

# “Decoding Visions of Misery” through Rudali of Mahasweta Devi and the Rudalis of Reality

Manjusha C B & Dr. V. Vijayalakshmi

VIT University, Chennai. Email: [manjushac.b2016@vitstudent.ac.in](mailto:manjushac.b2016@vitstudent.ac.in)

---

## Abstract

Mankind in this world is always found to be filled with plethora of visions and dreams irrespective of their societal status, economic condition and culture and women is not exceptional in this principle. To state, honestly there will not be even a single soul without dreams and visions will not be wrong. Visions and dreams of the person are the persuading factor that leads to achievements through hard work. To simplify, socio economic and cultural perspectives plays an important role in the successful accomplishment of a person's visions. Through Rudali by Mahasweta Devi, it could be well understood that poverty and cultural creeds acted a hindrance in shattering the visions and as fate decider of women in the particular community and in such a circumstance, it will not be wise to mention that Sanichari would be void of visions. Poverty and the various cultural dogmas worked as a line marker for her to decide about future giving no time to think and proceed. Thus, this research article is a well structured attempt to bring out those 'would – be' unexpressed visions of Rudalis in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi and the Rudalis in reality in an unbiased manner bearing the very feminine qualities in having visions and faith of future. Every effort is taken to depict the women in reality that have lots of visions and aspires to achieve the zenith of success but does not expresses these visions because of their socio economic cultural obstacles.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi and Rudali, Rudalis in reality, visions, socio economic and cultural perspective, fate decider, womanhood, sacrifices and satisfactions.

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar states:

“I have a dream that one day; Dalit women won't be paraded naked, raped or forced to commit suicide for nothing wrong. Not only the Dalit women but whole women society will not be forced to do menial jobs. Women won't be disrespected, exploited, neglected or won't be treated as a sex-object only in Indian society. I dream that one day, equality will come in all spheres and women suffering will come to end.” (Ambedkar)

'Woman' is the most tranquilly powerful word globally. Role of women around the world is a noteworthy one as they are the important personalities in sports, research and development, education, HR and other industries. The tremendous change in women empowerment around the society is appreciable but the darker side of womanhood is also to be taken into consideration because mainly from 1970's that is from year of publishing *Rudali* till now, the darker side of the lifestyle endured by women especially of lower caste remains the same. They sacrifice their

dreams and individuality and live in a personified way to fit in the 'cultural' needs of the society. These bitter phases of womanhood are depicted intellectually by Mahasweta through illustrating the pathetic life of female kind. The objective of this research article is to decode the unexpressed and 'would-be' visions of female imaginary characters like Sanichari, Bikhni and Gulbadan and the Rudalis in reality that is the women kind who have lost their privilege to be one among in this society mainly as a consequence of their caste, poverty and culture.

## **RUDALI?**

According to Encyclopedia dictionary, "the term Rudali is a reference to a custom in certain areas of Rajasthan where women of a lower caste are hired as mourners upon the death of upper-caste males. These women are referred to as a "rudaali", literally translated as "female weeper" or "weeping woman". Their job is to publicly express grief of family members who are not permitted to display emotion due to social status". <sup>(Encyclopedia)</sup>

Through this research article, attempts are made to redefine Rudali as "women and men who mourn within themselves for the fate thrust upon them consequently of economic status, caste, religion, rituals and other societal practice which affects them right from education to career". Even today, in this named modern era or technological world there are thousands of populace who are prohibited from having their rights of livelihood.

Focus of this research article is to emphasize the female mourners or Rudalis in this real world who are not in a situation to express their visions as a consequence of societal and cultural standards explicating the miseries endured by Sanichari and other female characters in Mahasweta Devi's Rudali.

## **RUDALIS IN REALITY**

Question that triggered the concepts of this research article is the thought is, are Rudali found only in West Bengal and Rajasthan or globally? The answer obtained after reviewing a lot of articles is yes Rudalis are found globally. There are multitudes of human beings both men and women who are left out in the fringes of this society deprived of even their basic rights. This research article elucidates those enclosed visions of such women who are suffering in reality just like Sanichari. Mahasweta Devi the notable writer would not have elaborated the anguish she had on the deplorable religious and cultural norms prevailing amidst the less privileged people without a lucid observation of their traumas.

Globally, there are innumerable fewer beneficiary women who are forced to face countless of hurtful situations owing to poverty, starvation, financial disgrace, cultural statutes and religious conviction. These women who are out thrown from this dignified society are not just blown out but are disturbed venomously to live at peace with what they have. Women from this particular sect are considered to be untouchables but they are made to do the domestic chores of the upper class community people. Though work is extracted from them irrespective of their class, they are not treated conversely like human kind. Labeled as untouchables, even today, they are asked to enter the house through back yard, not given food in a proper plate, served with stale food and list goes on. Moreover, these women who are regarded as untouchables are raped ruthlessly forgetting the status, pride, decorum and reputation of the high class highly ranked elite class society and its here Mahasweta Devi has very rationally and audaciously brought to the light the sufferings plunge upon the lower caste people by the upper class people who cannot even mourn for the death of their family member. Tony Beck and Tirthankar Bose has stated "The plight of the

muted and the silenced, the cause of the gendered subaltern, women’s empowerment and radical feminist realism – these are some of the positions attributed to her fiction.” (Beck)

## RUDALI CUSTOM

From the story Rudali, the various nuances carried out by writer Devi to express the custom of Rudali could be analysed. She has very ingeniously penned the Rudali culture where women of lower caste community are branded as Rudali which stands a synonym for female professional mourners. From the different phases in the life of Sanichari, the tactful way to make a woman the Rudali could be observed. Women of this community both turn up as Rudali or a whore and it is stated by Mahasweta Devi as

“It is women who are ruined by Malik Mahajans who turn into whores...” (Rudali 80)

The superiority character of the Malik Mahajans who go the extreme of tormenting the other caste woman to a prostitute is highlighted by the writer. Fate of the woman especially belonging to hard-up community is decided by all other caste people except them and it is always a line where they stand to decide what to choose between the worst two options given.

Adding to it, village where Sanichari lived was haunted over by the Rudali custom mainly for the reason that they lacked basic amenities to lead their life. The life style led by them fits aptly to the saying of Dr. Ambedkar that “ditch of regionalism and the den of ignorance and parochialism.” (Ambedkar). Life at Tahad village in the words of Mahasweta through Rudali could be mentioned to explain the principles of this community. She states:

“In Tahad village, gangus and dushads were in majority. Sanichari was a Gangu by birth. Like other villagers her life too was lived in desperate poverty. Her mother – in – law used to say it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering. (To which Sanichari would tell herself) Huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday that made me unlucky daughter – in –law! You were born on a Monday – was your life happier? Somri, Budha, Moongri, Bishri – do any of them have happier live?” (Rudali 54)

Sanichari, hailing from such a scenario will have to endure the desolation and the practices accustomed that were faced by all women in general irrespective of the time of and day of birth and the fortune that is bestowed upon her. Rajnesh Pandey in his research article has stated “... Ganjus and Dushads are compelled to live an afflicted life under the repression and tyranny of the upper caste Rajputs who enjoy the so called ‘inborn’ privilege of capturing the land of these tribal people by hook and crook”. (Pandey)

## RUDALI OF MAHASWETA DEVI

In Rudali, Devi has represented the unfortunate woman both as prey and as **potentially** dissident agent in the phallogocentric hierarchy of Brahmanical patriarchy<sup>(Chakravarty)</sup>. Sanichari is introduced as a beautiful little girl who lost her father even before she had the comprehension power to understand who he was, furthermore, she did not have the bliss to take pleasure in the warmth and love of her mother also. Sanichari from the time of her birth has felt and undergone the pain of missing her family yet; she was firm enough to be without shedding tears. Her life is encompassed of a range of miseries which gave her chances to break down rather than weeping over the spilt milk, she had courage to proceed with the future.

Sanichari with all strong will power married a Gangu from her locality and adding to her fate, his life also ends up in the midway. Later, she was proposed by Rajput Malik asking her to be

with him and though traces of her interests could be found, she refused to go as she was married and had a son. She lives with her son along with her mother-in-law who is counting the last seconds of her life and sister-in-law. Adding to her unblessed fate, when her mother-in-law passes away, she had no one except her sister-in-law to look after the further rituals even in this sober panorama of her life, she did not mourn nor blame her fate. She was not emotionally out taken by the most pathetic death of her mother-in-law who yearned and died crying out for food. Mahasweta has pictured this most sentimental and miserable death as:

“Her mother-in-law died in great pain, of dropsy, lying in her own excrement, crying out, over and over, 'food, give me food!' It was pouring that night. Sanichari and her sister-in-law lowered the old woman on to the ground. If the rites weren't carried out before the night was over they would have to bear the cost of the repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. And there wasn't even a cupful of grain in the house! So Sanichari was forced to go from Neighbour to neighbour in the pouring rain. Dragging the Neighbours home with her, and handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry. So what if there wasn't? the old woman had given her so much trouble that even if Sanichari had tried to cry she wouldn't have been able to wring out many tears. <sup>(Rudali 55)</sup>

On the other hand, her son married a prostitute and ran away after he was bequeathed with a child and Sanichari remained calm as she did not want to shed her tears may be she could have sensed only tears will give her solace and help her for her livelihood in future. Sanichari in all dimensions were torn as she had no wealth to support a better way of living. Life of her childhood friends were not exceptional while Bikhni and Duland were Rudalis, Gulbadan was forced to be a whore. Rudali or a prostitute both resulted in tears and it was chosen by them rather it was forced upon them.

## **RUDALIS OF REALITY**

Women who are not in the position to express their visions and achieve it owing to various external factors and those who are let astray in the midst of reaching their visions are termed as Rudalis of reality through this research article. When Mahasweta Devi has brought into light the professional female mourners, here female mourners whose tears are also hid in their messy life is explored and explained. There is a drastic increase in the number of sexual assaults, murders, infanticide and various disgraces to the society globally and in varied parts of India as well which is crafted through the works of many writers. Often, women are the victims of all these stabbing and especially the women from the low caste community who are tagged as untouchables and Dalits.

*What Tamil Women want in 2016: An End to Domestic Violence* by Sandhya Ravishankar a news article from the online journal *The Wire* is a treasure throve on women from slum areas of different parts of Tamil Nadu who are subjugated and tormented because of varied reasons. Sandhya has concluded the elaborate news of three different cases of such women with a complete statistical data on domestic violence as “Hemmed in by aggression from an increasingly male-dominated society, women of Tamil Nadu are struck in a cycle of debilitating violence”.

(Ravishankar). A noteworthy concept through this article is life of woman belonging to slum areas. Poverty and need of better financial status has occupied a daring role in deciding the fate of these women who spoke to *The Wire*.

Similarly, from *Mainstream* article by A K Biswas titled “*Is India the Most Dangerous Place For Dalit Women?*” is a notable article as Biswas has analysed the dangerous factors that bothers the life of Dalit women in India along with the different threats of sexual assaults especially from the upper class elite people. Biswas has very wisely argued that the people with high standards in life who wear the mask of inborn upper class are the main threat for women especially the Dalit women. He goes on to justify his statement with an example through a rape case that happened in Rajasthan in 2010 where a Brahmin boy was let free by the High Court stating Brahmanical society people will not touch a Dalit women and the case was nullified. <sup>(Biswas)</sup>

A very recent incident that happened on November 26, 2016 was published in CNN news with the head “*14 year old dies in second shocking double rape case*”. This incident is the second incident that happened in Delhi where girl belonging to the Dalit community was raped for the second time by the same person and was killed. The news lines of CNN goes as thus “A 14 year old girl has died in another case of a lower caste woman allegedly being raped by the same man twice. the news article has also stated that according to India’s National Crime Records Bureau, more than four Dalit women are raped every day, with 2014 statistics crime against Dalits rose 19%. In many of the cases, these crimes are committed by perpetrators from an upper caste.” <sup>(CNN)</sup>

*The Dalits still Untouchable* article from *India Today* by Ajit Kumar Jha has raised a question “Is Ambedkar’s dream of social and economic equality a bridge too far?” Article adds on to state that out of 25 students who committed suicide in North India and Hyderabad since 2007, 23 are Dalits. Furthermore, it is also added that Dalit children occupy the highest percentage of segregation right from malnourished children to being made to sit separately while having food especially in government schools. <sup>(Jha)</sup>

From all these news articles it could be read and comprehended that upper class caste people always take a higher hand in suppressing the needy and also assault them in the most egotistical way that leads to death. Mahasweta Devi the renowned writer has penned all these narcissistic attitude of the mask wearing dignified class people through Rudali centering the role of caste in brutally massacring the whole lot of community in spite of tagging them untouchables.

## FICTION AND REALITY

Through Mahasweta Devi’s Rudali and the Rudalis in reality, it could be understood that these women are pressured to choose the best between the two worst things irrespective of their age and desire. In order to exist in this world for sake, they sacrifice their life and get victimized in many ways. Gulbadan for example, lost her life as her self – worth was shattered because of her natural father who forced her to yield to the lustful desires of his nephew by addressing her whore <sup>(Rudali)</sup>.

On the other hand is Shanichari who does not shed tears at any situation but turn out to be a prey to societal hierarchy where she accepts to be a professional mourner than going the other way round owing to her constant need to retain her dignity. In all the toughest and pitiable situations, when she had ample of opportunities to break out emotionally, she stood strong and stubborn as if she prophesied her future earlier. In spite of all these depressions, Sanichari chooses to cling on to the distinguished and esteemed path of life.

In reality, Dalit women are pushed to the realm of horizon of ending up their life or are slaughtered for no reason other than their innocence. There are still scores of students who are not able to get proper education, food and clothing just because of the badge they carry and that is Dalit. When analysed all these problems posted by Mahasweta in Rudali and the traumatic hurdles dealt by Rudalis in reality it leads to a question is all this caste based issue to be rectified by law and order or is unbalance in caste a social stigma and societal threat?

### **DECODING THE VISIONS OF MISERY**

The objective of this research article is to bring decode the visions of misery where the Rudali of Mahasweta Devi and Rudalis in reality are considered as the misery it is because of their state of living where knowingly or unknowingly they become the prey callous afflictions. Visions are the persuading factor of human life for it stimulates every cells of our body to work actively to reach out the visions. Every single soul will aspire to do something great according to their interest in their life time. If visions are vital element in the process of human existence, then how about the life of those suppressed, trampled and the marked untouchable dalits of our society? How about the women in Rudali of Mahasweta? Are they all denied to have visions or are their visions conked out even before expressed?

Visions of misery if decoded, the results would be massive amount and heaps of aspirations to achieve. Education, better clothing, fresh food, good career and an uplifted status would certainly occupy the first preferences in their list of visions for any common man will have these. Right for living in a way they like without being tormented because of their gender, economic status, religious practices put forth by cultural disorderliness will take up their catalog of visions. Sanichari did not exhibit her emotions nor decided to give up her dignity at any cause though she was lost in the caste maze. Even when she had no food and when left as an orphan she did not beg for her livelihood. She went out of track like a cat on the wall to befall a victim to the lust of the Rajput lord but she had the will power to stand strong and lived for her family. If the personality traits of Sanichari is scrutinised thoroughly, she will fit in all the qualities an administrator will require because she is bold, adapts to situations, foresees the future, makes sturdy decisions, is a better thinker and acts timely. For a person like Sanichari who is well equipped with high defined managerial qualities, is there any probability for a person with such obstinate personality and character to be without any vision?

Accordingly, rudalis in reality endures continuous suppression from the society as they are frail economically and in other ways their ability to maintain the societal standards are also grabbed away. Even their daily life activities become a question as they are not sure about how and what kind of day they will have to witness. Many number of Dalit women and students are still living with a hope that their visions to visualise and experience the better part of life will happen a day. In this caste ruled society where for anything caste is to be lighted out, voice of these fringed out people will keep reverberating within themselves.

### **CONCLUSION**

“Decoding Visions of Misery” Through Rudali of Mahasweta Devi and Rudalis of Reality is an effort taken to explore various communal rites and rituals, role of caste and creed, gender discrimination and status of the under privileged masses through Rudali of Mahasweta Devi. This research article has also brought out an imaginary scene of what would be the visions of such down trodden people that are left unexpressed by Mahasweta and Rudalis in reality. Key concept that could be implicated is every single soul will have visions and set of missions to achieve them

but it is always left without happening in reality due to various societal hurdles in the name of caste and religion. Resembling Rudali of Mahasweta, even in realism tears become a source of living as it paves way to forget the stings of this society for a while and to move on. There are many mourners as stated from the news articles who lament within them as they develop into numb beings in years of time. Thus, just like how external noxious factors made Sanichari a mourner for the dead men of upper class society women in reality become mourners for themselves because of the congenital patriarchal social order. Will insanity of caste and classism revolutionize at least in the techno era and will there be liberation for all such mourners? Will grief expressed by Mahasweta about the lower caste people be considered and will the visions of her and neglected people come to reality?

### References

- Ambedkar. (1986). Complete Works. Bombay: Govt. of Maharashtra. vol.2, pg 34
- Ambedkar. (2012). “I Have a Dream” for Dalits of India. Ambedkar’s Caravan. Retrieved from <https://dramedkarbooks.com/2012/01/11/i-have-a-dream-for-Dalits-of-india>
- Beck, Tony and Bose, Tirthankar. (1995) "Dispossession, Degradation and Empowerment of Peasantry and the Poor in Bengali Fiction," Economic and Political Weekly: 30 441-48.
- Biswas, A K. (2013). Is India the Most Dangerous Place For Dalit Women? Mainstream. VOL 8, Pub. FEB 15.
- Chakravarty, Uma. (1993). Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State, Economic and Political Weekly 28 :579-85
- CNN. (2016). India: 14-year-old girl dies in second shocking double rape case .CNN.com. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/26/asia/india-rape-cases/>
- Devi, Mahasweta. Rudali. Trans. Anjum Katyal. (1990). Calcutta. Seagull. Pg 80, 54, 55
- Encyclopedia. Definition of Rudali. Retrieved from [www.encyclo.co.uk/meaning-of-Rudaali](http://www.encyclo.co.uk/meaning-of-Rudaali)
- Jha Kumar, Ajit. (2016). The Dalits still Untouchable. India Today. Retrieved from <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/Dalits-untouchable-rohith-vemula-caste-discrimination/1/587100.html>
- Pandey Rajnesh. (2014). U.R. Anantha Murthy’s Samskara and Mahasweta Devi’s Rudali: An Attempt to Voice the Unvoiced. RSIRJLE. ISSN 2320-6101. Vol.2. Issue – III.
- Ravishankar Sandhya. (2016). What Tamil Women want in 2016: An End to Domestic Violence. The Wire. Retrieved from <http://thewire.in/25050/what-tamil-women-want-in-2016-an-end-to-domestic-violence>

### Author note

**Ms Manjusha C B<sup>1</sup>** is a Doctoral Degree Researcher of VIT University Chennai and is pursuing research in Soft skills focusing on ELT- Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literature and Arts.

**Dr. V. Vijayalakshmi<sup>2</sup>** is serving as Assistant Professor in School of Science and Languages of VIT University Chennai and has more than 25 years of teaching experience and is also guiding Doctoral degree researchers.