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Victims of Hunger and Poverty in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* and *Breast-Giver*

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Abstract

Poverty and hunger are among the major social evils that deprive individuals of their basic human needs, dignity and social status. Mahasweta Devi, through her literary works, exposes the harsh realities of poverty, starvation and the exploitation of marginalised communities. This paper examines the victims of hunger and poverty in her two significant works, *Rudali* and *Breast-Giver*. It analyses how economic deprivation forces individuals, particularly women, to adopt unconventional means of survival and exposes them to humiliation, exploitation and social discrimination. In *Rudali*, Sanichari struggles against extreme poverty, loss and isolation. Unable to secure a decent livelihood, she becomes a professional mourner, transforming her tears into a source of income. Similarly, in *Breast-Giver*, Jashoda accepts the profession of a wet nurse to support her impoverished family. Her physical exploitation and eventual death reveal the indifference and selfishness of the wealthy. Through these characters, Devi demonstrates how hunger overrides social identity, caste distinctions and personal dignity. The paper also explores the exploitative relationship between the rich and the poor, particularly the ways in which feudal power and economic dependence perpetuate poverty and subjugation. By portraying women's struggles for survival, Devi brings attention to the unequal social structures that deny the poor their fundamental rights. The study highlights her concern for the oppressed and her literary commitment to exposing social injustice and human suffering.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Poverty, Hunger and Starvation, Women's Exploitation, Survival Strategies

Poverty is one of the major social evils prevailing in our society. It results in people's deprivation of social, economic and political status. According to Berstein Henry, the dimensions of poverty are:

- Lack of livelihood strategies,
- Inaccessibility to resources (money, land, credit)
- Feeling of insecurity and frustrations
- Inability to maintain and develop social relations with others as consequences of lack of resources.[1]

Poverty is also defined as the inability to gratify the physiological needs, that is, need of survival, safety and security. The minimum requirements of the physiological needs are food, cloth and shelter. The poor lack all these, as they are deprived of their economic status.

Hunger is the result of poverty. When the people are deprived of the economic status, they lack food. This leads them to hunger, starvation and death. Hunger and starvation prepares them to any kind of servitude and subjugation. As they are considered as lethargic, inefficient and burden of the society, they are harassed, humiliated and discriminated. Though, they are harassed and humiliated, they bear it with patience just for their survival. They struggle for their livelihood and existence. They take up any kind of job they come across for their survival.

A few of Mahasweta Devi's works deal with poverty, hunger and starvation. She depicts the conditions of dire poverty and the plight of the people under those circumstances. She shows how the people undergo torture and subjugation as a result of poverty. She reveals different straits of livelihood people take up to relieve themselves from the pangs of hunger and starvation. She also harbours the exploitative attitude of the rich, who encash the conditions of the poor and degrade them to further inferior level. Her works which deal with the conditions and effects of poverty and hunger are *Rudali* and *Breast-Giver.*

Rudali deals with poverty and explicates the various strategies of survival. Sanichari, the protagonist, born as a ganju by caste undergoes torment as a poor woman. She loses her husband, her son and everyone who is related to her. She suffers life in isolation and without support of any one. She toils hard to get food and survive. In the run of the story, she becomes a [*]rudali to support her life and mourns the corpses

[*] rudali – a mourner for the corpses of rich people.

of the rich. The novel reveals how the tears are commodified and how the poor people survive through the tears they shed.

Breast-Giver is about a poor Brahmin woman who shoulders the burden of her family. As her husband loses his feet in an accident, she searches the ways to feed her family. She takes up the profession of a breast feeder in a rich family. This story depicts the effects of poverty and straits of livelihood. It tells us that it is not the caste or community that degrades a person, but, the hunger and poverty. Jashoda, the brahmin woman, because of her dire poverty, is looked down upon and is made an employee in the Haldars family as a breast giver. By her over breast-feeding, she develops a breast cancer, suffers and dies lonely, uncared either by her breast bred-rich sons or by her own husband and children.

These works give a clear picture of poverty and suffering of the poor. In *Rudali,* Sanichari lives in desperate poverty. She and her husband toil hard, days and nights to fill their stomachs. Her mother-in-law dies of hunger, crying out over and over, "food, give me food!"[2] When her mother-in-law dies, she does not have even a cupful of rice to do the death rites. In the pouring rain, she runs from house to house begging for rice. If the rites are not carried before night is over, they have to bear the cost of repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. So, Sanichari rushes from door to door, begging, to finish the death rites before night is over. At this busy juncture of handling all the arrangements, she does not have even time to cry. Even, when her brother-in-law and her cousin die, she does not cry, as she is much worried and thoughtful of the expenditure of their funeral ceremony. She runs begging for a loan for their death ceremony. The narration says:

> Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the *Shradh.[3]

The death of three people in their family, that is, her mother-in-law, brother-in-law and her cousin, of course, sighs Sanichari with relief. The meagre scrappings they bring home after labouring is not enough for all the people in the house. Sometimes, they starve for food. After their death, she feels relieved as "at least their

* Shradh – A funeral ceremony.

stomachs would be full."[4] In the meantime, her husband also dies of cholera. To perform his funeral ceremony, she takes a loan of twenty rupees from Ramavatar Singh and becomes a bonded labourer.

Breast-Giver unveils the plight of a brahmin family which is afflicted by poverty. Kangalicharan, the head of the family, works in Haldar's sweet shop. As he is poor, he steals sweets and samosas and feeds his children. His wife and he cook less food and eat. Daily he lifts a bit of flour and other things and makes his life easy. One day Haldar's son rides his car over Kangali's feet and makes him crippled. Feeling it as an obligation, Haldar takes care of Kangalicharan and his family. He bears his hospital expenses and sends food to his family every day. As long as Haldar is alive, their family runs smoothly. One day, Haldar dies and Kangali's family runs into trouble. He, his wife, and children starve for food. The children whine interminably for food and abuse their father and mother. Jashoda, Kangali's wife, searches the ways to relieve her family from starvation. She goes to Haldar's wife and begs for a cook's job in their vegetarian kitchen. The mistress is not as sold on Brahmins as the master was. So, she says, "Let me see dear! Let me think and see."[5] During their conversation, mistress's six months grandson cries. Then mistress says, "You come like a god! Give her some milk, dear, I beg you. His mother's sick--Such a brat, he won't touch a bottle."[6] Jashoda immediately suckles the boy and pacifies him. She stays in their house till nine p.m. and suckles the boy often. While returning home, at the order of mistress, the cook fills a big bowl with rice and curry for Jashoda and her family and gives it to her. For that day their hunger is pacified. And later, again Jashoda and her family struggle in hunger for food.

In *Rudali*, Sanichari is always in trouble. Her son, Budhua, who helps her in everything, suffers from tuberculosis. His wife is like a witch, who is always hungry and has an extra appetite. She never does any work. She goes on eating whatever Sanichari and her son earn and bring home. Even after begetting a child, her attitude does not change. When Budhua is at a dying stage, neglecting him and her son, she leaves home. Sanichari knows that, "she would never be content with an ailing husband, and poverty-stricken existence."[7] She does not feel ill of her escape, as she knows about her mental status. After her son's death, she is in up to her neck looking after Haroa, her grandson. She always carries him while slaving in Malik Mahajan's fields. Her grandson grows and becomes an adult. Like his mother, he is fed up with his poor life and leaves home. This is another blow to Sanichari. "Every loss she suffers is because of dire poverty, the constricted life, the total lack of hope of any change or improvement – Her daughter-in-law, Parbatia and her grandson, Haroa both

leave because they refuse to submit to the harsh conditions, even though their options are prostitution and the insecurities of a wandering life."[8] Sanichari loses everybody who is related to her. While she is in search of her grandson, she gets confronted with her childhood friend Bikhni, who has a different sad story unlike hers. She gets separated from her son. The suffering of both Sanichari and Bikhni draws them closer to each other. They plan to live together. One day, all the money Bikhni has got ,exhausts. The problem and fear of survival troubles them. During this time, comes Dulan, an intelligent man with new ideas and strategies of livelihood. He starts giving the ideas to Sanichari. Keeping them in mind, he presents them as himself and says:

> Before money ran out I would pick up a nice stone from the banks of Kuruda river. I'd anoint it with oil and sindoor and proclaim that *Mahabirji had come to me in my dreams. … Then you could present yourself and Mahabirji at Tohri Market place. Collect offerings from the devout.[9]

A similar instance can be drawn from *Breast Giver*. When Kangalicharan loses his feet, Nabin gives him similar strategy of livelihood. He says:

> I've thought of a plan. There's no problem with making a Hare Krishna racket. I tell you, get a Gopal in your dream. My aunt brought a stony Gopal from Puri. I give it to you. You announce that you got it in a dream. You'll see there'll be a to do in no time, money will roll in. Start for money, later you'll get devoted to Gopal.[10]

Both Sanichari and Bikhni reject their friend's ideas. They warn him not to joke about gods and that would bring calamity to their lives. Besides this, Dulan tells his own story how he bluffed Lachman's mother, when she gave him ten rupees to bring her some holy oil from Chas. He says, "I didn't even go to Chas, just took her some oil from home after a few days. … She massaged herself with the oil yesterday and today she walked on her own two feet to the fields."[11] He further says:

> If your mind is pure, the Ganga flows even through wood. Look here, Budhua's ma, there's no bigger god than one's belly. For belly sake everything is permissible.[12]

Here, we are reminded of Kalo, a low caste in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who rides a Tiger,* who disguises himself as a brahmin priest and serves the devotees' needs to relieve himself from the pangs of hunger and starvation.

* Mahabirji – God hanuman.

Sanichari and Bikhni reject Dulan's strategies dealing with God and request him to give some other good ideas. Then, Dulan suggests them to take up rudali profession. He tells them that Bhairab Singh has died and his son needs rudalis to cry over his father's corpse. Here, Dulan gives the picture of corrupt mind of the rich people. He says:

> 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 tears. Our malik has ordered a fancy funeral. … They need rudalis to wail over the corpse.[13]

When Dulan prepares Sanichari and Bikhni to take up the rudali profession, Sanichari sighs and her feelings are exploded within. She has not cried or let her tears drop either for her husband's death or for her son's death. She says that her eyes "are scorched." Then, Dulan tells her in a cold and expressionless tone:

> Budhua's ma, I'm not asking you to shed the tears you couldn't shed for Budhua. These tears are your livelihood. You'll see, just as you cut wheat and plough land, you'll be able to shed tears.[14]

She gets convinced by his words and agrees for his proposal. Dulan arranges them the job. Sanichari and Bikhni wail so loudly and impressively that everyone gets attracted by their mourning. The impression they create makes them the best rudalis and they become the first preferred. For Bhairab Singh's funeral and Kriya ceremonies they get five rupees each, two and half [*]sers of rice, clothes and feasted to their hearts' content. Thus, their tears have been reserved for the time when they have to feed themselves by selling the tears. Vasantha Surya writes about Sanichari and Bikhni that, "the rudalis have nothing to sell but their howls."[15] Sanichari's display of grief is valuable because it papers over cracks and fissures in the social system, making it appear as if the poor care for the rich as human beings, as though they have a sense of loyalty and feudal obligation which they express in their spontaneous grief.

Having become rudalis, Sanichari and Bikhni, now know something about money and they bargain in the market place, over their settlements. They enquire about the deaths of the rich, approach them and make their lives easy.

[*] sers – Unit of weight

After the death of Bikhni, Sanichari becomes lonely. Having lost the companion, she feels delicate to present herself as a rudali, but, her conditions of hunger and poverty force her to the profession. When she resents to go, Dulan tells her, "Look, Budhua's ma, it's wrong to give up one's land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn't give it up. … When Budhua's father died, didn't you take over his work in the malik's field? ... In the same way you have to take over from Bikhni."[16]

Dulan's encouragement gives a boost to Sanichari's mind. She moves ahead to take up the duties. Without any embarrassment, she goes to the red light area to collect some whores for the funeral ceremony. She invites her daughter-in-law, Parbatia to come and participate in the funeral ceremony of the rich corpse, as a rudali. She invites other whores and initiates them to take up the profession early, as they would have to do it anyway, when they grow old. Thus, she establishes a group and mourns the corpse of Gambhir Singh. Here, tears become the path of their livelihood. The tears which would have been a meaningful rite of socialization appear in a saleable form. They become commodified and give the wretched poor an opportunity to earn their livelihood. Thus, poverty drives Sanichari and others to a bizarre profession of mourning.

Parbatia, Sanichari's daughter-in-law, craves for food as she has got an extra appetite. Unable to bear the conditions of poverty and pangs of hunger, she runs away with a medicine man who promises her puri and kachauri everyday. When he deceives her, she joins prostitution to relieve herself from starvation.

> Speaking of *Rudali*, Vasantha Surya tells: "Using eerie custom of the rudali as a metaphor, Mahasweta Devi has created a story of a heart-rending 'survival strategy' or 'coping mechanism'."[17]

In *Breast-Giver*, after Jashoda suckles Haldar's grandson, Mistress of Haldar looks in charmed envy at Jashoda's mammal projections and says, "The good lord sent you down as the legendary cow of Fulfilment. Pull the teat and milk flows! The ones I've brought to my house, haven't a quarter of this milk in their nipples!"[18] Jashoda feels happy and replies her that though, "one hadn't come to my belly yet. Still it was like a flood of milk. Where does it come from, Mother? I have no food, no pampering!"[19] So, the large production of lactation in Jashoda becomes news of the house.

The second son of Haldar, whose wife is sick and whose son drinks Jashoda's milk is particularly uxorious. He likes his wife remain beautiful though, she is often pregnant. He thinks a lot about how to combine multiple pregnancies and beauty. When he hears of Jashoda's surplus milk, in all enthusiasm he cries out, "Way found." He goes to his mother, convinces her that the progressive suckling will ruin the shapes of wives of the Haldars family and if Jashoda is employed to feed their children, their family would be benefited.

At first, the Mistress hems and haws and later, thinks and realizes that, "If the sons look outside, or harass the maid servants, she won't have a voice to object. Going out because they can't get it at home."[20] She further thinks that, if Jashoda becomes the infants' suckling mother, her daily meals, clothes on feast days and some monthly pay will be enough. And also the sin, her son has committed by driving car on Kangali's feet would be lightened.

Jashoda and Kangali, though, they feel odd for this proposal, later, they agree as they cannot die of starvation. In order to keep her breasts always heavy with milk, she has to carry a child in her belly, time to time. So, Kangalicharan becomes a professional father and Jashoda becomes a professional mother and breast feeder. With this acceptance, Kangali's family runs smoothly with adequate food for all the people. In fact, Haldars feed Jashoda well, as she has to feed their children with nutritious milk in return. About the production of milk, Gayatri Chakravorthy Spivak states that:

> The milk she produces for her children is presumably through 'necessary labour'. The milk that she produces for the children of her master's family is through 'surplus labour'.[21]

Jashoda takes extra burden to feed the children of Haldars family. She accepts to bear the pain of producing the off spring and pain of suckling her children as well as Haldars' children at the same time, because she has no other way to shoulder the burden of her family in its wretched conditions. Though her profession is odd, it is the only one which can rescue her family from its problems.

The circumstances of poverty become an opportunity for the rich people to exploit and subjugate the poor. The suffering and affliction of the poor are never noticed by them. They never consider them as human beings. They suck their blood for their selfish motives. In all these works we find such exploitative mechanism victimizing them to the maximum.

The [*]maliks in *Rudali* exploit the poor. They give money to the poor and make them their bonded slaves. They do not care for their lives. They extract the work from them. Sanichari becomes one such slave. For the funeral rites of her husband, she takes twenty rupees from Ramavatar, puts her thumb print on a paper stating that she would repay fifty rupees through bonded labour on his fields over the next five years. Ramavatar takes it as an opportunity to beguile the poor for their ignorance. Sanichari toils much though, she is weak. For her over time work in his fields, she is hard pressed to feed and take care of her little son, Budhua.

The malik mahajans in *Rudali* do not have emotions for their own parents who have given them birth. They do not even shed tears for their fathers' or mothers' deaths. They are busy in finding the keys to their safe. They employ someone to cry for their parents' deaths. They exploit the poor for such mournings. They want to exhibit their pomp through the death ceremonies they celebrate. They employ rudalis for the mourning and wailing over their elders' corpses. They make grief a commodity. They do not spend money at all for the welfare of poor labourers who toil days and nights in their fields, instead, by lending them some money, they make them their lifelong slaves. They do not have sympathy for the poor. The price of these death ceremonies, of course, is truly paid by the low castes, from the hides of whom the lords extract the sums they have overspent.

Haldars family in *Breast-Giver* for retaining the beauty and charm of the daughters-in-law, employ Jashoda for breast-feeding their children. Though, Haldar's son hits Kangali with his car and makes him crippled, the family never thinks of the livelihood of the Kangali's family, instead, they feel that by giving Jashoda, the odd profession of breast-feeding, they can wash away their sin.

Having no other way for livelihood, Jashoda agrees to take up the profession. She feeds more than fifty children of Haldars family. By over-feeding the children, she develops cancer in her breasts. She experiences a lot of pain in her breasts. Later, she develops sores on her breasts, which give a foul smell. Knowing her condition, all the people move far away from her. All the milk-bred sons of Haldars family never wish to take care of her. Her husband and her own sons neglect her. They leave her in lurch and desert her. Everyone betrays her. After a long-suffering and affliction, she dies in the hospital. Her body is left in the hospital morgue uncared for and at last cremated by an untouchable. Thus, she is forsaken by all and dies alone. This story

[*] maliks – feudal lords.

gives us the glance of rich people's attitude. They are opportunistic and exploit the weak to their hearts' content. They do not either care for their needs or for their lives.

Mahasweta Devi looks into the depths of poverty, where people strive for food and livelihood. All these stories reflect the conditions of poverty and the predicament of poor. They show how people take up different straits of livelihood and suffer in the hands of exploitative class. Sanichari in *Rudali* suffers all her life in solitude and has none of her relatives to make her life tolerable. She strives as a bonded labourer for a few years. Later, she joins the profession of Rudali to relieve herself from the pangs of hunger. Jashoda in *Breast-Giver* out of poverty, shoulders the burden of her family by taking the profession of breast-feeding. By over feeding, she develops breast cancer. She suffers and dies uncared for, by the negligence of Haldars family and her family.

In these two works, the feudal lords and rich people exploit the poor for their selfish motives. The poor who are already weak by the dire poverty, become more submissive for their livelihood and undergo humiliation and affliction in their masters' hands. They are relieved and freed from their suffering and poverty only when they die.

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