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CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK IN MOURNING?: A COMPARATIVE READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S SHORT STORY AND KALPANA LAJMI'S FILM, *RUDAALI*

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Abstract

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak posed an incendiary question in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). This continues to reverberate across subaltern studies: can the voices of the oppressed ever be heard outside the power of dominant narratives? This question becomes particularly important when the subaltern voices are coerced to express themselves through the ritual of grief. Against this backdrop, this paper examines Mahasweta Devi's short story Rudali and Kalpana Lajmi's cinematic adaptation of the same (1993), focusing on how mourning functions as both commodified labor and a broken account of suffering. In Mahashweta Devi's story, Sanichari and her community of lower-caste rudalis reveal caste hierarchies while retaining a sense of selfhood that refuses to disappear. Lajmi's film, on the other hand while foregrounding women's solidarity, looks at mourning through melodrama and demonstrating shared suffering, thereby diluting the radical caste critique of the original. By reading story and film side by side through Spivak's framework, the paper argues that Rudali highlights both the possibilities and the limits of subaltern speech suggesting that even in mourning, the subaltern's voice remains caught between expression and control by others.

Keywords

Subaltern Studies, Caste, Mourning, Mediation, Cinema, etc.

Full Article

Introduction: Can the Subaltern Mourn?:

Mahasweta Devi's short story *Rudali* (1979) and Kalpana Lajmi's film *Rudaali* (1993) both focus on Sanichari, an impoverished lower-caste woman from Rajasthan. Her life is full of unrelenting struggle; the death of her husband, alienation from her son, social ostracisation and backbreaking poverty. The tradition of *rudalis*, or professional mourners, who mourn for the upper castes, is popular in Rajasthan. There is a show of weeping and wailing, which is like a performance. Sanichari is a professional mourner, who ironically is unable to shed tears at her own miseries, but her tears flow in abundance when she is paid to weep at the funerals organised by wealthy upper caste men. This paradox lies at the centre of Devi's story: grief becomes perceptible only when monetised for elite rituals, while the personal distress of marginalised women remains disregarded, unrecognised and obscure.

Kalpana Lajmi's cinematic rendition works on this idea but moves its emphasis. In *Rudaali*, Sanichari (Dimple Kapadia) establishes an emotional bond with Bhikni (Rakhi Gulzar), another lower-caste woman who introduces her to the profession of mourning. The film looks upon their camaraderie and sisterhood, looking at mourning as not just labour but also a precarious

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form of community solidarity and self-esteem. Through Bhikni, Sanichari learns a way of expressing emotions which are otherwise crushed by caste and patriarchy. Yet, the film re-examines Devi's unembellished critique through cinematic and melodramatic conventions. Lyrical songs composed by Bhupen Hazarika, and a graphic spectacle. The cinematic medium, therefore, translates a story of caste-based dispossession into one of resilience and female dignity. While this broadens its appeal, it inevitably softens Devi's sharper critique of caste oppression.

This tension takes one back to the theoretical question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her ground-breaking essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). Spivak opines that the subaltern, who are excluded from edifices of power, discourse, and depiction, cannot "speak" in a way that is perceived as powerful. When the subaltern does make an effort to speak, her words are controlled, recast, or appropriated by dominant discourses. These, according to Spivak can be colonial, patriarchal, or elite-nationalist. Spivak illustrates this with the example of *sati* (widow immolation), where colonial administrators interpreted the act as uncivilised custom and patriarchal society justified it as a wifely duty and devotion. In both cases, the widow herself, the actual subject, disappeared; her voice was never accessible. Hence, Spivak concludes, "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 292–296).

When we apply Spivak's question to Devi and Lajmi's works, the issue becomes more pressing, and another question is raised: Can the subaltern mourn? Grief and mourning are extremely personal, but here the subaltern grief is mediated by structures of power, especially caste, gender and economics. In the short story, Sanichari weeps only when she is summoned by the upper caste elite to perform a ritual of mourning. Her tears are commodified by the landlords. Her personal grief is immaterial within these social structures because she cannot weep at her personal tragedies. This reaffirms Spivak's point: The subaltern may cry, but those cries are heard only as part of a ritual that reaffirms upper-caste prestige.

Lajmi's film complicates this issue. On the one hand, *Rudaali, the film,* stresses the idea of sisterhood, giving Sanichari a bond with Bhikni that aids her eventual release of long pent-up tears. In one of the most powerful scenes of the film, Sanichari finally weeps, but not as a *rudali,* not for the landlords, but for her own past and for Bhikni (who is discovered to be her mother) whose death becomes the emotional catalyst. Here, mourning becomes both personal catharsis and collective resilience, suggesting that subaltern grief can indeed break the silence and dominant discourses, which, as Foucault suggests, are not monolithic. On the other hand, Spivak's warning about control remains important. Lajmi's film reframes subaltern mourning through the conventions of mainstream cinema songs, melodrama, and spectacle. In doing so, it risks reinscribing the very silences Devi's text attempted to disrupt. The subaltern can "speak" or "mourn," but her voice is still filtered through cinematic forms designed for middle-class audiences.

This comparison demonstrates the different ways literature and film retracts the subaltern voice through cinematic codes. Devi's short story starkly exposes caste hierarchies, presenting mourning as a fissured testimony of women's lived dispossession. Sanichari's grief, though commodified, is a reminder of marginalised lives erased. Lajmi's film, while strengthening emotional resonance and female solidarity, inexorably intercedes this testimony through melodrama. Both works illustrate Spivak's insight: the subaltern's voice can never be fully free of control. Yet they also reveal the persistent attempts of subaltern women to affirm their presence, even though fractured, within oppressive frameworks.

Scholars such as Ajay Sekher opine that Devi's *Rudali* "forces visibility on those women who would otherwise remain anonymous in elite narratives" (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 2006). Reetamoni Das and Debarshi Nath, writing in the *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, emphasise that Lajmi's recasting changes tone and tenor, turning Devi's caste criticism into a more schmaltzy

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narrative meant for a niche audience (Das and Nath, 121). The opinions of these critics prove that once represented through cinema, the radical edge of the subaltern voice risks weakening. Yet both the story and the film stage grief as a paradoxical space at once commodified and resistant, quietened and spoken.

Thus, this paper argues that Devi and Lajmi together offer balanced insights into the question "Can the subaltern mourn?" Devi's text reveals how mourning, even when commodified, becomes a fractured testimony of survival. Lajmi's film dramatises the possibilities of solidarity, but also demonstrates how representation reshapes and dilutes the subaltern voice. By reading both works through Spivak, we can say that mourning is never purely personal or universal; it is structured by caste, gender, and power, yet it still carries the traces of resilience.

Grief and Testimony in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*:

The profession of *rudalis*, women engaged to weep publicly at funerals, is an integral part of the social and ritual fabric of Rajasthan. In Devi's story, this practice demonstrates the brutal irony of caste hierarchies. Subaltern women, whose own lives are full of misery and in conspicuousness, are called to "perform mourning" for the deaths of rich landowners. Their wailing is prized, even demanded, but only as part of ritual spectacle designed to reinforce elite prestige. The rudalis' tears are "for hire," serving the needs of those who have historically oppressed them. The contradiction is glaring; Sanichari's personal tragedies merit no recognition. It is only when her grief is appropriated for funerary practices that her voice is accorded cultural recognition.

The setting of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* (1979) is rural Rajasthan, where social milieu is strictly defined by caste and gender. The chief protagonist is a poor Dalit woman. Sanichari, whose name itself ("born on a Saturday, under an unlucky planet) suggests a life predestined for remaining in perpetual agony. From the beginning, her story is marked by adversity; her husband dies, she is separated from only son, and is constantly shunned by those who should have supported her. Even her community treats her with constant coldness, looking at her as a bearer of bad luck.

Despite suffering a lifetime of personal tragedy, Sanichari is ironically unable to weep for her own miseries. Her emotional impassivity becomes her most defining trait, as she struggles to express grief in her private life, unable to shed a single tear, which earns her the moniker *Sookhi Sanichari.* This inability stands in blatant contrast to the role she later takes on where she must display sorrow publicly, crying as a professional rudali at the funerals of upper-caste elites. As Ajay Sekher notes in his Bahujan reading, of *Rudali* that it is not just a feminist text but also a commentary on how caste operates as a primary determinant of suffering and survival for Bahujan women, emphasizing the resilience and agency Sanichari embodies despite her marginalized status. (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 2006)

A crucial point in the story is Sanichari'smeeting with Bhikni, another lower-caste woman who becomes her confidante and admits her into the profession of mourning. Bhikni provides both practical survival strategies and emotional support. In a world where men abandon women, Bhikni's friendship is crucial.

Here, Spivak's perspectives from "Can the Subaltern Speak?" become important. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak outside negotiation of dominant discourse. In *Rudali*, this truth is twisted: Sanichari's anguish is recognized only when sifted through ritual performances controlled by the upper castes. Yet Devi shows how, within this control, fragments of testimony slip through. Each wail becomes a coded form of speech, conveying histories of suffering that dominant discourse seeks to erase. *Rudali* also represents the intersectionality of race and class. Anjum Katyal writes "Every loss she suffers is because of the dire poverty, the constricted life, the total lack of hope any change or improvement" (Katyal, 7).

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The Bodhi Journal (2019) also highlights this intersection: *Rudali* demonstrates how Dalit women's grief is doubly exploited first by patriarchal structures that deny them dignity, and second by caste hierarchies that reduce their emotions to a service. Hasmukh Patel, writing on Mahasweta Devi's feminism, adds that even though Devi resisted the label "feminist," her works unflinchingly expose women's strategies of survival in oppressive structures (Patel, 2012).

By situating mourning within caste and gender politics, Devi does something subversive. In Rajasthan's feudal set up, grief is monetized which the subaltern have to pay with their crying. Their cries may serve landlords, but they also unsettle the smooth performance of upper class mourning by injecting subaltern bodies and voices into the scene. Sanichari may not "speak" in Spivak's sense, but her cries, fissured, negotiated and mediated, still articulate an existence that refuses erasure. Her voice may be appropriated, but it cannot be silenced completely

Ranajit Guha's concept of the "small voice of history" is particularly useful in understanding *Rudali*. Guha emphasised how subaltern histories are excluded from mainstream narratives, yet persist in fragments, testimonies, and every day practices. Devi's story exemplifies this. Sanichari and Bhikni, through their profession, incise into privileged rituals the unacknowledged presence of lower-caste (Guha, 45-47).

Scholars have approached *Rudali* from multiple angles. Ajay Sekher reads it as a Bahujan text that forces upper-caste society to confront its exploitation. Hasmukh Patel highlights its feminist concerns, particularly the emphasis on women's survival strategies. The Bodhi Journal underscores the intersection of caste, class, and gender in shaping mourning. Together, these perspectives confirm that *Rudali* is not merely a story about grief but a look into how grief itself is structured by social hierarchies.

By centering Sanichari and Bhikni, Devi brings into focus the "small voice of history" of lower-caste women. Their grief, fractured and mediated, becomes both a survival strategy and a testimony of lives otherwise erased. In this way, *Rudali* attempts to let the subaltern mourn—though always within the limits that Spivak so powerfully identifies.

Mediated Mourning in Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali*:

Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali* (1993) represents one of the most powerful attempts to bring Mahasweta Devi's politically resonant short story into the visual medium of cinema. Yet in doing so, it reshapes the silhouettes of grief, shifting focus from caste as the prime focus of oppression to a more generalised meditation on women's survival and solidarity.

The film transforms grief into performance and a witness to suffering. Even as mourning is appropriated into ritual for the upper castes, the presence of music, friendship, and solidarity complicates the storyline line opening up a space where silence is temporarily broken. The lamentation, carried on screen through both voice and song, links personal pain with social critique, turning Sanichari's silenced fortitude into a form of delicate verbalisation. Together, Sanichari and Bhikni create a sensitive and beautiful female sisterhood of survival. While their mourning may be performed for landlords, their shared experiences create moments of authenticity. Kalpana Lajmi's film heightens this relationship by using songs as emotional support. Bhupen Hazarika's haunting songs, with lyrics by Gulzar, serve as narrative devices that show emotion. One of the most touching moments is highlighted by the melancholy melody *"*Beete Na Beete Na Raina*."* The lyrics evoke edgy nights and restless winds that resonate Sanichari's own inner loneliness. The song is more than just Bhupen Hazarika's music to draw audiences, it symbolises the emotional consistency of subaltern womanhood, where sorrow is a constant companion. The song "Dil hoom hoom kare" highlights Sanichari's subjugated longing and the burden of her struggles. These songs exalt mourning into lived experience, presenting anguish as gracious and collective rather than as commodified labour.

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Visually, Lajmi uses wide shots of the desert landscape to match Sanichari's emotional barrenness, coupled with powerful close-ups during scenes of lamentation. The use of red and white in funeral processions stages grief as both ceremonious spectacle and cinematic performance. Such choices heighten the emotive appeal but also shift focus from structural caste critique to universal human suffering. Like the short story, the film focuses on Sanichari as a woman marked by dryness emotionally, sterile unable to shed tears despite a lifetime of misfortune. Her nickname, "Sookhi Sanichari", is a cruel social judgment that captures her inability to outwardly articulate pain. The irony is central: in a society that extracts tears from lower-caste women for the funerals of upper castes, Sanichari cannot weep for her tragedies

Her misfortunes an unfaithful husband, abandonment by her son, and years of isolation—remain unwept, producing numbness that Lajmi emphasizes through restrained acting and stark visual imagery. In contrast to Devi's story, where male figures frame Sanichari's entry into professional mourning, the film places Bhikni at the heart of the narrative. Bhikni introduces Sanichari to the profession of mourning, but more importantly, she provides comradeship and worthiness. Initially their relationship suggests a surrogate mother-daughter relationship, but it is later revealed that Bhikni is Sanichari's biological mother.

This revelation is importantSanichari's eventual tears flow only at Bhikni's death, breaking decades of silence. As critics argue, Bhikni replaces patriarchal mediators with a female voice of guidance (Das and Nath, 121). Her death scene fuses personal and social loss, offering Sanichari catharsis and affirming mourning as a means of survival and expression.

One of the most significant differences between Devi's story and Lajmi's film is thematic emphasis. Devi's text is unyielding in foregrounding caste hierarchies, exposing how the upper castes commodify subaltern grief while ignoring their lives. Lajmi, however, reframes the narrative around solidarity and resilience, presenting mourning as a collective female act.

Critics like P. Gupta note that the adaptation "reconfigures caste critique into a sentimental narrative designed for wider audiences" (Guptan.p.). Similarly, J. Kathpalia observes that the film negotiates between literariness and accessibility, diluting radical charge while broadening appeal (Kathpalia, 7). Thus, while the film makes Sanichari's suffering visible to mainstream audiences, it also risks reinforcing Spivak's concern: the subaltern voice becomes mediated and softened within dominant cultural frameworks.

Two scenes particularly stand out in dramatizing controlled mourning:

- **The Funeral Spectacle**: Sanichari and Bhikniorche strated laments of grief at a landlord's death, their cries are staged and accompanied with elaborate rituals. Here, mourning is visibly commodified. But Lajmi frames it with magnificence, converting ritual labor into a cinematic spectacle. The scene communicates dignity rather than critique, inviting empathy rather than outrage.
- **Sanichari's Breakdown at Bhikni's Death**: This is the film's emotional climax. After years of being "dry," Sanichari finally weeps copiously at the loss of Bhikni, her long-lost mother. The breakdown symbolizes both personal catharsis and the collapse of silenced endurance. For audiences, it affirms that tears, long withheld, can still flow and carry meaning. For subaltern studies, this scene reflects Spivak's idea: Sanichari's tears, though real, are shaped by melodrama so they can be accepted by wider audiences. Devi's story shows that caste and mourning are inseparable, while Lajmi's film shifts the focus to melodrama, solidarity, and universal themes. Feminist critics note that this shift is not only a dilution but also an expansion: the film highlights women's emotional bonds and presents mourning as resilience, not just as form of commodified labour.

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However, as Spivak would say, this cinematic move comes at a cost. The sharp political critique of caste in Devi's text is, restrained replaced by a more "humanist" narrative of grief. In trying to make the subaltern's pain visible, the film risks absorbing it into dominant cinematic codes**.**

Conclusion: Can the Subaltern Mourn?

The question posed at the outset *can the subaltern mourn?* finds no simple answer in the comparative study of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* (1979) and Kalpana Lajmi's cinematic adaptation *Rudaali* (1993). Instead, the story and the film highlight the contradiction that lies at the heart of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question *Can the Subaltern Speak?* For Spivak, the subaltern does not lack speech but lacks recognition, as her voice is always mediated, reframed, or silenced by dominant discourses of power. The act of mourning in *Rudali* makes this insight visible: grief itself becomes a form of authentication but one that is constantly moulded by caste domination, women's subordination and cultural negotiation.

In Mahasweta Devi's original short story, mourning is blatantly connected to the structures of caste. Sanichari's grief hints at lives erased from history. In this sense, Devi's story answers Spivak both negatively and affirmatively: the subaltern cannot mourn in ways free from mediation, but mourning still creates a fragile space where silenced histories echo. Lajmi's *Rudaali*, meanwhile, translates this narrative into cinematic form, inevitably altering its politics, foregrounding women's solidarity and dignity, where mourning is a collective act of resilience. Visually, the spectacle of tears, heightened by Bhupen Hazarika's haunting songs, transforms grief into a dignified and communal ritual.

Taken together, the story and film show both the opportunities and the restrictions of representation. Devi's text shows the structures of oppression, refusing to romanticize or sentimentalize the lives of *rudalis*. Lajmi's film, while politically less sharp, expands the narrative into a cultural event, making visible women's solidarity but also blunting its caste critique. In both, however, mourning emerges as more than emotion it is labour, ritual, and born of mediation. The *rudalis* may not mourn freely but her wailing remains a disturbing presence both on screen and on the page.

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