

## Grief as Resistance : Performativity, Affective Economies and Subaltern Agency in Mahasweta Devi's "Rudali"

DEEPAI SINGH

**Abstract.** Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* offers one of the most incisive literary examinations of caste, gender, labour, and emotional commodification in postcolonial India. This article reinterprets the novella through an interdisciplinary framework that brings together performance theory, affect studies, subaltern historiography, and feminist political economy. Moving beyond readings that position the text primarily as a representation of caste-based suffering, the study argues that mourning in *Rudali* functions as embodied practice, affective circulation, and negotiated labour. Through the trajectory of Sanichari—from dispossessed widow to professional mourner—Devi reveals how caste society regulates not only land and labour but also emotion, visibility, and ritual legitimacy. Drawing on the theoretical interventions of Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Arlie Hochschild, and Ranajit Guha, the article contends that the Rudalis' commodified grief unsettles caste decorum, produces affective counter-publics among marginalized women, and creates contingent forms of subaltern expression through embodied performance. By situating *Rudali* within debates on emotional labour, ritual economy, and the ethics of representation, this essay demonstrates that Devi transforms grief from private sorrow into a socially mediated and politically charged form of collective visibility.

**Keywords :** Performativity; affective economies; subaltern expression; emotional labour; caste hierarchy.

### Introduction: Rethinking Grief in a Caste Society

*Rudali* unfolds in the arid terrain of rural Rajasthan—a landscape marked not only by ecological barrenness but by entrenched feudal and caste hierarchies. Within this environment, survival is precarious and social mobility nearly impossible. Caste determines labour, ritual participation, bodily proximity, and even the legitimacy of grief. It is within this rigid structure that Sanichari, a socially marginalised woman, emerges as the

central figure whose life is shaped by relentless personal loss and systemic deprivation.

Conventional readings approach *Rudali* as a realist portrayal of caste oppression and gendered suffering. While such interpretations remain crucial, they risk reducing the text to a sociological document. This article instead proposes that grief in *Rudali* is not merely thematic but structural. Mourning becomes an organizing principle that reveals how affect is governed by hierarchy. It is not simply that marginalized women suffer; it is that their suffering is regulated, appropriated, and commodified.

Sanichari's transformation into a professional mourner exposes the political economy of emotion. In a society where upper-caste masculinity is defined by stoic restraint, the display of excessive grief must be outsourced. Marginalized lower-caste women are hired to perform lamentation publicly. Thus, caste society simultaneously stigmatizes their bodies and depends upon them to sustain ritual spectacle. This paradox becomes the central tension of the novella.

Grief, therefore, operates at multiple levels – as personal bereavement, as ritual requirement, as economic transaction and as subaltern articulation. Through this multi-layered construction, Devi compels readers to interrogate the politics of emotion itself.

## **II. Socio-Political Terrain: Feudalism, Caste, and Ritual Hierarchy**

The Rajasthan depicted in *Rudali* is governed by feudal landlords whose authority extends beyond land ownership into ritual and symbolic control. Caste is not merely occupational; it is ontological—structuring social space, bodily interaction, and moral worth in ways that Ranajit Guha's work on subaltern historiography identifies as “constitutive of colonial and postcolonial social formations” (Guha 1). This ontological dimension means that no aspect of life—including death and its attendant rituals—escapes the regulatory force of caste.

Death rituals become sites where hierarchy is theatrically reaffirmed. The grandeur of a landlord's funeral signifies prestige. Yet caste decorum prohibits overt emotional expression by elite men; public stoicism becomes a marker of dignity. This restriction produces a peculiar

dependency – the upper castes require professional mourners to stage grief on their behalf.

The Rudalis occupy the lowest rung of social hierarchy, yet they are indispensable to ritual spectacle. Their bodies are considered polluted in everyday contexts but momentarily sanctioned in death ceremonies. This conditional inclusion exposes the hypocrisy of caste purity. The ritual economy of mourning thus reveals the intimate relationship between power and performance. Grief is not spontaneous; it is managed. Ritual authority determines who may mourn, how loudly, and through what bodily gestures. The bodies of marginalized women become the site through which elite prestige is publicly staged and sustained.

### III. Personal Loss and Structural Violence

Sanichari's biography is marked by repeated tragedies – her husband's death, her son's departure, her grandson's exploitation. Yet Devi avoids sentimentalizing these events. Poverty leaves little space for extended mourning. Hunger overrides grief. Survival demands labour.

This juxtaposition reveals an essential insight: structural violence renders certain lives perpetually precarious. Their suffering is normalized to the point of invisibility. Sanichari's personal grief is neither acknowledged nor ritualized. Her tears are irrelevant when directed at her own losses.

The shift occurs when grief becomes economically viable. Encouraged by fellow marginalized women, Sanichari begins working as a *Rudali*. What was once unrecognized pain becomes remunerated performance. The irony is sharp: she cannot afford to mourn her own dead, yet she is paid to mourn strangers :

Sanichari got home to find her son dead and her daughter-in-law gone. The baby was crying in the room. Her bahu, her daughter-in-law, never returned. With the child in her arms, she busied herself cremating Budhua and fending off queries about her bahu. Through all this, she didn't cry for her son either. Nor could she cry. She would sit, stunned; then fall into exhausted slumber. (Rudali 79)

This transformation does not erase exploitation. Rather, it demonstrates subaltern pragmatism. Sanichari converts imposed suffering into strategic labour. She learns to manipulate ritual expectations to secure a livelihood. The act is not revolutionary in a grand sense; it is tactical. Yet within that tactic lies a framework of resistance—engineered through the deliberate mechanics of bodily re-enactment and strategic repetition.

#### **IV. Performativity and the Making of the “Rudali”**

Drawing upon Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which “understands identity as constituted through repeated and socially regulated acts rather than as a fixed essence” (Butler 33), Sanichari’s transformation into a Rudali can be read not as a simple occupational shift but as the sedimentation of embodied practices into a socially recognizable identity. In *Rudali*, mourning is neither spontaneous nor purely interior; it is choreographed, codified, and repeated until it becomes recognizable as professional lamentation. Through ritualized gestures—wailing, beating the chest, invoking the virtues of the deceased, collapsing at calculated moments—Sanichari performs grief in ways that both comply with and subtly expose the regulatory norms of caste society.

Butler’s formulation unsettles the assumption that identity precedes performance. Instead, identity is produced through repetition. Applied to Devi’s novella, this suggests that Sanichari does not first “become” a Rudali internally and then express it outwardly; rather, she becomes a Rudali by repeatedly enacting the gestures that constitute that role. Each funeral becomes a site of reiteration. The body learns its script. Voice acquires cadence. Tears become timed. Through repetition, the performance accrues authority. Butler’s later work in *Undoing Gender* further “emphasizes that recognition shapes the conditions of livability”(2) —a point directly relevant to Sanichari, whose widowhood alone secures no social recognition, but whose professional mourning grants a paradoxical and conditional acknowledgment.

The upper-caste male body is regulated by norms of stoicism; excessive public grief threatens masculine prestige. Consequently, emotional expressivity is displaced onto the bodies of marginalized lower-caste women. The Rudali becomes the delegated bearer of affect. This delegation is not incidental—it is structural. Caste society simultaneously marks these bodies as polluted in everyday life while mobilizing them as ritual instruments in moments of public mourning. The Rudali’s

performance is therefore conditioned by a regulatory system that determines who may display grief, in what manner, and for whose benefit.

Performativity also contains the possibility of subversion. Because identity is constituted through repetition, it is inherently unstable; repetition can exaggerate, parody, or resignify the norm. The Rudalis' lamentations often border on theatrical excess. Their cries are amplified, their gestures heightened, their invocations hyperbolic. Such exaggeration exposes the scripted nature of ritual mourning. What is meant to appear as spontaneous reverence reveals itself as performance sustained by labour. This exaggeration does not dismantle caste hierarchy outright; rather, it produces temporary fissures within it. The Rudali's body, typically relegated to the social margins, occupies the ritual centre during the funeral—her voice fills the courtyard, and her gestures command public attention. For a fleeting moment, the marginalised female body becomes indispensable to the production of upper-caste prestige.

Sanichari's evolution from reluctant participant to strategic professional further demonstrates how repetition generates agency. Initially uncertain, she gradually refines technique. She learns which metaphors resonate and which gestures evoke greater remuneration. Mastery of performance confers a limited but tangible control over her circumstances. In this sense, "her gradual mastery reflects Butler's understanding that agency emerges through the reiteration and negotiation of social norms rather than from a position outside them" (184-185).

Importantly, the performativity of grief does not negate the reality of suffering. Rather, it reveals that suffering itself is mediated by social codes. Sanichari's personal losses are unperformed, unrecognized, and unremunerated. Her professional grief, though strategically enacted, draws upon reservoirs of lived pain. The boundary between authentic emotion and performed affect becomes porous. Butler's theory resists such binaries, suggesting that authenticity itself is produced through reiteration. In *Rudali*, tears are at once real and strategic, embodied and instrumental.

## V. Affective Economies: Circulation, Attachment and Value

According to Sara Ahmed, "emotions circulate among bodies and signs rather than residing within individual subjects, acquiring social and political value through their movement and attachment" (Ahmed 120). In *Rudali*, grief is pulled out of the realm of private interiority and thrust

into public circulation as a commodified currency. Payment formalizes this circulation, directly attaching quantifiable economic value to physical tears. Within the logic of this economy, the theatricality and intensity of lamentation dictate the posthumous prestige of the deceased landlord. The landlord purchases the spectacle, while the Rudali supplies the regulated affect required to validate upper-caste honour.

Ahmed argues, “emotions create attachments that align individuals with larger social and collective formations” (11). The shared, rhythmic wailing of the women aligns their bodies into a temporary collective formation, transforming the funeral from a performance of elite prestige into a contingent site of solidarity among marginalised women. The novella thus dramatizes two overlapping economies: a dominant feudal ritual economy that commodifies grief for status, and a subaltern survival economy that reappropriates that same grief as a tool for collective livelihood.

Moreover, the economic transaction itself carries ideological significance. If grief can be quantified and remunerated, it is revealed as labour. The performative act therefore oscillates between sacred and profane registers. It is precisely this oscillation that unsettles the moral authority of caste ritual and exposes elite prestige as a socially manufactured rather than naturally ordained quality.

## **VI. Emotional Labour and Feminist Political Economy**

Arlie Russell Hochschild’s concept of “emotional labour”—the management of feeling to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job (Hochschild 7)—provides an indispensable framework for reading Sanichari’s professionalization. Long before emotional labour became widely theorized in sociology, *Rudali* provided a literary critique of its deeply gendered exploitation. Patriarchal caste structures traditionally assign mourning to women as a naturalized moral obligation. Devi radically disrupts this ideological assumption by assigning a cold, monetary value to lamentation.

This economic transaction exposes the social construction of female suffering. If grief can be quantified, negotiated, and remunerated, it ceases to be an essentialized biological disposition and reveals itself strictly as labour. The economic reality of this transactional mourning is explicitly codified when Sanichari and Bikhni establish their professional tariff:

Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees 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. At the *kriya* ceremony, we want cloth, preferably a length of plain black cloth. (Rudali 96–97)

While the Rudalis' earnings remain meagre, this literal breakdown of remuneration destabilizes the romanticized, patriarchal myth of the selfless, stoic Hindu widow. Sanichari's structural evolution from an unpaid, domestically marginalized widow into a paid professional mourner foregrounds the historical economic invisibility of women's emotional and reproductive labour. Devi's narrative anticipates later materialist-feminist critiques of care work by revealing how affective labour, often naturalized as feminine obligation, can become economically visible only through commodification. Crucially, however, the novella resists presenting this transformation as straightforward emancipation. Economic participation within a market structured by caste and feudal power does not fundamentally unsettle the existing hierarchy; it enables only a limited and contingent form of agency operating within conditions of structural constraint.

### VII. Subaltern Expression and Embodied Speech

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question of whether the subaltern can speak within dominant structures of representation "remains central to understanding Sanichari's trajectory" (Spivak 271). Sanichari does not gain access to institutional spaces of power; she does not author legal treatises, publish manifestos, or exercise formal political authority. Instead, her presence becomes legible through embodied and performative forms of expression. The Rudalis' strategic wails function as a sonic occupation of elite ritual space. Their amplified voices reverberate through the interior courtyards of feudal estates—spaces that ordinarily restrict the everyday visibility and mobility of marginalized women.

Professional lament becomes a form of testimony, though one mediated through ritual performance and economic exchange. Yet this articulation remains conditional, permitted only within the temporal

boundaries of funerary spectacle. Sanichari's expression does not emerge as autonomous speech outside structures of power; rather, it becomes audible through a script that simultaneously constrains expression and enables survival. By foregrounding this strategic negotiation of ritual norms, Devi complicates overly totalizing readings of subaltern silence. While subaltern expression in *Rudali* remains mediated, localized, and structurally constrained, it is not entirely erased. The professional cry becomes a contingent form of social and historical articulation through which marginalized experience enters public visibility.

#### **VIII. Community, Kinship and Pragmatic Solidarity**

Sanichari's alliances with other marginalized women form the emotional and structural nucleus of *Rudali*. Their solidarity does not emerge from abstract ideological commitments but from shared experiences of precarity, hunger, and systemic abandonment. They exchange survival strategies, support one another economically and emotionally, and negotiate the vulnerabilities produced by feudal and caste-based structures. This emergent collective resists forms of patriarchal fragmentation that frequently rely upon social hierarchy and material insecurity to isolate marginalized women from one another.

Through their coordinated labour, the Rudalis construct what may be understood as an affective counter-public—a contingent social space in which marginalized women collectively negotiate survival and visibility, analogous to what Nancy Fraser theorizes as subaltern counter-publics: parallel discursive arenas in which members of subordinated groups formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. Though excluded from formal structures of political authority, this community exemplifies everyday forms of resistance grounded in mutual dependence and embodied practice. Devi suggests that subaltern subjectivity is sustained not solely through isolated endurance but also through fragile and negotiated forms of communal affiliation.

#### **IX. Irony, Satire and Narrative Strategy**

Devi deploys irony and sharp satire to expose the contradictions embedded within feudal decorum and ritual authority. The upper-caste landlords, who exercise social and economic power over the peasantry throughout their lives, demand elaborate public mourning upon their deaths. Their posthumous reputations and familial prestige become dependent upon



the visible performance of grief. Honour is thus revealed not as an inherent moral quality but as something publicly produced and ritually sustained.

The Rudalis' heightened and carefully staged lamentations subtly expose this structural dependency. While outwardly praising the deceased in accordance with ritual expectation and economic necessity, the theatrical excess of their performance reveals the constructed nature of elite prestige. Devi's narrative balances social realism with satirical critique, preventing the text from collapsing into sentimental representations of caste-based suffering. Instead, the narrative creates a critical distance that encourages readers to interrogate the social and ritual mechanisms through which grief, status, and authority are performed :

Turning to the sons he said, "Our duty now is to make sure that chacha receives all due honour by way of funeral rites. Take him home, inform the police—but don't name any names. The body is not to be taken to Tohri, not to be cut open for post-mortems. Chacha died a hero's death. But the manner of his death is not what he deserved. People will talk. We must perform the ceremonies and burial with pomp and splendour. Dress up the body, place him on a big bed. And inform our entire Rajput clan. (88)

#### **X. Ethics of Representation and Authorial Responsibility**

As a politically engaged writer, Mahasweta Devi confronts the ethical challenges involved in representing marginalized lives without reducing them to objects of sympathy or passive suffering. *Rudali* resists transforming Sanichari into either a symbolic figure of tragic martyrdom or a passive recipient of structural violence. Instead, Sanichari is portrayed as pragmatic, resilient, and attentive to the material conditions that shape her survival.

The narrative similarly avoids romanticizing poverty or treating deprivation as a source of moral or spiritual authenticity. Rather than aestheticizing suffering, Devi maintains attention to the structural conditions of caste, gender, and economic inequality while preserving the emotional and psychological complexity of her characters. This

balance produces an ethics of representation that foregrounds subaltern experience without collapsing it into victimhood or appropriating it as transparent political testimony. In doing so, *Rudali* sustains a critical political perspective while preserving the agency and humanity of marginalized subjects.

### **XI. Contemporary Resonance: From Rural Rajasthan to Global Economies**

Though firmly anchored within the socio-cultural landscape of rural Rajasthan, *Rudali* continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of emotional labour, affective economies, and the regulation of feeling under global capitalism. In modern service and digital economies, institutional and corporate structures frequently require workers to manage emotional display, perform interpersonal warmth, and regulate affect as part of professional expectations—dynamics that Hochschild’s foundational work on the managed heart anticipated and that have only intensified under neoliberal regimes of labour.

Sanichari’s commodified grief offers a productive framework for reflecting upon these contemporary dynamics. The novella invites broader questions: whose emotional labour becomes economically visible, whose forms of feeling receive social legitimacy, and whose suffering remains structurally marginalized or unseen? The politics of visibility and the circulation of affect explored in *Rudali* continue to inform contemporary discussions of caste inequality, gendered care work, and economic precarity across changing social contexts.

### **XII. Conclusion: Tears as Counter-History**

Reading *Rudali* through the interlocking frameworks of performativity, affective economies, and subaltern expression reveals mourning as a contested terrain where labour, identity, and social hierarchy intersect. Through Sanichari’s transformation, grief emerges not simply as a sign of suffering but as a negotiated practice through which marginalized subjects seek forms of visibility, survival, and constrained agency. The novella demonstrates that caste hierarchy regulates not only access to material resources but also the legitimacy of emotional expression and public recognition.

By transforming mourning into labour, the Rudalis create a precarious and conditional form of agency within structures that continue to constrain them. Their performances unsettle ritual authority and reveal the dependence of elite prestige upon marginalized labour. Devi thus reimagines mourning as a mode of social memory and as a form of counter-history that renders visible experiences often excluded from dominant narratives of social order. The Rudalis' collective lament bears witness to lives shaped by caste and economic inequality, suggesting that grief, when collectively enacted, may become a site of social visibility, embodied testimony, and negotiated resistance.

#### **Deepali Singh**

Research Scholar, P.G. Department of English  
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

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