

A CRITIQUE OF TRIBAL LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RUDALI BY MAHASHWETA DEVI

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Abstract: The post-independence period in India saw a resurgence of interest in tribal cultures and literature. Prominent tribal writers began to emerge, using literature as a means of expressing their identity, challenging stereotypes, and addressing social injustices. Mahasweta Devi, a renowned Bengali writer and social activist, dedicated much of her work to highlight the plight of tribal communities in India. Her stories often depict the struggles and resilience of tribal people, offering a powerful critique of social inequality and exploitation. Contemporary tribal literature in India continues to evolve, with writers and poets exploring new themes and forms. Authors such as Nirmala Putul, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, and Jacinta Kerketta are gaining recognition for their works that blend traditional narratives with contemporary issues. These writers address topics such as displacement, marginalization, environmental degradation, and the impact of modernization on tribal communities.

Moreover, the rise of digital media has provided new platforms for these voices, allowing for greater visibility and outreach. Online forums, social media, and digital publications are increasingly being used to share stories, poems, and essays, fostering a vibrant and dynamic literary culture. The present paper proposes to examine tribal literature in India with special reference to Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) who was one of India's most influential writers and activists, known for her deep commitment to the lives and struggles of tribal communities. Her literary works serve as both documentation and protest, bringing to light the systemic oppression, exploitation, and resilience of marginalized tribal groups in India. Through her fiction and activism, she played a crucial role in shaping tribal literature, ensuring that the voices of Adivasi people were heard in mainstream discourse.

Keywords: Indigenous, Tribal, Oral tradition, Activism, Adivasis

1.0 Introduction

Indigenous literature in India is a rich and diverse body of work that reflects the varied cultural, social, and linguistic traditions of the country's numerous tribal communities. India is home to an estimated 104 million tribal people, who belong to over 700 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own unique language, folklore, and literary traditions. Historically, tribal literature in India has been predominantly oral. These oral traditions include myths, legends, songs, epics, and folktales that have been passed down through generations. These narratives often serve multiple purposes: they are a means of preserving history, imparting moral lessons, maintaining cultural identity, and providing entertainment. The oral literature of tribal communities is typically performed during rituals, festivals, and other communal gatherings, reinforcing social bonds and cultural continuity.

One of the most significant aspects of tribal literature in India is its close relationship with nature and the environment. Many tribal stories, songs, and myths revolve around the natural world, reflecting the deep connection that these communities have with their land and surroundings. For instance, the Gond tribe, one of the largest tribal groups in India, has a rich tradition of oral storytelling that often features tales about animals, forests, and the cosmos. With the advent of written literature, many tribal stories have been transcribed and published, bringing these rich traditions to a broader audience. In recent years, there has been a growing effort to document and preserve tribal languages and literature, as many of these languages are at risk of extinction. Efforts by scholars, writers, and activists have led to the publication of anthologies, translations, and research

studies that highlight the literary contributions of tribal communities. The present paper proposes to examine tribal literature in India with special reference to *Rudali* written by Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) who was one of India's most influential writers and activists, known for her deep commitment to the lives and struggles of tribal (Adivasi) communities. Her literary works serve as both documentation and protest, bringing to light the systemic oppression, exploitation, and resilience of marginalized tribal groups in India.

Mahasweta Devi's literature is deeply rooted in the experiences of India's tribal communities, particularly the Santals, Mundas, and Lodhas. Unlike many mainstream narratives that romanticize or exoticize Adivasis, Devi's works present them as complex, struggling, and resilient individuals. She depicted their everyday battles against feudal landlords, corrupt officials, and state oppression, showing how they resist even in the face of immense hardship. One of her most celebrated novels, *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights of the Forest), is based on the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who led a revolt against British colonial rule in the late 19th century. By narrating the historical struggle of the Munda community, Devi not only brings attention to tribal resistance but also critiques the continued marginalization of Adivasis in independent India. Her short stories further illuminate the suffering and resilience of tribal women. *Draupadi*, one of her most powerful works, tells the story of Dopdi Mejhen, a Santal woman who is raped in police custody but refuses to be broken. Unlike the *Draupadi* of the *Mahabharata*, who is saved by divine intervention, Devi's *Draupadi* reclaims her agency by confronting her oppressors with defiance. This radical retelling challenges both state violence and patriarchal oppression, making the story a landmark in feminist and tribal literature. A key theme in Devi's works is the systemic exploitation of Adivasis by landlords, industrialists, and the state. Stories like *Shishu* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* depict how development projects, mining industries, and governmental policies displace and destroy tribal communities. Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of tribal women is particularly noteworthy. In contrast to mainstream literature, where tribal women are often depicted as helpless victims, Devi presents them as warriors, laborers, and survivors. The present paper mainly focuses on Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* which is a powerful critique of caste oppression, economic exploitation, and gender struggles in rural India. Through the life of Sanichari, the protagonist, the story portrays the struggles of Dalits and lower-class individuals who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and exploitation. Through the life of Sanichari, Devi highlights the systemic discrimination that denies dignity to the lower castes while reinforcing the privileges of the upper class. The narrative exposes the hypocrisy of feudal society, where oppression is normalized, and even grief is commodified. Sanichari, a poor Dalit woman, is subjected to humiliation and deprivation because of her caste. She belongs to a community that is treated as inferior and denied basic rights. The zamindars (landlords) hold complete power over the lives of lower-caste people, forcing them into servitude while showing them no compassion. Sanichari laments her condition, saying:

"Our kind don't even have the right to die properly." (Devi, 1997, p. 24)

This line reflects the dehumanization of Dalits, whose suffering is ignored by society. Even death does not bring them peace, as they are denied the dignity of proper mourning rituals. In contrast, the landlords ensure that their deaths are marked by grand ceremonies, showing the stark divide between the privileged and the oppressed.

Class oppression in *Rudali* is deeply tied to caste discrimination. The landlords exploit the labor of lower-caste individuals, paying them meager wages while maintaining their own wealth. Sanichari and others like her have no choice but to work under these oppressive conditions. When Sanichari's son dies, she receives no support from the landlords or the village community. Instead, she is left to fend for herself, reinforcing the idea that the poor are disposable. Her struggle for survival leads her to the profession of a *rudali* (a hired mourner), where she is paid to cry at the funerals of the rich. This bitter irony reveals how even grief becomes a tool for economic survival. Sanichari reflects on this, saying:

"If we can sell our labor, why not our tears?" (Devi, 1997, p. 45)

This statement captures the brutal reality of lower-caste women who must monetize their suffering to survive. The landlords, who disregard their pain in life, demand extravagant mourning performances at their deaths. This hypocrisy highlights the class divide—while the rich use rituals to display their status, the poor are forced to turn these rituals into a means of sustenance.

The landlords maintain their dominance by upholding social customs that reinforce caste hierarchies. While they exploit the poor, they also expect them to uphold traditions that serve their interests. The hiring of *rudalis* is one such practice, where the wealthy use the labor of Dalit women to project an image of grandeur, even in death. Mahasweta Devi uses *Rudali* to expose this systemic injustice. By making Sanichari a professional mourner, she

subverts traditional expectations, showing how marginalized people must navigate oppression creatively to survive. The story ultimately questions the legitimacy of a system that values wealth and status over humanity.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* is a stark portrayal of poverty and the relentless struggle for survival among marginalized communities in rural India. The protagonist, Sanichari, represents the countless lower-caste individuals who are trapped in a cycle of economic hardship and social neglect. Through her journey, Devi explores how the poor are forced to adapt and find unconventional means to survive in an oppressive society. The story highlights how poverty is not just a lack of wealth but a condition that dictates every aspect of a person's existence, from birth to death. Sanichari is born into poverty and spends her entire life fighting against it. Despite working tirelessly, she remains trapped in a system designed to keep people like her at the bottom of society. She loses her husband early in life and struggles to provide for her son, Budhua. However, even after years of hardship, her circumstances do not improve. Sanichari's reflection on her life captures the inescapable nature of poverty:

"Hunger, misery, death—these have been my companions since childhood." (Devi, 1997, p. 17)

This statement reveals how suffering is normalized for the lower castes, who accept it as an unavoidable part of life. Unlike the wealthy, who can plan for the future, Sanichari lives day to day, constantly battling hunger and misfortune.

One of the harshest realities of Sanichari's life is the complete absence of social or familial support. When her son Budhua dies, she does not receive sympathy from the community. Instead, she is left to fend for herself, highlighting the isolation of the poor. The landlords and upper-caste villagers, who could help, remain indifferent to her suffering. Her plight is further worsened when she realizes that even grieving is a privilege reserved for the wealthy:

"The rich have the luxury of mourning, but for the poor, sorrow is a burden that must be swallowed." (Devi, 1997, p. 38)

This contrast emphasizes how economic status dictates not just how people live but also how they are allowed to experience loss and grief.

Faced with extreme poverty, Sanichari is forced to make a radical choice—she becomes a *rudali*, a professional mourner. This profession, where Dalit women are hired to cry at the funerals of the rich, exposes the deep irony of the caste system. By embracing her role as a *rudali*, she transforms grief into a survival strategy. Though the work is degrading, it provides her with financial security that she never had before. In doing so, she subverts the very system that oppressed her, finding a way to use it for her benefit.

In *Rudali*, even death is a privilege that the poor cannot afford. The wealthy ensure grand funeral ceremonies, while the poor are often buried without proper rites. Sanichari's journey from a destitute widow to a professional mourner underscores the absurdity of this system. The same society that denies dignity to the lower castes in life profits from their labor in death.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* exposes the deep irony and hypocrisy embedded in the social rituals of rural Indian society. In *Rudali*, mourning is not necessarily an expression of sorrow but a performance dictated by social hierarchy. Wealthy landlords want their funerals to be marked by loud wailing and elaborate displays of grief, regardless of whether the mourners feel genuine sorrow. Since their family members often fail to grieve authentically, they hire professional mourners (*rudalis*) to perform the ritual for them. Sanichari, upon realizing the irony of this practice, remarks:

"The rich have the luxury of grief, but for the poor, even sorrow must be earned." (Devi, 1997, p. 38)

This statement encapsulates how social customs are shaped by wealth and power. The poor, who face unimaginable loss, are expected to continue working and suppress their grief, while the rich, who live in comfort, ensure that their deaths are marked by grand mourning ceremonies. This contradiction is evident in the way landlords treat *rudalis*. In life, Dalit women like Sanichari are treated as untouchables, yet in death, their presence is essential to maintaining the landlords' honor. The upper class does not value the emotions of these women—only their ability to cry convincingly. Sanichari's friend Bikhni mocks this practice, saying:

"They wouldn't let us enter their homes when alive, but now they want our tears to wash away their sins." (Devi, 1997, p. 51)

This statement exposes the hypocrisy of a social system where lower-caste people are considered impure while alive but essential in death rituals.

Moreover, While the rich manipulate rituals to uphold their status, the poor cannot afford even basic funeral rites for their loved ones. When Sanichari's son, Budhua, dies, she is unable to give him a proper farewell because she has no money. Her grief, though immense, must be pushed aside in favor of survival. This is in stark contrast to the landlords, whose funerals become grand spectacles. The poor, who suffer the most loss, are denied even the right to mourn properly. This irony reinforces the idea that even emotions are controlled by economic and social status.

Despite the irony and hypocrisy of these rituals, Sanichari finds a way to subvert them. By becoming a rudali, she turns the upper class's customs into a means of survival. The same system that once oppressed her now provides her with financial security. This shift represents a small but significant act of resistance against the rigid social hierarchy. Sanichari reflects on this transformation, saying: "If I can sell my labor, why not my tears?" (Devi, 1997, p. 45) Through this statement, she acknowledges the absurdity of her situation but also her ability to use it to her advantage.

Despite the overwhelming oppression, Rudali also highlights the strength and resilience of women. Sanichari, though broken by suffering, refuses to succumb to despair. She learns to navigate the social system and eventually finds a way to survive on her own terms. The profession of rudali—initially imposed on her by circumstance—becomes a form of empowerment. Along with her companion Bikhni, she transforms mourning into a means of financial independence. In a society where women, especially those from lower castes, are expected to be passive victims, Sanichari's journey represents an act of defiance. Throughout the story, Sanichari is repeatedly exploited—by landlords, society, and even her own family. However, she does not remain a passive victim. By embracing the rudali profession, she finds a way to turn societal expectations to her advantage. This shift symbolizes a form of resistance, where marginalized women reclaim some power in a system designed to oppress them.

Mahasweta Devi's work stands at the intersection of literature and activism, making her one of the most important voices in tribal literature. By documenting the struggles, histories, and resistance of Adivasi communities, she challenged dominant narratives and reshaped Indian literature. Her stories continue to serve as a powerful reminder of the resilience of marginalized communities, ensuring that their voices are not erased from history. In conclusion, tribal literature in India is a testament to the rich cultural heritage and resilience of the country's tribal communities. It is a living tradition that continues to adapt and thrive, offering valuable insights into the diverse and multifaceted identities of tribal people. As efforts to preserve and promote tribal languages and literature gain momentum, these literary traditions are likely to play an even more significant role in the cultural and intellectual life of India.

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