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The Performative Politics of Mourning in Mahasweta Devi's "Rudali" (1979)

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ABSTRACT

The very fabric of social life is woven through practices of memory. One's identity is profoundly shaped by memory, emerging at the intersection where the personal merges with the collective. Mahasweta Devi's "Rudali" (1979) amalgamates performance and memory to analyse how grief and mourning are enacted through the bodies of subaltern women. Jann Assmann's 'mnemohistory' foregrounds how societies reconstruct the past through selective remembrance and ritualised performances. In "Rudali," this framework illuminates how funerary spectacles function as mnemohistorical sites, where grief is staged to perpetuate the social hierarchies. *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), by Taylor, introduces two concepts for the transmission and preservation of cultural memory: the Archive, which stores memories in tangible forms, and the Repertoire, which refers to embodied ways of remembering, as exemplified in the case of "Rudali" by mourning rituals. The Rudalis become archives of microhistories, transforming performance into social structures and their enactment of grief through wailing, tears and oral lamentations — an instance of repertoire. This paper examines how, in "Rudali," hired female mourners were compelled to suppress personal grief, loss and deprivation — enacting ritualised performativity that served societal expectations over individual memory. Their mourning was not an expression of individual emotion but a socially imposed enactment of subservient respect,

dictated by the caste hierarchy and the structures of domination it upheld.

Introduction

The structural inequality stemming from the Caste hierarchies in India denies the marginalised people the right to grieve. Grief in the Indian social structure is a privilege available to the upper classes. The marginalised communities, Dalits in particular, often have to negotiate compromisingly with mourning. They are subject to hate and violence even in death. Acts of grief by those at the margins are seen as threats to the existing social hierarchy. Not only are the traditional funeral rites and cremation grounds inaccessible to the Dalits, but they are also stripped of any emotional display of their losses. The denial of acts of mourning to the lower castes dehumanises them and takes away any agency they have over their emotions. In Mahasweta Devi's short fiction "Rudali" (1979), Sanichari's grief has ceased to find an emotional outlet; her life is marked by continuous loss and deprivation. Sanichari and her husband do not ceremoniously mourn the deaths of her brother-in-law and sister-in-law because the deaths in their family occur in the context of extreme poverty and social vacuum, leaving no space for ritualised grievability. This erosion of grief is articulated when Devi notes:

> "Their grief must have hardened into stone within them." (Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

Sanichari's inability to mourn her loved ones is not due to an emotional absence but a state of devastation, which makes suffering normalised and personal grief gets subsumed by the struggle to survive. Situated within these conditions, the text observes:

> "There was no crying over those deaths either. Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shradh?
>
> (Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

Performing the funeral rites was a challenging task for Sanchari's family. The meagre income was barely enough for them "to feed so many mouths." (Devi and Ganguli 55) Deaths would bring the burden of the 'kriya' and entrap them in the cycles of debt to the feudal lords. Devi contextualises the depravity of the Ganjus and the Dushads of the Tahad village by locating them in structural poverty marked by chronic hunger and desperation for survival. "Rudali" sheds light on the modality through which Dalit communities have long been subjects of social erasure – of memory and history. The term "Dalit" as an identity carries the weight of the oppression, the eternal struggle of the 'outcasts' and their fight against

the system. In a social order stratified by the caste hierarchy, the Dalit communities mobilise culturally sanctioned performances by transforming their collective histories of oppression into acts of resistance and subsistence. Devi's "Rudali" (1979) reveals mourning not as a response to loss but as a performative economy in which grief is extracted, circulated, and displayed, while those most acquainted with loss remain structurally unmourned. Grief is determined by the socioeconomic class one belongs to. "Rudali" reconfigures mourning as a performative politics of memory, where grief is staged, regulated, and exploited. In her essay "Metamorphosis of Rudali," Anjum Katyal notes that Ramavtar's oppression "invades the most private space of an individual, the emotions, so that even grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival." (Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

The Archive vs the Repertoire

In *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire provides a crucial framework for understanding how "Rudali" stages resistance to subaltern erasure. Taylor defines the archive as the domain of written, institutionalised knowledge—documents, deeds, genealogies, and authorised histories—while the repertoire consists of embodied practices such as gesture, ritual, speech, and performance that transmit cultural memory through repetition and presence. In "Rudali," the archive remembers only the prominent figures of the dominant social structure, keeping Sanichari and other marginalised characters at a deliberate distance. The narrative repeatedly records the names of Malik-Mahajan across generations and spatial jurisdictions, establishing a continuity of elite memory. In contrast, even when the focus shifts to Sanichari's life, the text rarely names those she has lost to death. Her grief remains unarchived, and she appears in official memory only as a bonded labourer, reduced to an economic function rather than a subject of empathy. The subaltern woman, denied recognition of her own suffering, is reduced to an instrument in this production of elite memory.

This asymmetry reveals how grief itself operates as a regulated social performance—an argument already established earlier in the paper. The poor are expected to die quietly, without ritual excess or public lamentation, while the deaths of Malik-Mahajan demand elaborate ceremonies and loud, performative mourning to secure their status as "honourable." This theatricality is laid bare through Lachman Singh's exaggerated display of grief upon seeing Bhairab Singh's corpse:

"He made a dramatic appearance near the dead body. His pathos-laden cries put the sons to shame." (Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

Nathuni Singh's wealthy second wife asserts—

"What's thirty thousand for a kriya ceremony—less than nothing. May my father live long—but when he dies, then I'll show everyone how a kriya should be held"

(Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

—makes explicit how mourning functions as a spectacle of wealth, masculinity, and social prestige rather than genuine affect. Respectability, here, is not inherent, but it is performed and purchased.

It is within this economy of performative grief that the figure of the rudali emerges as a counter-archive, aligning closely with Taylor's notion of the repertoire. By flooding elite funerals with exaggerated lamentation—even for men whose lives were marked by exploitation—the rudalis disrupt the decorum of feudal mourning and force public acknowledgement of figures otherwise insulated from moral scrutiny. They are summoned to manufacture grief; to produce an alternative narrative for oppressive men whose deaths nevertheless demand ritual legitimacy. Yet, in performing this role, the rudalis simultaneously carve out space for themselves within systems that had long excluded them. Through their emotion-inducing wailing, they bargain for higher payment, negotiate their worth, and ensure their names are entered into registers and account books. In this paradoxical moment, the repertoire forces entry into the archive.

The reclamation of space through embodied performance is how Sanichari, Bikhni, and other marginalised women in "Rudali" resist erasure and assert epistemic presence. As Taylor observes,

"If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity." (Taylor, 2003)

Devi crucially refuses to romanticise this repertoire as "authentic" or purely expressive. Much like Taylor's insistence that performance is strategic rather than innocent, the rudalis consciously perform grief as labour, monetising emotion for the very elite who once denied them the right to mourn. This strategic performance exposes the theatrical foundations of upper-caste death rituals and reveals respectability itself as a stronghold of power. By insisting on presence through sonic excess and bodily repetition, the rudalis transform mourning into an act of resistance, ensuring that subaltern histories persist not within the sanctioned archive, but against it.

Performing Memory

Maurice Halbwachs's notion of memory being socially framed emphasises how collective structures mediate individual recollections. For the Rudalis, memory was not a passive recall, but rather an active,

embodied and politicised performance. Their personal grief, rooted in poverty and marginalisation, is rendered overwritten by the ritualised demands of cultural memory. The act of mourning metamorphosed into labour, making survival greater than their personal grief. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1971), Erving Goffman, in comparing social mobility in Western and Indian societies, states:

> "Indian society…has sometimes been cited not only as one in which mobility occurs in terms of caste groups, not individuals, but also as one in which performances tend to establish favourable claims regarding non-material values." (Goffman, 1971)

According to Goffman, in the Indian social structure, social mobility is more of a collective concept than an individual one, and it is facilitated by the performances of certain cultural and ritual acts. The Rudalis, or the professional mourners in Mahasweta Devi's "Rudali", resort to performance to resist and survive in a structure that forces them to bury their personal memories of grief. Performance in "Rudali" is a political act and a living site of memory where the collective suffering of a community gets transformed into ritualised mourning to serve the upper castes. Unlike Goffman's idea of performance propelling social mobility, the Rudalis in Devi's story rely on the profession of mourning for survival and not climbing the social ladder. For Sanichari, Bikini or the prostitutes from the bazaar, the opportunity to climb the social ladder does not exist. They sell their tears not to gain social prominence but to fill their empty stomachs. In an instance in the story, when Sanichari was pondering on the question as to how her daughter-in-law or Gulbadan, came to be a prostitute, Dulan makes a stark comment on their priority to subsistence. He asserts that it is not their place to question right and wrong and to "leave that kind of thing to the rich" since they understand it better, whereas the outcasts "understand hunger."

In *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation* (1992), Jan Assmann considers cultural memory to be institutionalised and symbolically preserved through artefacts. He notes that:

> "Cultural memory is maintained through ritual, ceremony and symbolic forms." (Assmann, 1992)

The concept of cultural memory enables us to recognise the interplay between individual and collective memory, both of which are equally fundamental to history. According to Assmann, "cultural memory works by reconstruction". In Devi's "Rudali", the ritualised mourning of Sanichari and Bikhni operates as a cultural memory that preserves the subaltern histories of loss and oppression. They serve as a medium to disseminate cultural memory, and their acts of wailing and crying become mnemonic practices for preserving and transmitting histories of dispossession and caste oppression. Their performance is a constructed commemorative mnemonic form that politicises the idea of grief and

transforms them into powerful tools of remembrance. Sanichari's personal grief throughout the story is far removed from time and space. A crucial instance in the story is when her son Budhua dies. He dies as bonded labour, exhausted and ill, in a state of social and medical neglect, and his body is disposed of without ceremony:

> "There was no one to wail, no one to beat their chest. Death came and went."

Budhua's death fails to interrupt social time because his life was never framed as a life whose loss would matter. Caste determines 'grievability.' This moment concretises the normalisation of loss in Sanichari's life.

In his seminal work, *How Societies Remember (1989),* Paul Connerton talks about how rites permeate non-ritual behaviour and mentality; he states:

> "Although demarcated in time and space, rites are also, as it were, porous. They are held to be meaningful because rites have significance with respect to a set of non-ritual actions, to the whole life of a community. Rites have the capacity to give value and meaning to the life of those who perform them." (Connerton, 1989)

Drawing on Connerton's observation on rites, the performance of the Rudalis can be read as a socio-political practice that goes beyond mere obsequies. Though temporally and spatially bound to the funeral rituals, their performance remains porous in the sense that it absorbs and becomes a symbol of their lived realities, one of caste oppression, economic depravity and hunger.

Their performances transmit hunger, dispossession, and endurance across time, even when stripped of explicit narration. Mourning here is not an intimate response to death but a social performance that confirms caste prestige. What is sold is not grief itself, but its performative recognisability within a caste-regulated economy of death.

Commodified Mourning

One of "Rudali's" most scathing interventions lies in its exposure of how 'grievability' itself is socially produced and unequally distributed. Mahasweta Devi repeatedly stages death among the subaltern as an event that passes without ritual, remembrance, or collective acknowledgement. Sanichari's personal losses—her husband's death from exhaustion, her son's death following starvation and illness, and later the death of Bikhni—are marked by narrative restraint and ritual absence. These deaths do not invite mourning because the social order does not permit them to matter. Devi makes it clear that grief is not

denied because it is unfelt, but because poverty and caste foreclose the very conditions under which grief can be expressed. Hunger interrupts mourning, and survival suspends sorrow. When Sanichari reflects on the deaths of her brother-in-law and sister-in-law—

"Two dead, just as well, at least their own stomachs would be full" (Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

— death appears as an economic recalibration rather than a moral rupture. Affective response, here, is reorganised by the demands of survival. This reconfiguration of affect is most productively understood through a historical materialist framework, which situates emotional life within the material relations of production rather than treating it as a universal or transhistorical human faculty. As Marx and Engels contend, human affect and ethical response are not governed by abstract morality or innate sentiment but are shaped by historically specific material conditions; consciousness, in this account, emerges from social being rather than preceding it. In the narrative, material scarcity does not erase emotion but governs it, compelling affect to submit to the logic of endurance. Devi thus exposes how poverty does not merely produce suffering but actively structures the forms through which suffering may be registered, expressed, or withheld.

Devi exposes mourning as a site of structural denial. Following Marx's insight into the conversion of lived time into abstract labour-time under capitalism, "Rudali" shows that the subaltern is stripped not only of economic security but of temporal autonomy. The social order does not merely exploit her labour, but also systematically eradicates the time and space in which loss can be registered or processed. Each death imposes intensified work demands, producing a cycle in which grief is continuously postponed until it becomes impossible. In Devi's narrative, the deprivation of temporal agency enforces a political economy of mourning: subaltern lives are rendered ungrievable, and the capacity to register loss is denied as rigorously as material resources. Devi reinforces this exclusion through literary form. Sanichari's bereavements are narrated swiftly, almost brutally, in sharp contrast to the detailed, excessive descriptions of landlords' funerals. This imbalance is not incidental; it mirrors the unequal distribution of memory itself.

"In rich families, the son kills the mother, the mother the son. Forget about who killed him. Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears." (Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

This statement by Dulan resonates with the Marxist critique of the bourgeois family, where kinship is overthrown by inheritance. The image of relatives "searching for the keys to the safe" crystallises the

subsumption of affect under capital: death is figured not as grief but as a moment of material transfer and class reproduction. Death, here, is activating economic anxiety rather than collective sorrow. When Sanichari's husband dies, she is forced into bonded labour to repay fifty rupees for the twenty rupees borrowed for his funeral rites from Ramavtar Singh. Mourning itself is commodified: grief is subordinated to debt, and the labour demanded actively prevents the temporal conditions necessary for its expression. Though she resolves to cry once her debt is repaid, she finds herself unable to do so—grief indefinitely deferred.

In *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985), Schechner argues that performances consist of behaviours that have been detached from their original context and can be re-enacted across time and situations. What matters is not the performer's interior state but the successful execution of a socially legible script. A key implication of Schechner's theory is that performance does not require sincerity. Rituals, ceremonies, and social performances function precisely because they rely on codified gestures rather than personal emotion. By proposing that Sanichari and Bikhni become rudalis at Bhairab Singh's lavish funeral, Dulan acts on this performative logic. He understands that funerary ritual requires bodies trained to execute its script. Dulan's instruction that Sanichari and Bikhni "wear black clothing" makes explicit the semiotic dimension of mourning as performance. Black attire, in this context, does not index interior grief but renders mourning socially legible. Therefore, the Rudalis' — Sanichari and Bikhni's — bodies become the site where culturally recognisable signs of loss are produced and performed.

Conclusion

Sanichari's ability to mourn is mediated by Brahminical norms. The legitimacy of her mourning depends on adherence to caste-regulated procedures. The kriya is enacted according to pre-existing scripts, independent of her personal affect, but she must perform it convincingly to be socially recognised. The event of Sanichari's husband's death is stripped of both temporal dignity and ritual autonomy. The haste of the cremation is not merely administrative but also signals how subaltern death is treated as a logistical problem rather than a social rupture. Sanichari performs the rites hastily with her last penny, not as an act of remembrance but as an obligation she cannot defer. Yet this enforced haste is later declared ritually insufficient. When Sanichari returns to her village, the Brahmin priest rejects the legitimacy of the kriya performed by the neighbouring village priest, insisting that —

"Can a Tohri Brahmin know how a Tahad villager's kriya is done? By obeying him, you've insulted your local priest!" (Devi and Ganguli, 2007)

What is at stake here is not ritual efficacy but ritual authority. Devi exposes funerary rites as performative acts whose validity depends neither on intention nor on affect, but on caste-sanctioned repetition and jurisdictional control. The kriya must be enacted according to a pre-scripted ritual code, authorised by the correct caste body and performed within the sanctioned spatial boundaries. Ritual is manipulated here only to produce social legitimacy.

This episode sheds light on the ideological function of ritual hierarchy—ritual purity is not merely symbolic but actively structures social power. The Brahmin's rejection of the earlier rites performed by Sanichari is not a theological concern but a performative assertion of dominance, reaffirming caste sovereignty over death itself. Mourning thus becomes a site where hierarchy is not only reflected but reproduced through embodied compliance. Sanichari is compelled to repeat the rites not because her grief was inadequate, but because it was not mediated through the correct Brahminical authority. Ritual correctness becomes a mechanism of surveillance, transforming mourning into an act of caste submission.

As the "Rudali" comes to an end, mourning is no longer a site of deprivation but a weaponised performance. After Bikhni's death, Sanichari mobilises a collective of prostitutes—women economically and sexually exploited by the same Malik–Mahajan class—to perform ritual grief at Gambhir Singh's funeral. This moment marks a decisive shift: grief, previously denied to the subaltern, is now strategically redeployed against the structures that monopolised it.

Gambhir Singh's treatment of Gulbadan is central to this reversal. Though he initially acknowledges her as his daughter, he withdraws all paternal responsibility after her mother's death, expelling her from the household and forcing her into sex work. His refusal to intervene when his nephew attempts to molest her confirms her expulsion from kinship, legitimacy, and protection. In life, Gulbadan is rendered disposable; in death, Gambhir Singh demands ritual reverence. Sanichari's orchestration of the rudali performance exposes this contradiction.

The prostitutes' exaggerated wailing—culminating in Gulbadan's dry-eyed performance of grief—must be read as an act of conscious theatricality rather than emotional expression. Her wink at the nephew ruptures the solemnity of the ritual and signals the performance's falsity. This gesture collapses the moral authority of the funeral itself: mourning becomes an exposé, not a tribute. Read through Schechner's notion of restored behaviour, the rudali ritual is executed flawlessly while being emptied of sincerity, revealing the bourgeois funerary rite as a hollow spectacle.

Crucially, this is not revenge enacted through violence but through semiotic sabotage. The same women denied dignity in life now monopolise the public language of grief. Gulbadan's wink functions as a moment of performative excess that refuses closure, reminding the audience that the ritual honours not virtue but power. In Devi's final inversion, the subaltern does not reclaim mourning as an authentic feeling; instead, she exposes grief itself as a classed performance, capable of being appropriated, manipulated, and turned against its 4original owners.

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