being exploited by Malik Maharajans.

On other perspective woman should also be equally blamed for their submission to societal construction which ended up in their victimization. The race of woman against men for dignity, equality and identity still remains as an unbridgeable gap because of their conformity to what Betty Friedan call as ‘feminine mystique’ defined as women adherence to the dogma of seeking fulfillment in their husband and children. “Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased where they are not honored, no sacred rites yields reward” (p. 9) says Manu. But this described nobility and dignity for women remains only in abstract utopian world and not in concrete reality where women were viewed as objects. The physical problems faced by women like abuse and domestic violence laden with sexual objectification adds new dimension in picturing the trauma of women in red light district in Rudali.

Though culture and religion hold women in higher strata in sayings and text when it comes to practice they are treated worse than any other creatures on earth. The confinement of women resulting from domestic chores and reproduction complemented with financial insecurity made them submissive to men which patriarchy later turned into subjugation. The comfort which women found in kitchen is made into conformity. The affection which she showcased to her family in nurturing is turned into duty. By gradually modifying women naïve nature and roles in society and family patriarchy confined women with the label of weaker sex and sexual object. By drifting away the emotions and identity in women, men started looking at them as an object meant for gratification of sexual pleasures. The trials and tribulations faced by women in red district resulting from sexual objectification is crafted in the lines of Immanuel Kant as follows, “Sexual love makes of the loved person and object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast away a lemon which has been sucked dry...as soon as a person becomes object of appetite for another, all motives of moral relationship cease to function, because as an object of appetite for another a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by everyone.” (p. 163).

The red light district in Rudali symbolizes prostitution where women are sold as commodity to gratify men sexual appetite. No woman dares to give up her self-honor and desires to embrace prostitution but the women in Rudali after being raped by Malik Maharajans are destined to embrace this profession with the hope of living the rest of their peacefully. After being raped culture brands women with cuss words but never questions men who distorted and perturbed women life. Ostracized by family, culture, society and religion the women is left with no other choice to exist in a community without embracing prostitution which provides survival strategy at the cost of degradation and dehumanization as Kant says "She is reduced to a thing on which another satisfies his appetite." (Lectures on Ethics, p.165).

In the final scene of Rudali sanichari gathers all whores from red light district to mourn the death of Malik Maharajan Gambhir. While calling out whores she sees her own daughter-in law Parbatia. Instead of hurling curses at Parbatia for letting her son to die and for abandoning her grandson Sanichari understands her plight. Sanichari realizes how hunger made Parbatia to desert her duty and obligations. There is a general saying that only a woman can understand another woman. This statement is made sense in the final scene of Rudali where Sanichari realized that Parbatia didn't adopt prostitution as profession on her own willingness rather it was vigorously rendered on her by chauvinist Malik Maharajans.

Mahasweta Devi explicitly foregrounded red right district to bring awareness about the unspoken psychological and physical illness of tabooed women. Though many reforms were made for women development in contemporary society culture imbibed in sexuality still views women as subordinate creature, entertainment object, child-bearing machine and unpaid domestic labor. Through the final scene of Rudali where Sanichari gathers every woman in red district area to form a professional weeping group Mahasweta Devi emphasis on women economic independence and empowerment which act as a liberating factor for women entanglement in society and traditional dogmas. By deploying ostracized and subjugated women Mahasweta Devi shows how women is also a being like men with dreams, desires, self-esteem, rights, weakness and strength.

Mahasweta Devi like Stuart Mill insists women to embrace any trade or profession to seek economic independence in order to end the blind folded biased dogmas which degraded women in an unjustifiable way. Economic independence will ultimately land up in equality and paves way to eliminate the invincible gendered bias steeped in culture as Mill points out "The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes-the legal subordination of one sex to the other-is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." (p. 1).

Rudali Sanichari As New Awakening: Apart from class issues, Mahasweta Devi voiced on behalf of downtrodden women by delving deep into the notion of double-marginalization which is justified in the name of culture. Indian culture says that God resides where women are treated with respect but Sanichari life deconstruct this saying by addressing the devastating side of cultural practices and its subjugation. The multi-faceted role of Sanichari like daughter-in-law, wife, mother and grandmother adds new dimensions to the ramifications of stereotypes bestowed on women in society. The upper class people seeks entertainment and delight in the penury of downtrodden like Sanichari. Culture dictates that for woman like Sanichari survival is attained only by pawning oneself to authority.

The irony is that Sanichari awakening was brought forth by a man Dulan who acted as a catalyst in liberating her from the void of Malikhs antagonism. Dulan played a lead role in rendering Sanichari a new role by making her comprehend the dire throes of hunger by saying, If our mind is pure, the Ganga flows even through wood. Look here, Budhua's ma, there is no bigger god than one's belly. For the belly's sake everything is permissible. (p. 69)

He not only gave Sanichari economic independence but also made her understand the cynicism of Malikhs and significance of survival. After losing everyone in her family Sanichari was thoughtless about her survival and thought of seeking the guidance of Dulan help who narrated about the loopholes which malikhs used to cleave economic difference through class domination. These critical views of Dulan on Malikhs provided Sanichari an eye-opening about the hypocrisy of Malikhs. As she says,

The tale Dulan told them was very significant; it explained clearly how the ruthless Rajputs infiltrated this remote area of tribals and and from jamindars gradually built themselves up to the status of jotedar/moneylenders and establish themselves as the masters of the area. (p. 73)

Dulan acted as an epitome of ideal culture. When Sanichari was in trouble he rendered her a helping hand and emphasized the value and significance of community, fraternity and partnership as survival tools. Though she was subjugated by dominant class without the help of her own community members Sanichari would have not able to cross this turbulent situations. Sanichari spotlights this signification as follows, "There are some debts that can never be repaid...if her fellow-villagers had not rallied around in their manner, would Sanichari have survived?" (p. 62).

Though Sanichari comprehends the subjugation and injustice meted out to women like her she dares not to speak up because her anxiety laden with fear of alienation and ostracism from community seals up her rebellious spirit. Generally, women are attributed to emotions but on the contrary Sanichari is deprived of emotions. The

constant death of her loved ones like husband and son made her emotionally barren. Besides the compulsion of doing shradh decreed by culture loomed as a threat to her life. These practice of culture asphyxiate lower-class people like Sanichari and pushes them deliberately into the void of penury. On the other hand objectification of women by Maharajans add new color to the brutal side of patriarchy who used woman for sexual pleasure and dumped them with a label of being unchaste.

Initially like every women in her community Sanichari led a life by abiding to cruel practices and customs of culture. The name 'Sanichari' is evident enough to reflect a glimpse of Sanichari's family and community which is drenched in cultural-religious ardor. Saturday is viewed as unlucky day in Rajastani culture and since Sanichari was born on that day she was named after and thought to be a cursed and unlucky woman doomed to suffer throughout her life. But Sanichari scrutinized it in a completely different light and understood the fact that the problem in her life is nowhere connected to her born day but rather with her community. As she says, "Because I was born on and named after Saturday that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday-was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongri, Bishri-do any of them have happier lives?" (p. 54).

It was only after Sanichari became an orphan she embraced the profession of rudali as survival strategy. Until then even though she was aware of cultural injustice and discrimination meted against women in her community she couldn't voice out because she was encircled in a family. Besides, fear of isolation and ostracism from family and community curbed her rebellious spirit. Sanichari encounter with her childhood friend Bikhni paved way for being independent. When Sanichari and Bikhni were in dire poverty they went to Dulan to seek his advice. Dulan suggested them to become Rudalis. On this Sanichari considering her barren emotional state exclaimed "Cry? Me? Don't you know? I can't shed tears? These two eyes of mine are scorched?" (p. 90).

This illustrates the unaccountable sufferings that Sanichari encountered in her life. Besides in the later part of the novel after Sanichari became a reputed and renowned rudali and when she come to know of her friend Bikhni death she uttered "Money, rice, new clothes- without getting these in returns, tears are a useless luxury"(p. 89) This shows the drastic transformation of Sanichari's professional phase. By becoming independent Sanichari not only brought development in her own life but also made monumental difference in the life other women in her community who were branded as prostitutes by Malik Maharajans after being sexually exploited. Though Sanichari profession of rudali initially appeared as ad-hockey in the end she

made revolution by bringing in unison all women who were victimized in red-light district by giving them new identity and independency.

CONCLUSION

Sanichari act as a mouth-piece for women sufferings irrespective of cultures across the world. Cultural politics and patriarchy are strong and powerful factors which acts in diversified ways to oppress women and under class community. It is significant to lift the veil of indifference meted out to women in the name of cultural practices. Women being independent definitely provides a great shift thereby wreaking super-structure. It is time to raise the consciousness of women in society to question cultural inequity which deprives women of independence. Empowerment of women is the only solution to put stop to the practices of brutal patriarchy and inhuman cultural political nuances. Empowerment complemented with independence liberates not only women but also brings socio-economic development and rise the conscious of gender-egalitarian attitudes which results in universal well-being. As Archer points out "People are inescapably shaped by the culture in which they live, while culture itself is made and remade by people" (p. 227) therefore culture continues to operate in society and cannot be escaped but its diabolical nature can be changed through awareness and unity.

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