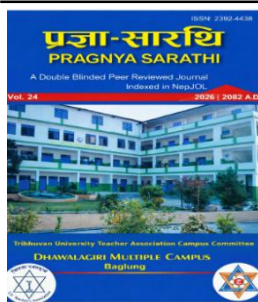

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Voices from the Margin: A Subaltern Reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the formation of subaltern subjectivity through the intersecting structure of caste, class, and gender in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*, a novella, as the primary site of interpretation. Although the text has been widely examined through feminist and Marxist framework, comparatively less attention has been paid to the ways subaltern agency operates within these interlocking systems of domination. By addressing this lacuna, this study foregrounds the dynamic processes through which subaltern identities are constituted and negotiated under the conditions of structural subjugation. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies, draws the ideas of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from her work "Can Subaltern Speak? Ranjit Guha's ideas as articulation of subaltern agency and consciousness, autonomous agents whose consciousness and actions cannot be reduced to elite politics, since their insurgencies arise from their own experiences, values, and modes of organization rather than from elite leadership. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony; rule with consent, the domination is sustained not only through coercion but also through the internalization of ruling values proves particularly illuminating. In the text, Sanichari and other marginalized women come to accept suffering, poverty, and social exclusion as inevitable conditions of existence; hegemony thus, operates at the level of consciousness. The institution of professional mourning emerges as both a symbolic and material practice that reinforces castes and class hierarchies, enabling the exploitation of subaltern women while simultaneously legitimizing dominant authority. Employing a qualitative analysis this study argues that subaltern identity is not merely imposed but continually negotiated. Sanichari's transformation of socially imposed suffering into a means of economic survival gestures toward a subtle yet significant form of resistance. By foregrounding the subaltern body and its lived realities, Devi constructs a counter hegemonic narrative space that renders visible limited yet significant forms of subaltern agency, not merely as a critique of systematic oppression, but also as an exploration of alternative albeit constrained modes of resistance from marginalized subjects.

Keywords: caste hierarchy, empowerment, oppression, resistance, subaltern agency

Introduction

Rudali, describes the life of Sanichari, a destitute low caste woman in rural India who struggles against extreme poverty and social stigma. Born under an inauspicious constellation she faces death of her husband, son and various relatives while battling with life with manual labour. Hardship affects her in a way that she is not able to show emotions but has a tough shell around her. Her life takes a turn when she meets Bhikhni, another equally wretched woman and finds a profession as a rudali or hired mourners. It's in this irony of selling sorrow, Sanichari earns her living with the rich taking grief and showing mourning only through the *Rudali* whereas they forget the people in pain.

By the end of her narrative, she develops into an enduring figure who, although still oppressed, finds herself equipped with agency and an economic footing via adaptation and struggle within collectivity. Her narrative brings to the foreground the resilience and survival strategies of subaltern women on the fringes. The narrative is that of a poor lower-caste woman, the life of whom is determined by unceasing poverty and systemic alienation. Through her story, the text converts “survival into question of existence...and reifies the theme of ‘bread and survival’” at the center of the experiences of the oppressed, laying bare how the subjugated struggle for their rights to dignity, labor, and agency in worlds that relentlessly seek to erode them.

Rudali by Mahasweta Devi centers on Sanichari, a woman born on Saturday, a ‘bad day’ in the hierarchical beliefs of the social structure. Being a member of the subaltern Ganju caste, she is at the bottom of the social ladder where gender inequality, class exploitation, and caste oppression are all intertwined in determining her life. What we can observe in the novella is a move from silence to utterance, through which subaltern women gradually finds ways to articulate themselves within a highly oppressive system of feudal domination. The struggle to overcome the constant hunger and poverty is most crucial to the lives of the Ganju, as their entire existence seems to be governed by material necessity and poverty. Throughout her life, Sanichari encounters numerous tragedies and losses in her family--of her mother-in-law, husband, son and other family members; this endless cycle of grief makes her emotional responses almost meaningless.

This paper is an inquiry into the question of subaltern subjectivity and agency within the interlocking oppressions of caste, class and gender. For my analysis I will take as my primary text Mahasweta Devi’s novella *Rudali*. Despite being the subject of feminist analysis, the novella has been widely read without probing into how subaltern women negotiate agency, resistance, and survival in the face of hegemonic social economic structures. According to Gramsci, “The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (Gramsci, 1971, 57). This is visible in the upper caste elite not only as they control the means of production but also as they normalize suffering amongst the subalterns. The life of Sanichari shows how hegemony works in that it influences the subaltern ‘s conception of the world as Sanichari sees poverty and oppression as pre-ordained fate. 68”. Yet her conversion of the social institution

of mourning to source of income is also indicative of a slight resistance within this hegemony in that the subaltern works within the dominant system while negotiating herself. Thus, both the working of cultural hegemony and the possibility of subaltern agency are demonstrated by the text. Working within the theoretical paradigm of Subaltern Studies, this paper explores how marginal women create agency out of silence imposed on them.

This text is concerned with Sanichari a low-caste woman whose lives are molded by abject poverty, ostracization, and constant personal suffering, but who gradually begins to negotiate her pain and transform it into the raw materials of survival through commodification of sorrow. Utilizing Spivak's understanding of the subaltern as structurally mute, Guha's theory of subaltern agency, and Gramsci's theory of hegemony, I intend to demonstrate how *Rudali* offers an oppositional or counter-hegemonic discourse where women as subalterns assert their limited yet meaningful agency by reinterpreting emotional labor as an act of economic and symbolic resistance.

The main terms that direct this work (subalternity, agency, hegemony, emotional labour) are interpreted within theoretical framework. Subaltern, according to Spivak refers to those populations who are politically and discursively excluded from relations of power, and thus opens up the question as to whether the subaltern 'can speak' within structures of mainstream power relations. Expanding the theoretical concept, Guha is interested in the existence of subaltern agency as an existing factor within the terms of domination. Hegemony, as formulated by Gramsci explains the maintenance of power through consent rather than brute force, within systems of power. Lastly, the category of emotional labour (popularized by Hochschild) is significant in analysing how the experience of grief is marketed as a survival tactic by Sanichari and other women.

Within this context, the text can be read as a narrative that reveals, through the unfolding of the life of Sanichari, the reality of those cast aside, whilst raising questions about the institutions and processes which facilitate the marginalization of certain groups. The course of Sanichari's existence is one of hunger, accumulation of work, and loss. Her life is lived amid cellars and storerooms and would appear to leave little room for emotional expression. Ironically, within this setting, Sanichari is compelled to turn upon herself her own capacity for mourning, for as a rudali she enters yet another sphere of performance, in order to cater for the dead of the upper castes.

The presentation of Bikhni and the intervention of Dulan reaffirm the development of subaltern solidarity and pragmatic opposition: the conscious collective decision to pursue a ritualized grief gestures to strategies by which subordinate subjects use exploitative institutions for their own ends. But through such gestures, it also foregrounds the moral emptying of the feudal elite who throw away millions on funeral luxury, when they cannot rent a bike to a widow. This foregrounding of the critical site of tension between silencing and articulation, exploitation, and resistance, deserves closer look.

This paper has used qualitative textual analysis method to examine how subaltern identity and agency are built up through characterization, narrative strategies, and socio- linguistic representations. The chosen methodology is suitable

in the sense that it enables a detailed examination of the underlying discursive and ideological devices present in the text. Ultimately, the aim of the thesis is to prove that the text not only narrates a story of victimhood but shows how subaltern women assertively define their situations and use pain as a resource.

Doing so, the paper with *Rudali* does not treat it merely as a social realist text, but as an intervention into the ongoing discussions on representation, voice and resistance, thus constituting a work that shows how even within the most oppressive systems, subaltern subjects forge spaces, no matter how constrained for agency and self-identity. *Rudali* is truly a compelling investigation into the survival techniques and resilience of the subaltern women who are on the margins in various ways. At the center stands Sanichari, a woman of lower-caste origin and under the influence of poverty, caste discrimination and patriarchy. Through this individual subject, the text probes into the tragedy and the life of Prakriti, a subaltern woman who is born under inauspicious sign and as member of Ganju caste that is itself a marginalized group. The text surveys her life through the lens of different forms of subaltern women who continue to negotiate existence within oppressive structures that threaten their entire being.

What is the problem which the study aims to investigate? It is the 'problematic' (Chatterjee 2004: xii) of whether subaltern women, institutionalized in their marginality, manage, or hinder the production of agentic discourses within the shared socio-cultural and economic terrains. It is read as a story about excess of suffering; it also poses an important question: In spite of their marginalization, the 'poor' still have strategies of 'being alive', that is, subaltern women manage survival under the conditions of unequal power relation in the existed social order? How do they cope with their voicelessness? In this, struggling with Sanichari's voice, this study attempts to address the substratum of subaltern women's voicelessness.

The story traces the Supari's transformation from helpless endurance in the face of hunger to the negotiation of existence through agency. Her stories are punctuated at several intervals by loss: the death of those in her family, the collapse of institutions of solidarities and support. Due to experience of hunger, expression of emotion becomes a secondary function. But the transformative experience that triggers the process of change remains her relationship with Bhikhnti. The sharing of the experience of deprivation results in the formation of solidarities; and the loss of a job and entry into the trade of ritual mourning initiates a phase in which grief materializes. In this profession, the subaltern body and emotion is commodified; the contradictions of the paradise in which living bodies endure squalor unnoticed by the elite is revealed in the outward ritual of mourning.

This study seeks to examine the representation of subaltern women's survival strategies in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* by situating their experiences within the intersecting structures of caste, class, and gender. It explores how lower-caste women's lives articulate forms of oppression and marginalization, and how these intersecting identities shape the formation of subaltern subjectivity. The study further interrogates the portrayal of mourning as a professional and itinerant occupation, analyzing how it reflects the socio-cultural and class dynamics that sustain structural inequality and emotional labor exploitation. In doing so, particular attention is given to the character of Sanichari, whose lived experience provides a critical lens to

understand how power is negotiated within hegemonic systems, and how personal suffering and grief are transformed into calculated strategies of survival, agency, and resistance.

In terms of method employed, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis, drawing on subaltern studies and feminist theoretical frameworks. It engages with concepts such as marginality, agency, and resistance to interpret how the narrative constructs subaltern subjectivity. Rather than treating the text as a simple social document, the analysis focuses on how literary representation reveals deeper socio-political structures and the strategies through which marginalized individuals negotiate them.

By foregrounding the lived realities of women like Sanichari, it critiques the hypocrisy of feudal and patriarchal systems while simultaneously highlighting the possibilities of resistance embedded within them. The study reveals that subaltern agency does not always emerge through overt rebellion but often through realistic adaptation, collective harmony, and the creative transformation of oppressive conditions into means of survival.

Literature Review

The novella *Rudali* by Mahasweta Devi has received significant critical attention and analysis since its publication in 1993. Scholars have approached the text from numerous critical theories including feminism, subaltern studies, caste studies, and postcolonial theory. These various interpretations widen the scope of the novella as a poignant depiction of Dalit and tribal women marginalized in Indian society. Considered in these perspectives, this story becomes more than a tale of hardship it becomes a site of critique of structures of power in Indian society. It has been widely interpreted as a feminist and subaltern text that chronicles the struggles of marginalized women on the margins of Indian hierarchy. According to Metla (2024) “the narrative highlights the resilience of subaltern women who confront oppressive social structures” (pp. 11–14). In her reading, the story revolves around Sanichari, a lower-caste woman whose existence is constrained by poverty, caste discrimination, and social stigma. Within the Ganju community, hunger and survival dominate daily life, situating the narrative firmly within the material and socio-political realities of subaltern existence.

Spivak’s (1988) influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Offers an important theoretical lens with which to examine these conditions. Spivak posits that “not only between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, but the figure of the woman also disappears” (p. 306), a point which speaks directly to the voicelessness of subaltern women. The overt display of grief seen in Sanichari’s inclusion as a professional mourner in Cawal, Oxford, and Redi, reveals the paradox inherent in this visibility: while her outward grief is both social and performative, her voice is limited by general socio-historical and socio-cultural powers. In *Rudali*, however, Sanichari’s progress from voiceless mourner to voicing individual begins to refashion this systemic silencing of subaltern women, albeit partially. Ajay Sekher (2006) states:

Most of her works Mahasweta Devi attempted to confront and overcome the turbulence of caste/class/gender within the historic framework of the

brahmanic caste patriarchy. Even assuming its occupation class position, the "rudalis" define as a gendered caste of.... Which might be regarded as the central tension or contradiction in the social practice, as well as the narrative praxis of Mahasweta works. (4422)

Sekher (2006) underscores that Mahasweta Devi consistently interrogates the intersections of caste, class, and gender within the framework of Brahmanic patriarchal structures. Even when lower-caste women like the rudalis acquire an occupational identity, their social mobility is constrained by gendered stigma, effectively transforming them into a marginalized "gendered caste" labeled as "whores." Critically, this highlights a central tension in Devi's narrative praxis: economic or professional empowerment does not equate to social liberation. Instead, her fiction exposes the persistent contradictions of a society where caste and gender hierarchies systematically reproduce subordination, demonstrating how structural oppression shapes both identity and agency.

From a stylistic and linguistic perspective, Devi employs a hybrid language strategy to convey the lived realities of her characters. Such stylistic linguistic measures imply that Devi continues to adopt a heterogeneous language pattern by which she attempts to re-present the real experience of her characters. Dasgupta (2003) highlights that the author juxtaposes local dialects, occupational terminology, and English expressions to create a dynamic and authentic space of interaction. This technique brings urban and middle-class perspectives into dialogue with marginalized spaces, unfolding complex moral and social tensions within the narrative. As she views:

Mahasweta Devi does not simply employ local and hybrid vocabulary, or words frequently used by people participating in various spheres along with common English words and idioms, but always juxtaposes them against each other, mapping out a space of interaction and tempo one more proximate to lived experience. Parallel to this, the author ventures often to position the middle-class urban protagonist also to the at the core of activity within the margins, as a performative drama of an awakened conscience unfolds in its all its contradictions, its dualisms. (p.202)

Dasgupta (2003, p. 202) highlights Mahasweta Devi's linguistic and narrative schemes as a deliberate effort to mirror the complexity of lived reality. By blending local dialects, occupational jargon, and English expressions, Devi creates a hybrid linguistic space that reflects the everyday interactions of marginalized communities. This juxtaposition not only conveys legitimacy but also destabilizes hierarchical linguistic norms, giving voice to subaltern perspectives. Critically, the insertion of middle-class urban protagonists into these marginalized spaces creates a narrative tension; it exposes the ethical and social ambiguities of privilege while foregrounding the moral awakening of characters encountering subaltern realities. Thus, Devi's stylistic choices operates concurrently at the levels of language and narrative, producing a dynamic interplay between the subaltern and the dominant, and revealing the ambivalent, dual natures of social consciousness. Similarly, Pradip Sharam (2022) views:

The finest of her writings explore with resonance the articulation of issues relating to gender, class, and caste" (Shahani and Ghosh, 2000, p. 3813). Their reading shows Mahasweta's subaltern issues in her writings especially of the deprived and outlawed community which gets homo sacer name in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* while extending Mitchel Foucault's biopolitics. (53)

(Sharma, 2022, p. 53) views that in her writings, Mao, Arundhati Roy, and others "address the complex links between gender, caste, class and violence" insofar as they "give voice to communities of people who have always been defined, constituted and criminalised as non-existent." Using Agamben's homo sacer, Devi interprets these deprived and outlawed groups as struggling to attain "sovereign power over their own bodies", promoting their concealment from political influence. Indeed, in relation to this idea of homo sacer, the foundation of biopolitics (according to Foucault) the 'subject' of biopolitics is exposed as "a naked subaltern body by way of state organized control, surveillance, and exploitation of the sub-altern body.... In this sense, the subalterns' pains and anomie were made visible, politicised, and named through the writing of Devi." In sum, this reading of Devi's work is effective in highlighting the ways in which her unique combination of political theory and creative writing conceptualizes the subaltern "as an effect and by-product of a series of social and political conditions that are constitutive of the subaltern itself." The work of Iliana Sen (2017) takes a similar approach, stating:

Mahasweta Devi's writings on tribal life are intimate, and clearly identify the state and its agents as violent oppressors of the people. Her stories also uphold the strength and dignity of their resistance. Her feminist concerns spring from real life encounters with the patriarchy of religion and the state. (16)

According to Iliana Sen, foregrounding the personal ideological stakes of Mahasweta Devi's literary project the writing of tribal life as "intimate" provides a "policy" by which her works on tribal life can be understood. As Sen writes, Devi, using the term "intimate," bolsters her writings on tribal life with a "certain" proximity to tribal communities "not...to narrate for them," but rather to "also underwrite their existential realities," to enact her empathy through her own ethical expenditure. This empathic intimacy leaves Devi unaffected in her aim of revealing "the domination of her bodies by the state and its instrumentalities," as Sen explains, while at the same time providing "a world where that domination is explicitly combatable." But most importantly what Devi says is not a projection of victimization; in fact, it is a literary affirmation of subaltern resilience, a recuperation of their heroism, through its "herstories." "21 The power of "herstories" is that it stands for a direct reversal of the "masculine and often nationalist patriarchal" gaze of its historiographer, "patriathink" a fearless feminist reclamation of the reticent lives and mediums of subaltern women. But what Stivagnulo importantly places Devi's feminism squarely on the platform of real social conditions and really emerges from: attacks on the combined hegemonies of patriarchy in religious tradition and the state. Devi's activism-feminist literature also acts out as a thematic "despotic" narrative-and-agitation of subaltern hope and triumphant resistance. Similarly, Badri Acharya (2009) states that:

The Rudali as a ritual performance represents the elevation of the intersection of class, caste and gender roles enacted by the poor, untouchable women like Sanichari and Gulbadan. Simultaneously, it is a ritual by the rich and upper caste males which represents how the rich upper-caste males had exploited the poor and untouchable women. (63)

The depiction of the rudalis as performative ritual upholds the intersection of caste, class and gender by demonstrating how disenfranchised women like Gulbadan and Sanichari are made to perform grief for members of the upper caste. Though the ritual may seem like a socio-cultural practice, it exists as a form of domination in which the emotional and physically labouring bodies of the “untouchable” women are co-opted to uphold the status and symbolic power of the ruling classes; in this manner, “performing grief” acts as an institution of oppression through which inequalities are both enacted and naturalized. The rudalis’ cry thus becomes a performance of structural inequality, but also of its internalization; it also reveals the “paradox of uttered voice, of a voice so publicly displayed, their lived realities and subjectivities remain unrecognized within dominant discourse.

This dynamic can also be seen through the rhetorical pronouncement of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “the subaltern cannot speak”(Spivak, 1988, p. 308). Making subalternity more in focus than ever previously theorized, Spivak’s point reminds us that subordinated subjects must have the ability to be heard in order to speak. While the women’s ritualized gesture appears to be doing more in the direction of expression and liberation it is in fact only furthering their figuration as voiceless laborers working within the constraints of a system that denies them even the recognition of their efforts. We can see more clearly how structural oppression informs subalternity, but also how agency within this oppressive system is negotiated and compromised within the narrative itself. Though the work has been studied intensively for its feminist and socio-political content and implications there remains a lack of attention paid to the way Devi’s speech, narrative voice, and performance interweave to produce a subaltern consciousness. Correspondingly, the ways in which the ritualized labor of the rudali, in attempting to calibrate the scales of oppression and limited authority, is under analyzed. The focus on these details and their thematic significance allows us to better understand how the text authorizes and authenticates subordinated realities on a symbolic level.

Methods

The close analytical reading belongs to the salient parts of qualitative research. Following the qualitative research design accessing data and textual evidence from both primary and secondary sources, this study has selected Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali* as the primary text under scrutiny since it exposes the brutality faced by low-caste, poor women in a patriarchal society. It demonstrates how the marginalized find ways to assert dignity and resist and critiques societal ceremonies that veil underlying injustice. It also incorporates other books, academic journals and internet sources have been used to support the claim. Critical analysis and interpretation of the primary text by applying the critical insights from different theorists who critique colonial and nationalist histories by focusing on marginalized groups, such as Ranjit Guha, along with key figures like Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, David Ludden who collectively sought to rewrite history from "below" using Gramsci's concept of the Subaltern *will be used as theoretical tool*.

Subaltern Studies provides an important theoretical foundation for examining marginalized voices in literature and history. The concept of the "subaltern" refers to socially, politically, and economically marginalized groups who are excluded from dominant structures of power and representation. According to Ranajit Guha, the project of Subaltern Studies was to challenge elite-centered historiography and to recover the histories and experiences of those groups who had been ignored or silenced within official narratives. In this perspective, the subaltern includes peasants, tribal communities, laborers, lower-caste groups, and marginalized women who remain outside institutional power. Guha argues that historical discourse has often privileged elite voices while neglecting the agency and experiences of subordinate groups (Guha, 1982). Guha contends that conventional historical narratives tend to foreground elite perspectives, frequently overlooking the actions and lived experiences of subordinate groups.

In the reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*, this becomes a useful theoretical approach as the reader encounters the oppressed lower caste village woman-Sanichari-who is persecuted by the working of a dominated social structure and the structural position of lower caste women in an organized social system of caste, poverty and patriarchy have been dealt effectively to offer a grand testimony to the subaltern existence.

Subaltern Consciousness and Agency

While one of the primary objectives of the Subaltern Studies has been to recover the autonomous consciousness of oppressed groups, it has not been as if these subaltern groups are alien from their own perspective and power and having only a desire to lean back them. Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee note that the subaltern groups are active in their political and social practices that are unlike the dominant hegemonic power of the elite groups. Guha (1983) asserts that, subaltern insurgency and resistance of everyday practices can re-present the autonomous political consciousness of the subaltern groups while Chatterjee (1993) states the way that prevent groups build a new domain for forging new negotiations and making a new life.

This insight can be visualized in the sense of transforming mourning into a metier. The practice of turning into a *rudali* (professional mourner), besides been an escape from social exploitation, is an assertion of agency for women like Sanichari. It might be a strategy to negotiate the social inequality, but in parallel constructs space of agency for the subaltern woman. The example is indicative of the fact that the subaltern can devise ways of resistance and adaptation to the social order.

Representation and the Question of Speaking for the Subaltern

There is also an ongoing debate within the framework of Subaltern Studies over issues of representation and whether subaltern really has the voice within dominant discourses. In his famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) highlights how these marginal voices are often subverted

or captured by intellectuals and existing institutions. Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* as an attempt to attach importance or give voice to those marginalized district women whose realities are systematically marginalized within the dominant discourse. Characters like Sanichari therefore reveal the means or the mechanisms within the society that marginalized those subaltern voices and by doing so allow the voice of those suffering labour and struggling to be heard.

Gender and Subalternity

Gender plays a key role in the construction of subaltern identity where gender intersects with caste, class and patriarchy. Spivak (1988) explains how the marginalized subaltern women are doubly inferior meaning they get sidelined by the dominant power structure as well as the patriarchal systems within. Likewise, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) underlines the importance of acknowledging the multiple historical backgrounds that are associated with oppressed groups in postcolonial societies. As Sanichari's life has reflected this intersecting oppression her poverty, deprivation stemming from caste and patriarchy makes her downtrodden in all respects. The story of Sanichari thus has demonstrated the intersection of gender, class and caste in the construction of subaltern identity.

Elite and Subaltern Power Structures

As Ludden views "Subaltern Studies sought to restore the agency of the oppressed in history." (Ludden, 2002, p. 3). It gives power and resistance to marginalized people in the society. Subaltern Studies also model the division of elite and subordinate groups as a structural one. Guha, (1982:33) states that colonial and postcolonial societies are marked by an "insidious hierarchisation" that places landlords, administrators, and "upper-caste" groups "on top" and "subaltern" groups "on the margins". In *Rudali*, the configuration of power and disempowerment is sexualized in the contrast between oppressed rural women and privileged landlords. The practice of professional mourning demonstrates how resources are commodified within highest-caste, monopoly families, as fragile and vulnerable women provides negative emotional labor.

Marginality and the Recovery of Voice

A second significant project of Subaltern Studies refers to the recuperation of the silenced, or the subaltern voices unrepresented in official histories. Shahid Amin, (1995) emphasizes the importance of examining everyday experiences and local histories of oppressed communities. In this context, *Rudali* functions as a literary narrative that records the everyday struggles and emotions of marginalized rural women. By foregrounding their lived realities, the text aligns with the broader aim of Subaltern Studies to recover voices that have been historically silenced.

Resistance and Survival Strategies

The Subaltern Studies framework also addresses the production of survival techniques that oppressed groups employ to reconcile themselves to the existing social order. Instead of portraying these groups as exclusively passive victims of domination, the framework is interested in the ways they adapt and negotiate. In *Rudali*, Sanichari's change of identity from impoverished widow to professional

mourner can be understood as such a survival technique. While the profession is derivative of an exploitative order, it also preserves Sanichari's economic sustainability as well as an aspect of agency

Analysis

Rudali compellingly resolves the lives of professional mourners *rudalis* to expose a social order in which survival itself becomes a measure of defiance. Set against a society immersed in hidebound beliefs and rigid hierarchies, the novella foregrounds the brutal connections of caste, class, gender, and power. At the centre of this narrative stands Sanichari, a poor, low-caste woman whose life is marked by persistent deficiency, loss, and exploitation at the hands of landlords, moneylenders, and feudal elites. Yet, rather than remaining a passive victim, Sanichari gradually emerges as a figure who lapses rooted social, religious, economic, and moral boundaries in her struggle to stay alive. As Devi states "leaving the little child at home, Sanichari laboured hard for the sake of a little security in her household. She would go off to the malik's house... (56)". Sanichari's struggle for survival in her familial state, which is the fate of subalterns, illustrates the structural invisibility of subaltern women's labour, which, though indispensable for survival, remains systematically unrecognized by dominant power structures. According to Spivak's influential formulation, "*the subaltern cannot speak*" because structurally marginalized groups especially women are denied an epistemic or institutional space from which their voices can be recognized (Spivak, 1988, p. 306). In Spivak's analysis, gendered subalternity is a form of double obstruction: subaltern women are caught between patriarchal and hegemonic discourses that erase their agency, meaning that even acts of resistance or survival often go unheard or are misinterpreted within elite frameworks.

Rudali illustrates how subaltern experiences are systematically excluded from dominant narratives, even when they constitute significant forms of resistance. Ranajit Guha (1982) contends that elite historiography privileges dominant actors while erasing the "politics of the people." In Devi's text, Sanichari's persistent efforts to sustain her family remain outside the sphere of social recognition, despite their critical importance. Her labour does not enter official or social discourse as meaningful action but is instead normalized as part of her subordinate status. This reflects Guha's argument that subaltern agency exists but is rarely acknowledged within elite-centred frameworks. Consequently, Sanichari's struggle embodies a form of lived resistance that remains structurally invisible, revealing how systems of representation perpetuate marginalization even while depending on subaltern labour. As Rosalind O' Hanlon states that "through the restoration of subjectivity and the focus on experience, the conceit is that a textual space has been opened up in which subaltern groups may speak for themselves and present their hidden past in their own distinctive voices"(164). Rosalind O'Hanlon's observation emphasizes that recovering subaltern subjectivity requires creating a textual space where marginalized groups can articulate their experiences and reclaim histories that are otherwise silenced (O'Hanlon, 2000, p. 164). In *Rudali*, this is exemplified when Sanichari confronts the exploitative demands of Ghambir, saying, "He expects the very women whose he ruined to cry over his corpse?!" (Devi & Ganguli, 1997, p.

45). Through her incredulity and pragmatic response, the narrative foregrounds the lived realities of subaltern women, giving them a voice within a literary framework that resists elite-centered narratives. By highlighting their strategies for survival and negotiation, Devi opens a textual space that allows the experiences of marginalized women to emerge on their own terms, aligning with O'Hanlon's assertion that subalterns can "present their hidden past in their own distinctive voices...that subordinate groups have a history which is not given to them by elites, but a history of their *own*" (Ludden, 2002, p.135-145). Subalterns create their own history raising the voice against dominant groups.

In *Rudali*, this is established in the example of Sanichari reacting to Ghambir's exploitative requests of, "He expects the very women whose he ruined to cry over his corpse?! (Devi & Ganguli, 1997, p. 45). Through her incredulousness and pragmatic response, the narrative brings to the foreground her lived position as a subaltern woman--thereby amplifying her voice in the text that represents her position against that of the educated elite. By bringing their modes of survival and negotiation to the foreground, Devi constructs a textual space in which the voices of under-represented women can speak for themselves: "Subalterns could reveal and present their hidden past in their own distinctive voices."

The novella yet again reveals how the production of subaltern labour is commodified in this ritualized performance of mourning, turning the act of grief into yet another transcendent commodity to be bought and sold. This is seen in the scene: "The *rudalis* surrounded his swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground... Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double!" (Devi, p. 91). Here mourning the dead is not a spontaneous act but a performance calculated based on economic viability. Guha (1982) summarizes this process in analyzing the marginalization of subaltern practice. He argues that even though labour can be seen, it is taken out of part of the production per se and hence cannot be conceived of as having so much subjective meaning, as being, in other words, an element in rituals in the control of the elite. The focus is on the mass consumed and affected dead and dead elite, while the embodied labour of the *rudalis* is made peripheral in the strategy. It is, however, Sanichari's ability to "teenk," to intensify her mourning in the hope of getting a better pay- rise, which demonstrates her manoeuvring capacity within the oppressive system, providing her with the only agency she can possibly achieve. As Devi states:

'Dulan later pitifully reports to Sanichari, the humiliating request Ghambir sing made of his... to act as *rudalis* at his funeral. Sanichari exclaims, 'He wants the very women his *jism* has ruined to mourn over his body?!' Dulan softly rebukes her, 'get over all that. Think about yourself'". (45)

This scene thus exemplifies the moral hypocrisy of the social relationships constructed under feudal patriarchy. Ghambir, a man of higher caste, can make the women he has raped and robbed of their lives do the mourning at his funeral--transform grief into a commodity and cement his dominance, even after death. The shock in Sanichari's incredulous exclaim, "He expects the very women whose he ruined to cry over his corpse?!" is like the shocked exclamations of subalternity, the reminder of the divided lives of the subjected as opposed to those of the administrators of their fate and the belief that survival for subaltern women depends

on the conscious manipulation of moral outrage (Light 2008). As Dulan suggests to her, “Your own business,” sanichari’s pragmatic engagement with the situation--drawing on her agency to concentrate on her own interests--becomes appropriate as an adaptive alternative to confrontation. This corresponds with Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) discussion of subalternity, in which she claims that subalternity as experienced by women--situates a subaltern within a structure that refuses to acknowledge them. In this instance, the empathetic response of sanichari is indicative of the limited agency of the subject under subalternity that is to continue negotiating means to survive within a system that is exploitive and veils their existence through silence (Spivak 1988 p.308).

Sanichari’s entry into professional mourning further reveals how subaltern agency operates in conditions of coercion rather than that of free choice. Her foray into the *rudali* group resulted not from moral choice but from sheer economic compulsion. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) points out, subaltern agency cannot be understood from a standard paradigm of free choice; rather it can be understood only in terms of structural limitations which render the possibility of self-representation futile. From this perspective, a performative display of tears comes to occupy the paradoxical dimension of “constrained agency”; namely, the production of the very conditions of its own normativity and comprehension, the very survival in the same conditions of normativity and familiarity that continue to marginalize her and constrain her under conditions of economic deprivation.

Rudali presents subaltern survival as a form of resistance that challenges dominant power structures while remaining embedded within them. Sanichari's journey does not culminate in overt rebellion; rather, it reflects the continuous process of negotiation with oppressive social systems. This aligns with the subaltern studies' broader emphasis on recognizing the adaptive strategies of marginalized communities within hegemonic frameworks. As Antonio Gramsci observes, "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 55).

By foregrounding Sanichari's lived experience, Devi not only critiques the entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and gender but also reconfigures narrative space to make subaltern realities visible. *Devi's story reaffirms the hierarchies of caste, class and gender, the story also folds in the sites of her characters lived realities and thus puts them on the map of narrative visibility.* In doing so, the novella functions as both a literary and theoretical intervention, demonstrating how survival itself can become a subtle yet powerful form of resistance in a deeply unequal society.

The account offers a rich depiction of the condition of the subaltern caught within the intersecting sites of caste, class, and gender, and illustrates how the labouring and suffering subjectivity of the lower-caste rural woman is structurally suppressed. Her endless fight for survival against the odds is that which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) refers to as the subaltern's epistemic silence: the inability of the marginalised subject to speak within the hegemonic discursive domains of representations. In this, the lived experience of the subaltern is thus not just the subjective narrative of an individual, but also of a structural invisibility.

This argument also shows how the institution of the rudali becomes a space where the existence of both exploitation and agency are revealed. The purchase of grief by elite families through the hiring of the marginalised women to act as rudalis exposes how the feudal state attempts to appropriate and monitor the agency of subaltern labour. At the same time, Sanichari's manipulation of the norm of life as *rudali* is an example of a negotiated agency; rather than sit back and fight it, her subtle use of the profession is an example of resilience within subalternity a point reiterated by Guha (1982) who suggests that subaltern practices appear to operate outside the features accepted by the dominant, but are in fact forms of resistance.

Rudali creates its counter-discursive space by foregrounding the everyday actuality of its oppressed women. Sanichari's conversion from destitute widow to shrewd survivor marks the emergence of resilient agency of a new kind within the folds of constraint. Although the fabric of exploitation has remained intact, the novella demonstrates HOW a subaltern subject employs the subaltern agency tactically while exposing the contradictions within that system. *Rudali*, therefore, does not only memorialise the oppression but also redefine resistance as a mode of survival.

Conclusion

This study argues that *Rudali* represents subaltern life as a condition shaped by the intersecting forces of caste, class, and gender, where survival itself becomes a form of negotiated agency. The analysis justifies this thesis by demonstrating how Sanichari's lived experiences her labour, deprivation, and eventual transformation into a professional mourner reflect the structural marginalization theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha. The research questions concerning the representation of subaltern consciousness, the commodification of labour, and the nature of agency are addressed through close textual analysis, which reveals that Sanichari's actions embody a form of constrained resistance. The study fulfils its objectives by demonstrating that the narrative not only lays bare the entrenched structures of systematic exploitation but also illuminates the nuanced, adaptive strategies through which marginalized subjects sustain themselves and negotiate conditions of oppression. In doing so, it shifts critical attention from overt acts of defiance to the less visible, yet deeply significant, modes of endurance embedded within the subaltern life.

The analysis argues that subaltern empowerment in *Rudali* is not articulated through explicit rebellion; rather, it is realized through pragmatic engagements with exploitative systems, where the very act of survival assumes political significance. Such a reading challenges reductive and conventional notions of agency, urging instead a more layered and context-sensitive understanding of resistance within subaltern frameworks. Future research may extend this inquiry by examining the interplay between narrative form and subaltern voice, undertaking comparative analyses with other postcolonial texts, or exploring the roles of performativity and affect in the representation of marginalized subjectivities.

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