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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURAL STUDIES IN “RUDALI”- A PERSPECTIVE OF MAHASWETA DEVI

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Abstract

This paper analyses the culture of Ganju community and highlights social exclusion and oppression by the high-class people of the same village in the work of the social activist Mahasweta Devi's, "Rudali". In this novella, Mahasweta Devi brings out how the marginalised community and economically down-trodden people are oppressed by the higher-class people in the same village. Through the female protagonist, she portrays the sufferings inflicted by the society on the down-trodden women who are abandoned by their families. She depicts the practise of a particular community which becomes her identity in society which subjugates her. Not only that, it also discusses about the subjugation of men by the zamindars in the village for their needs, which was also one of the reasons for the tragic life of women belonging to their family. The novella also focuses on the beliefs, practices and the culture of the Community and the social and economic aspects as well.

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Introduction:-

Indian writing in English focuses on the works of Indian writers who represent the voice of India which is heard throughout the world. World renowned Indian writers like Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Salman Rushdie, Mahasweta Devi and others, have dealt with themes related to social issues of India, including concepts of multi-culturalism, gender aspects, politics and so on. Mahasweta Devi, an eminent twentieth Century women writer and activist has focussed on real life issues, lifestyle of the people, custom and cultural practices. The works mainly focusses on the existing oppression and exploitation of the marginalised communities (tribal's and dalit's) that exist in the society and the subjugation of both men and women. Since Mahasweta Devi's works reflects society in terms of cultural manifestation, her works can also be analysed in the frame work of cultural studies.

Liyanage (2015) defines Cultural Studies as the study of culture in order to better understand a society and its politics. Edgar, A., & Sedgwick, P. (2007) explains that "the exponents of cultural studies sought to situate cultural products explicitly in relation to other social practices, and particularly in relation to political structures and social hierarchies, such as race, class and gender".

Chris barker (2005) says Hall, defines what is at stake is the connection that cultural studies seek to make to matters of power and cultural politics. Cultural studies not only talk about the power and politics but also "the exploration of

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representations and 'for' marginalised social groups and the need for cultural change. Hence, cultural study is a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice. Here knowledge is never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality, that is of the place from which one speaks, to whom, and for what purposes."

Each part of the country, state and community has different cultural practices according to the norms. Mahasweta Devi in her novella 'Rudali' focuses on the oppression and the exploitation of the marginalised people especially women of dushads and ganju and the dominant role played by cultural practices. The subjugation of men, the exploitation of the marginalised people and the beliefs and practices of a particular community are discussed in this research work through various characters from the novella "Rudali".

Athista.K.R.(2014)reinforces the same as "Mahasweta Devi is a major contemporary woman writer who has made significant contribution to Indian literary and cultural studies. She makes use of her creative energy to give an artistic expression to the harsh realities of poverty, exploitation and death in modern Indian society".

Oppression in the form of Cultural Practice:

According to Pryadarshin.P et.al (2018)"Mahasweta Devi 's approach to oppression can be further understood from Young's concept of "acceptable cultural imperialism." "Cultural imperialism at the same time involves imposing the culture of those in power and establishing it as a norm. The dominant groups control the beliefs, mannerisms and communication methods of the oppressed. In this way, the dominant group's beliefs are disseminated, expressing their values, goals, achievements and experience. If one dares to refuse it, one is subject to oppression". "Mahasweta Devi's work reveals how cultural imperialism in India has led to further oppression of the marginalised."

Mahasweta devi's explicates the harsh realities of the down-trodden and marginalised people life, the misery they undergo because of the upper- class people and also reflects on the contemporary issues and social problems they encounter in her works. Mahasweta devi's novella Rudali focuses on the marginalised people, the dushads and Ganjus, in the Tahad Village of Rajasthan and the different beliefs and practices in their village. In the name of the practices, the high-class people like the zamindars and the gomasthas in the village exploit the poverty -stricken people in many ways. They demand money from the down-trodden marginalised villagers and if they are unable to pay the amount, the women of their house have to work as slaves in the big houses of the Zamindars. Almost all the male dushads and ganjus are jailed for some petty reasons which was a trick made by the Malik Mahajan Ramavatar to keep the poor under their control. The novella deals with the ruthless exploitation of the poor, the lowest strata of the society and their poverty in the oppressive landlord system. Smitha.M(2007) states, Rudali is the de-sentimentalised narrative of the else romanticized rural area and it can be considered as Mahasweta Devi's call for resistance and she quotes Katyal's remark;

Mahasweta Devi replaces the normative urban perception of the 'eternal' Indian village as unchanging, peaceful, nourished by tradition -a version of the romance of the pastorate-with her insider knowledge and sub-alternised perception of power structures and corrupt ways of socially and economically dominant classes. (93)

The people of the village have a practise of not keeping the corpse over-night in their home. If they have not done the proceedings for the dead body and dispose it before night, they have to pay the cost of repentance to the zamindars. In the beginning of the novella, the protagonist's Mother-in-law dies, "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." (Mahasweta devi 55) to arrange for the cremation. The protagonist was forced to do the cremation rituals and bury the dead body as soon as possible. If not, she has to pay the repentance for the village aristocrats. It is impossible for a family to pay repentance which does not have a cupful of grain in the house. Sanichari doesn't even have time to cry for her mother-in-law. In the name of belief and practice she is forced to bury the corpse in a hurry.

The people in the village go to the Baishaki mela at Tohri to offer and worship Lord Shiva. In the grand mela the rich people donate pots and pots of milk to the lord which was collected for few days in the tanks and offered to the poor. This led to the death of the protagonist's husband as there are no hospital facilities to care for them and the corpse was cremated at Tohri. When she comes back to the village with her son, she is forced to put her thumbprint in the paper for Rs 50 for getting Rs.20 as a repentance for conducting the funeral of her husband at Tohri.

The down-trodden are paid back in the name of the same cultural practice by the rich people. In some parts of Rajasthan, the rich have the practise of not crying for their beloved one's death in their family, instead they hire Rudali's for mourning. Rudalis are the women of a lower caste who are hired as professional mourners upon the death of upper-caste males. "Rudaali" (roo-dah-lee), is literally translated as "female weeper" or "weeping woman". They are also been isolated from the society since they touch the dead bodies. Pryadarshin.P et.al (2018) "the 'rudalis' in Devi's novel Rudali is another category of people isolated from society since they touch the dead bodies and mourn for the dead. Such marginalization is the subject of the argument here."

All these happenings described in the story substantiate the prevalence of oppression of the down-trodden economically and socially in Indian rural areas. Mahasweta devi depicts the pathetic condition of the poor people who are unable to spend money for the crisis of saving their life, and on the other hand the sophisticated life of the rich who are spending for their loved one's death rituals. Rana, A., & Sambyal, S. (2020) resounds the same as "The marginalized people have no nothing to speed for the treatment of their ailing patients. On the other hand, rich people spend more and more on the death and rituals of their loved ones to show the prestige of their community".

Subjugation of women:

Indrani Singh Rai (2016) echoed as "Mahasweta's women characters focus the subalterns' surging struggle against bare and blatant exploitation. Her novels, dramas and short stories are actually accounts of an obnoxious and autocratic socio-economic system where the excruciating fight is between human being and unbearable hunger and survival, a system which compels the "have nots to live in a margin."

Mahasweta devi unmasks the pathetic life of the protagonist Sanichari in the novella rudali, her name itself was considered as a bad significance by the village people.

"To herself she would say- Huh! Because I was born on and named
after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were
born on a Monday-was your life any happier? Somri,
Budhu, Moongri, Bishri- do any of them have happier lives?" (Mahasweta Devi 54)

Sanichari belongs to the prevalent corrupt system; she is not represented as an individual but stands for the whole community of the down-trodden in the village. She is depicted as a sad, suffering human being who finally emerges as a survivor. Pramod.k (2019) echoes the same as "In the very beginning, she is presented as 'voiceless' dalit woman undergoing suppression but onwards she becomes an empowering agent of revolt against age-old social customs. The novelist undoubtedly exposes the deceit and corruption of the feudals against the lower castes". Her life is even more tragic as a woman who lost all her family members within a very short period including her son and husband. Even when her family was with her, she had to struggle as she belonged to the marginalised community but the burden was shared by her hardworking husband who had hopes to live a moderate life. After her husband's death, her son Budhua, who was very responsible like his father took the yoke of poverty on his shoulders, was her only hope.

Ghosh.A.(2020)reflects the same as "Sanichari was caught within the web of motherhood and the powerlessness that the relationship had spun around her. Instead of mourning, she caught the reign of life strongly and moved forward with hopes stemming around her son." But unfortunately, 'he contracted the wasting fever and hacking cough of tuberculosis', she felt as if the flames of the funeral pyre were burning within her. Mahasweta Devi gives a psychological view of the mother who is already been left alone and the dreams of a mother about her son scattering into pieces because of the disease. But even after facing a distressing situation, she didn't leave the hope; her dreams had changed shape in the form of her grand-son Haroa who was under the care of Sanichari. Her suffering continued as her grandson also ran away leaving her behind to fight her own battle and again, she feels hopeless, when she was in search of her grandson Haroa in the market place, she comes across Bhikni (Kalikambli) who transformed the struggleful life of sanichari into a successful life. Sanichari is a friend of Bhikni and she too was abandoned by her family and sheltered by sanichari. And when they both are in search of a job for survival, As Dulan, her neighbour says, "there is no bigger god than one's belly. For the belly's sake everything is permissible" and asks them to go as Rudalis, Sanichari exploded and said,

"I can't shed tears", Dulan replied "it is not emotional tears, these tears are your
livelihood- just as you cut wheat and plough land, So you'll be able to do it."

Passivity is replaced by rebellion and revolution; gender is subsumed into the idea of class and it is not solely the struggle of the women but also that of the class of the oppressed. Both of them accept to go as Rudalis for the landlord's death in the village to get whatever they give: cloth, money, and rice etc. for their survival. In the novella Sanichari did not cry or mourn for her own kith and kin but she had to shed tears for her survival.

"She thought that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them". (Mahasweta Devi)

Guru Shobana (2018) has stated that, the oppression Sanichari faced in socio economic condition has a very bad impact on her psychologically, which remains the reason for her inability to cry on her own destitution.

The randis in the market place were not very attentive to these two; but when started wailing so loudly and sang with such well-chosen phrases in praise of Bhairab singh all of them were stunned. They both were given five rupees and two and a half sers of rice. Again, they were called on the kriya ceremony and given clothes and they feasted on puri, kachori and besan laddus which they shared with dulan's wife.

They started it as a profession. Bhikni goes to the market to check who is in the deathbed and gets ready; they wear a lengthy black cloth, knot some churan into their anchals, munching on the churan they go to the big house negotiate with the gomasthas and they start fixing different rates for their performances like if they

"just for wailing one kind of rate,

wailing, and rolling on the ground five rupees one sikka.

wailing, and rolling on the ground and beating one's head five rupees

and two sikkas. wailing, and beating one's breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground, there –
for that the charge is six rupees." (Mahasweta Devi 75)

Since there are no good rudalis like these two they had a demand, even the lalas and sahus started to call them for death.....Dulan even asked sanichari to start a union and be a president for that union. They not only go and earn as Rudalis but they also call the whores along with them and negotiate for them also. Life was manageable but suddenly one day Bhikni, wanted to go for her nephew-in-laws daughter's marriage in Ranchi. The whole life of sanichari was changed by bhikni. Look of her home changed, everything in her life changed; it's like a game of chance for sanichari. Sometimes life of the people will change by the strangers. But still the fate of people will not be changed.; bhikni did not come back only her death news reached sanichari through Bhikni's relative. Sanichari has not come across this feel even when her son and her husband died, her grandson had left, her daughter-in-law ran away, its not grief it is fear.

She has become old; she fears about her life without bhikni, "considerations of the stomach are important than anything else" (Mahasweta devi, Rudali).so she went to the red-light area of Tohri to bring the whores as Rudali's, what bhikni was doing all these days has to be continued by her for her survival.

Indrani(2016) says, the essential resilience in Sanichari finds its path and she emerges as confident, in control and empowered. She confronts her social superiors audaciously. She has proved that her howl of grief has changed into a howl of victory, in other way it is the unyielding elation of the essentialists". When, she "is denied her right to live, she fights back. Rudali unfolds the story of people like Sanichari, who forever search for a real space within the mainstream where they can belong" actually with a permanent shelter and harmonious exitance.

Sheeba (2019) describes that Mahasweta Devi's stories reveal the horrific reality of women's suffering and their ability to endure and resist. The characters are given voices by Mahasweta. She exposes the characters' 'unspeakable' truth. "Her stories are the basics for justifying localized figures where the female becomes the means of social and familiar savior. She puts the female with in them with their strength and modes of existence. Her stories have not only been the part, but also the agent for bringing the change.

Conclusion:-

The cultural practices through which the rich were scrutinizing the poor has become the strength of the poor for survival. The whole scenario changed because of the cultural practice in the novella. Mahasweta devi has focussed the traits and survival of the marginalised people with the cultural practice of a particular community. At the

beginning of the novella, the rich people who demand money from the poor for negligible mistakes done by them in the name of culture, has to repay it to the poor at the end for their own needs in the same culture.

Since she is known for her feministic work, the novella also portrays with a feminist touch were the women who don't even cry for their own problems and deeds, they have started shedding their tears for their survival. They started crying in small groups for death, but later they had a good relationship with each other and they cared and shared for each other among themselves. They sheltered women like them in the society and they had a separate way of living. In all the aspects they had their own way of life. They started with crying, but later it became a performance. According to the performances they were paid by the rich people. The way of wearing the dress, their costumes etc. added credit to her description. The short story Rudali was adapted into a film in the same name by Kalpana Lajmi which also had the same outline of the importance of the cultural practice.

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