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Fractured Narratives in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* employs a fractured narrative structure to depict the socio-economic and caste-based oppression experienced by Dalit women in rural India. Through episodic storytelling, shifting perspectives, and non-linear temporality, Devi mirrors the fragmented and precarious lives of marginalized communities. The novella subverts conventional heroism by presenting Sanichari, the protagonist, as a figure of endurance rather than triumph. Oral storytelling traditions and interwoven voices contribute to the text's polyphonic structure, allowing multiple oppressed voices to emerge. Additionally, the disruption of chronological time reflects the cyclical nature of caste and gender-based exploitation. By resisting dominant narrative conventions, *Rudali* serves as both a critique of systemic inequality and a reclamation of subaltern voices. This paper examines the fractured narrative techniques in *Rudali* and their role in reinforcing themes of oppression, survival, and resistance.

Keywords: Fractured narrative, Dalit literature, caste oppression, oral tradition, subaltern studies, trauma narrative

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Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* is a powerful critique of caste, gender, and economic oppression in rural India. First published in 1979, the novella portrays the harsh realities faced by Dalit women, particularly through the struggles of its protagonist, Sanichari. Born into poverty and subjected to systemic discrimination, Sanichari experiences a life filled with loss and suffering. Yet, instead of succumbing to despair, she turns to the profession of professional mourning—a survival strategy that allows her to reclaim agency in a society that continually dehumanizes her.

Devi's narrative technique in *Rudali* is marked by fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and a non-linear structure, reflecting the disjointed and precarious lives of marginalized communities. The text does not follow a conventional chronological order; rather, it unfolds in episodic segments that highlight key moments of personal and social struggle. As scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have noted, Mahasweta Devi's works center on subaltern voices, exposing the systemic mechanisms that perpetuate their oppression (Spivak 324). Through an unconventional storytelling style, *Rudali* disrupts traditional literary norms, mirroring the instability and fragmentation experienced by the oppressed.

By analyzing the fractured narrative structure in *Rudali*, this paper explores how Devi's storytelling choices reinforce the novel's central themes of oppression, resilience, and socio-economic disparity. The fragmented storytelling, the use of oral tradition, and the cyclical nature of suffering all contribute to an immersive reading experience that forces readers to engage with the brutal realities of caste-based discrimination. As *Rudali* demonstrates, storytelling is not merely a form of expression; it is a tool of resistance that challenges dominant narratives and amplifies the voices of the marginalized.

Fragmented Storytelling and Social Disruption

The fragmented nature of the narrative in *Rudali* mirrors the fractured lives of its characters. Sanichari's story is not told in a linear fashion but through episodic events that highlight key moments of loss, struggle, and survival. This disruption of traditional storytelling reflects the instability of the lower-caste community, where continuity and stability are denied by systemic oppression. The disjointed structure emphasizes the unpredictability of Sanichari's life, where each tragedy adds to her resilience rather than breaking her spirit completely.

Devi employs a fragmented storytelling approach to expose the structural inequalities that keep Dalit women in a perpetual state of crisis. The narrative does not provide a clear resolution, reinforcing the idea that for the oppressed, suffering is cyclical rather than linear. As Sujata Mody points out, *Rudali* "resists closure, instead highlighting the repetitive cycles of exploitation that define the lives of Dalit women" (Mody 198) This refusal to conform to a conventional narrative arc aligns with the broader postcolonial literary tradition, where fractured narratives serve as a means to challenge hegemonic structures.

Furthermore, the disruption of time in *Rudali* reflects the way trauma is experienced by marginalized individuals. Rather than presenting a seamless account of Sanichari's life, the narrative moves between past and present, mirroring the protagonist's psychological state. As Meenakshi Mukherjee argues, "The past is never fully separated from the present in *Rudali*; it lingers, intrudes, and disrupts, much like the persistent oppression that defines Sanichari's world" (Mukherjee 76). By fragmenting the narrative, Devi forces the reader to confront the disorienting nature of systemic injustice, making the reading experience itself an act of engagement with the text's social critique.

In this way, *Rudali* does not simply tell a story—it performs the very disruptions and instabilities that characterize the lives of its characters. The fractured narrative structure is not

just a stylistic choice; it is an essential component of the novella's political and thematic impact. Through its episodic storytelling, *Rudali* captures the relentless, cyclical nature of oppression, making it an enduringly powerful critique of caste and gender dynamics in India.

Oral Tradition and Interwoven Voices

Mahasweta Devi incorporates elements of oral storytelling in *Rudali*, creating a polyphonic structure where multiple voices contribute to the narrative. Dialogue and communal storytelling play a crucial role, as characters frequently discuss their fates, gossip about the landlords, and reflect on their suffering. This technique allows *Rudali* to transcend the personal struggles of Sanichari and become a collective narrative of resistance. Oral tradition, as a storytelling device, serves to democratize the act of narration, ensuring that the voices of the oppressed are heard rather than silenced by dominant historical records.

The use of oral storytelling reflects the way history is preserved in marginalized communities—through spoken word rather than written documents. As Walter J. Ong observes, oral cultures rely on a "participatory and communal" mode of storytelling, which helps sustain cultural memory and resistance (Ong 47). In *Rudali*, this oral tradition is evident in the way Sanichari and other women navigate their trauma by sharing stories, creating a network of collective resilience. The interwoven voices within the text highlight the communal nature of suffering, emphasizing that oppression is not an individual experience but a structural condition affecting entire communities. Furthermore, the storytelling within *Rudali* serves as an act of defiance against the erasure of subaltern histories. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern voice" argues that marginalized individuals are often denied agency in historical narratives (Spivak 324). By centering *Rudali* on the voices of Dalit women, Devi reclaims a space for these silenced narratives. The text itself becomes an extension of oral tradition, ensuring that the lived experiences of Sanichari and her community are acknowledged and remembered.

Disruption of Conventional Heroism

Unlike traditional narratives that feature clear protagonists and resolutions, *Rudali* subverts the idea of heroism by presenting an anti-heroic structure. Sanichari does not achieve a grand victory; instead, she learns to manipulate the system for survival. Her transformation into a professional mourner is not framed as an empowering triumph but as a necessary adaptation to a brutal socio-economic reality. By rejecting the conventional hero's journey, Devi challenges romanticized notions of struggle and resilience, presenting instead a stark, unembellished account of survival within an oppressive caste system.

The fragmented storytelling prevents readers from idealizing Sanichari's endurance. As Subhasree Bhattacharya notes, *Rudali* "rejects the sentimentalization of the poor and instead offers an unfiltered, unsentimental portrayal of caste-based violence" (Bhattacharya 112). This anti-heroic approach aligns with postcolonial and subaltern literature, which often resists dominant, linear modes of storytelling that glorify individual success while ignoring systemic barriers.

Moreover, the novella's refusal to offer closure reinforces the persistence of caste oppression. Unlike mainstream narratives that follow a resolution-oriented structure, *Rudali* leaves Sanichari in a state of continuous struggle, mirroring the reality of many Dalit women in India. This disruption of conventional heroism forces readers to acknowledge that for the marginalized, survival itself is an act of resistance, and triumph is often measured in endurance rather than conquest.

Temporal Shifts and Dislocated Memory

Time in *Rudali* is fluid, moving between past and present without clear transitions. Sanichari's memories of her husband's death, her son's neglect, and her growing awareness of economic exploitation are not neatly arranged but emerge through recollection and

conversation. This fragmented treatment of time underscores the cyclical nature of suffering for marginalized people—there is no linear progression toward a better future, only repeated cycles of oppression.

Devi's use of non-linear storytelling reflects how trauma is experienced and remembered. As Cathy Caruth argues, trauma narratives often defy chronological order, as traumatic experiences "intrude upon the present in fragmented, unbidden moments" (Caruth 92). In *Rudali*, Sanichari's past is not a distant event but an ever-present reality that shapes her present struggles. The lack of clear temporal markers within the narrative mirrors the psychological disorientation of those living under constant oppression.

Additionally, the disruption of time in *Rudali* serves to emphasize the structural nature of caste-based exploitation. The past is not simply a memory for Sanichari—it is an ongoing condition. Meenakshi Mukherjee notes that in *Rudali*, "the past does not recede; it remains embedded within the present, forcing the reader to acknowledge the inescapability of caste and gender oppression" (Mukherjee 76). By dislocating memory and resisting linear storytelling, Devi underscores the intransigence of systemic inequality, reinforcing the novella's broader critique of social injustice.

Conclusion

The fractured narrative structure of *Rudali* serves as both a thematic and stylistic device, reinforcing the instability, fragmentation, and resilience of marginalized lives. Mahasweta Devi's use of episodic storytelling, multiple voices, and non-linear time reflects the social and economic fragmentation experienced by Dalit women like Sanichari. By rejecting a conventional, seamless narrative, Devi forces readers to engage with the raw realities of caste oppression and gendered suffering, making *Rudali* a powerful example of subaltern storytelling.

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