Chapter III
Tracing the 'voices' of women in U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*, Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* and Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*.

A reading of Indian novels in perspective requires a knowledge of the rise of the novel as a genre in India. Such an exercise would certainly help in situating the texts under study in their socio-historical contexts. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her works *Realism and Reality*¹ and *The Twice-Bom Fiction*² has very ably traced the development of novel in India. There were a number of factors that shaped the growth of this genre in the mid-nineteenth century. Besides the political and social situation of India as a colonized country and the indigenous narrative traditions of an ancient culture; the impact of English education and exposure to Western literature were by far the strongest influences at work. The first novels in India in Bengali and Marathi were written much later than the novels in English. Eighteenth century in English literature marks the emergence of novel as a new form and there were many economic and political factors as well as metaphysical assumptions about man's relationship with time, with nature and with other human beings that led to its rise. One of the marked features of the English novel at the time of its inception was realism. It was realism that made this genre so welcome and popular. Marking a radical break from the epic and romance, novel dealt with real people in real situations. Many theorists suggest a close link between the rise of individualism and the rise of the novel, probably because both in a way made human
beings realize their unique potential.

A novel is necessarily bound by its historical and cultural conditions and is generally a product of a specific environment in a particular society at a given point of history. However, a whole new world was available to educated Indians in the middle of the nineteenth century through their study of English literature. It became difficult for them to portray their own society which was a contrast to the society they read in the novels. The novelists did not know how to convey the Indian experience in a genre that had as its theme marriage, intrigue, individuality. Early English novels like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Moll Flanders* (1722), *Pamela* (1740) show how the central character is in each case an active rather than a passive agent challenging his/ her fate. The Indian novelist had to operate in a tradition-bound society where a man's profession and not his marriage was his personal affair. His life was mapped out by his family or his community or his caste. In the rigidly hierarchical familial and social structure of nineteenth century India, individualism was not an easy quality to render in literature. The early novelists found it difficult to reconcile with the two sets of values—one obtained by regarding an alien literature and the other available in life. Meenakshi Mukherjee quotes two passages from two nineteenth century novelists to capture their predicament. The author, in his introduction to the Marathi novel *Manjugosha* (1868) wrote:

Because of our attitude to our marriage, and for several
other reasons, one finds in the lives of us Hindus neither interesting vices nor virtues, and this is the difficulty which we find in trying to write novels. If we write about the things we experience daily, there would be nothing enthralling about them, so that if we set out to write an interesting book we are forced to take up with the marvellous...  

The second passage quoted from the dedication to O. Chandu Menon’s Malayalam novel, *Indulekha* (1888), captured more directly the problems faced by an Indian novelist having to write in a form that required individualism as a value while his society denied it.

my object is to write a novel after the English fashion, and it is evident that no ordinary Malayali lady can fill the role of the heroine in such a story. My Indulekha is not therefore, an ordinary Malayali lady.

The novelist thus writes a novel that does not reflect a society known to him. The writer of *Indulekha* transcends his limited model through a firm grasp of the milieu and time to which he belongs. *Indulekha* as an early novel was thus a projection into the future where the author envisions a society in that a woman like Indulekha could choose her own partner.

One of the recurrent subjects in the English novel was the man-woman relationship. However, an Indian writer living in a society bound by restrictive conventions of marriage found little scope to develop this theme. Where girls were married off by their parents before puberty and marriage was a social institution, there was no chance of a premarital love of the kind
depicted in the English novels being read by the educated Indians. Love could be shown in an indigenous setting only in historical romances where the demands of realism were absent. The other alternative was a depiction of illicit love, but this involved the attendant problem of juxtaposing individual aspirations with the stability of the social order. The novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94) at times dealt with this conflict between rebellious passion and the accepted social norm, but even he had to accede that the demands of social order were higher than even artistic integrity.

The question of time is important within the narrative structure of a novel. The novelist has been increasingly less concerned with the unchanging moral verities and their presentation in a timeless setting and more with the precise location of historical man in the flux and flow of society. In the Indian context, mythic time was indispensable to kavya works but in terms of the novel this was not given precedence understandably because the nineteenth century Indian writers were influenced largely by western concepts. Not *Brihatkatha, Kadambari* or *Kathasaritasagar*, but Scott's and Thackeray's novels were their conscious models. However, traces of puranic tradition, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are identifiable in the early Indian novels.

Realism is the marked characteristic of the novel and it means reflecting a particular world-view at a certain phase in human history. The
fidelity to actuality involves a focusing on the immediate, the here and now, detailing out the visual world, depicting specific human action and its verifiable consequences. Indian literature did not have any tradition of this variety of realism because it was based on a different view of reality. Interest in physical reality on the part of the Indian novelist often ended in giving descriptions that were far from real. To describe a beautiful woman they would rather allude her beauty to the Sanskrit Kavya convention. A realistic presentation of actual people or objects, interiors or buildings, was either absent or rare. The reality they represented was hardly the reality represented by Defoe or George Eliot, Balzac or Tolstoy. English novels emphasizing moral qualities were more popular among the Indians rather than amoral realistic settings of Defoe and Fielding. And this interest feeds into the writing of novels in India as well.

Thus the Indian novel was a direct result of the English novel in many ways so far as its features are concerned. However, in its early years the Indian novel was so much influenced by its English counterpart that it was difficult to differentiate between what was Indian and what was Western. Unlike the English novelists who wrote about their actual experiences, the Indian novelists could not express their own reality in their novels. The early novels were imitative and there was no conscious attempt to finding a new orientation to the writing of fiction in India. Early works like *Yamuna Paryatan* (Marathi, 1857) or *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (Bengali, 1858) were not considered
as 'novels' although in these works the beginnings of a new literary form could be recognised. The word upanyas for novel is a Bengali derivation, first used in 1862 in Bengali by Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay when he named a volume containing two tales set in the past as Aitihasik Upanyas (Bengali, 1862). By the time Bankim Chandra Chatterjee began writing his novels in the mid-1860's, the term upanyas was already well established in Bengali and about to be taken over in Hindi as well, as is evident from the title Manohar Upanyas of a work of fiction published in 1871. In Marathi the word for novel was kadambari nomenclatured perhaps after Banabhatta's Kadambari. The use of this word dates to the year 1829 and therefore the Marathi word for novel predates the Bengali upanyas. In Urdu it is naval, in Gujarati naval-katha and likewise almost every Indian language has a name for the novel as the genre became popular. Whatever the differences in terminology in the Indian languages, the thematic and formal aspirations of the Indian novel were the same as those of the English novels read by pioneering Indian novelists. Moreover, many of the early novels such as Deurani Jethani Ki Kahani (Hindi), Tabut-un-Nusuh (Urdu), Mirat-ul-Arus (Urdu) were written under the English patronage. In almost every major novel of the nineteenth century, behind the obvious European influences, there can be found the bedrock of a different narrative structure and value systems. The conventions of Sanskrit literature and puranic traditions unconsciously influenced the Indian writers.
While differences in literary trends in different languages are considerable, certain common patterns also become perceptible in the development of these patterns in different regions. There was a sudden spurt of long narrative fictions in most Indian languages in the second half of the nineteenth century, whether these were called upanyas, kadambari, naval-katha or novel. The full development of the Indian novel as a whole may be divided into three large stages: historical romance, social or political realism and psychological novels showing an introspective concern with the individual.

Bankim Chandra wrote historical romances in Bengali and his influence was evident in the early historical novels of Hindi in which Kishorilal Goswami led the field for a long time. The first of his long series of historical novels, *Labangalata* (1891), appeared almost at the same time as Devaki Nandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta* and together they launched this particular phase of the Hindi novel which continued well into the twentieth century. In Marathi, Hari Narayan Apte was the first to establish himself as a widely read novelist. His first novel, *Maisorcha Wagh* (1890), was a translation of Meadows Taylor's *Tippoo Sultan*, but later on he found his themes in Shivaji's life and times in novels like *Gadh Ala Pan Simha Gela* (1906). Likewise historical novels were written in Marathi, Malayali and Kannada. The historical romances created a glamour of the past incorporating characters from history. Thus the characters were far removed from the nineteenth century.
The reality of the readers.

The novel of social realism was ushered in sometime during the twenties by Munshi Prem Chand in Hindi and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in Bengali. They dealt with everyday problems of the rural community, and their immense popularity marks the next phase of development in the Indian novel. The writers concerned themselves with the contemporary public issues, whether social or political. The National movement for independence offered them rich and ready material as well. In Bengali well-known writers were Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra, though both dealt with different aspects of the upheaval. Tagore's Ghare Baire (1916) and Char Adhyay (1934) and Sarat Chandra's Pather Dabi (1926) are novels in this mode. In other novels like Palli Samaj (1916) and Arakhaniya (1916) Sarat Chandra dealt with superstitions and orthodoxy in village life. Prem Chand dealt with the problem of prostitution in Sevasadan (1916), while later in Karmabhumī (1932) his theme was Gandhian ideology. Social problems and politics have always been difficult to separate in India and many of the novels written in the 30's dealt with this subject. Some such novels were Bhule Bisre Chitra (Hindi; 1959) and Kanchan Mruga (Marathi; 1931).

The initial vogue of the historical romance was obviously associated with the awakening of Indian nationalism. During the height of British rule, the safest form of patriotism open to Indians was the celebration of
past glory. As nationalist feelings came to the forefront of Indian life in the 'twenties and 'thirties, it was no longer necessary for novelists to make their heroes sufficiently removed in time; the scene could now be shifted to the contemporary battles and agitations. Even the purely social reform novels were inflamed by politics since any desire to improve the lot of the people was bound to be linked with political independence.

While the vogue of the historical novel and the era of social reform fiction can be traced quite distinctly in most Indian literatures, the third phase is not so clearly seen because in some languages it is still in the process of emerging. In Bengali fiction the trend towards introspection started in the late thirties and it could be traced in the early works of Buddhadev Bose. In Hindi, Agyeya is the most powerful representative of this shift of emphasis from the public issue of society to the private agonies of the individual, while novels like Ilachandra Joshi's *Jahaz ka Panchi* (1955) or Naresh Mehata's *Dubte Mastool* (1954) give further evidence of this shift. Marathi novels of Mardhekkar and Vasant Kanetkar also illustrate the changes overtaking Marathi fiction towards probing analysis of the inner life of the human beings.

Modernism in the West was not without its impact in novel writing in India. The period after the World Wars saw a radical change in Western art, philosophy, literature and culture. Thinkers such as Nietszche, Marx, Frazer
questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion and morality and also the traditional ways of conceiving the human self. The catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the moral basis, coherence, and durability of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the post-war world. Writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot came up with works which were innovative and reflected the spirit of the age. The modern artists set out to create ever-new forbidden subject matter by violating the accepted conventions not only of art but of social discourse. The artists represented themselves as 'alienated' from the established order, against which they assert their own autonomy.

Modernity in India was no doubt influenced by Western modernism but it was not the same. The idea of modernity emerged in Indian Literature from the inner urge of the literary community to create alternative models and free the canon from traditions dominating for centuries. The move in the twentieth century was towards the ideological and psychological reality. The new content of this literature grew out of the writer's understanding of the social reality and his response to the fast changing world. In negating and critiquing the past concerns with spirituality and nation building, the Indian modernists launched an existential search for a new set of values. A modern writer carved out a distinct identity for himself in a new style. The search for authenticity was more vital. In his view only those values were authentic
which were real and relevant in the existential sense. The period also wit-
nessed the most engaging debates regarding style and diction in different
literatures. Most important to these writers was to explore the possibilities
of existing genres, while creating new forms of expression. They continued
to experiment with meters and narrative structures.

Indian modernism indeed followed two parallel paths. Influenced
to a large extent by Eliot and Yeats, Indian poets in different languages
were successful in setting a new idiom of poetry that was artificial and elitist.
Eliot was so popular among these poets that each vernacular literature wit-
nessed more than the translations of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. However,
the impact of modernism in Indian fiction was momentous. It provided the
Indian novelist a basis and opportunity to rediscover him/herself as a con-
cerned individual in his/her reality. She refused to live in the cloistered
world of isolation and suffer the artificial pang of existential angst.

The modern movement ushered in a way of interrogating tradition
and practices with a vision to change the society. Without the pretensions
of reformers, they wrote with an objective of 'showing' the prevailing social
situation being part of it. Premchand was at the forefront of this move-
ment. Although he is classified as a committed writer with leftist leanings, he
is indeed the very authentic voice of the Indian reality. Premchand was fol-
lowed by a host of writers who were committed not only to ideology
but to issues as social justice, equality and raised their voices against class and caste discriminations. Anantha Murthy, Gopinath Mohanty and Mahesweta Devi not only continued to make social issues as the theme of their fictional work but also experimented with language and narrative style. In the hands of these generation of writers, novel as literary genre made tremendous progress.

*Samskara*

*Samskara* was originally written in Kannada in 1965 by U.R. Anantha Murthy. It was made into a film in 1970 directed by Girish Karnad and translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan in 1976. Soon after its publication, the novel became enormously popular with general readers and critics in both its original and translated form. However, the novel also generated criticism for the writer as he was accused of attacking Brahminism. Anantha Murthy's subject in *Samskara* is revolutionary. A brahmin himself he questions the very basis of Brahminism. He exposes the contradictions within Brahminism as a discourse.

The event in the story is a death by bubonic plague of a Brahmin, Naranappa, a breaker of taboos of the agrahara. His death brings in its wake the question of the rites of burial of a Brahmin. The crux of the problem is the dilemma in performing such a man's rites. While the Brahmin elders confer on how to dispose off the renegade's body without inviting excommunication, the reader is on a detour having a close look at the flow of life of the community as well as the dilemma of the village acharya,
Praneshacharya. Praneshacharya turns out to be the main protagonist as
the story revolves around how he is going to solve the problem at hand.

Written in 1965, the novel is set at a period of transition, when tradi-
tional India had already come in contact with the modern world with the
advent of colonialism. In Naranappa, the rebel Brahmin and his followers
we find Brahminism’s collusion with modernity. There are enough evidences
within the text which suggest that Anantha Murthy’s Samskara is a rewriting
of Brahminism into modernity. Anantha Murthy’s critique of Brahminism
is unquestionable but what needs to be seen is how far has he succeeded
in handling the women characters in the novel, in articulating women’s voice,
because critics have not taken note of it. The narrative opens up ample
scope for a feminist reading.

The setting of the novel is a Brahmin village or ‘agrahara’. Anantha
Murthy captures very vividly the lived life in the brahmin village of Durvasa-
pura. Everything about their existence appears to be ‘routine’ and this is
brought into focus at the very outset when we are introduced to the spiritual
head of the community, Praneshacharya: “A routine that began with the
bath at dawn, twilight prayers, cooking, medicines for his wife. And crossing
the stream again to Maruti temple for worship. That was the unfailing daily
routin...” (p.1)*. Not only the life of the acharya, but the whole colony seemed

* All textual references are taken from U. R. Anantha Murthy, Samskara, Translated into
to be ordered by rituals and festivals and seasonal food variations. There were vows to be kept in each month and the occasional feasts for death, marriage and initiation. "The brahmin's lives ran smoothly in this annual cycle of appointments" (p.16). Besides, there appeared to be a uniformity in all the brahmin houses, both in their interiors and exteriors. The people who resided were all of Brahmin lineage.

In spite of this uniformity and smoothness, what we read is an uneasy calm. Far from being smooth the world in which the Brahmins live appears to be claustrophobic. The details emphasize the sterility of this ritual bound existence. Although the Tungabhadra river runs behind the houses, the flowing water seems to have no relation to the enclosed lives of the Brahmins. Time stands still here and kinships and hostilities continue for generations. Garuḍacharya, shirking from a relative's duty to perform Naranappa's burial rites recalls an ancient feud: "Between Naranappa and me, it's true, there's a bond of kinship going back several generations. But as you know, his father and I fought over that orchard and went to court... So we swore we'd have nothing between us for generations to come..." (p.5). Within the village even there is hostility between the two sets of Brahmins - the Smartas
and the Madhvas – each waiting for an opportunity to smear the other, even to the point of blaspheming their respective genealogies. Human relationships are graded and merits measured according to a prescribed scale. A Brahmin co-habiting with a low-born prostitute may be condoned, but not if he has eaten food cooked by her. A man neglecting his wife at the time of her death may be pardoned, but not if he has omitted performing the annual rites of his dead parents. In this agrahara, all decisions are made according to an inviolable code made centuries ago. Anantha Murthy depicts a decadent structure which once jolted out of its groove cannot be reintegrated again. The community wakes up to a new challenge how to handle the death of an unbrahminic Brahmin. The very basis of Brahminism, which for centuries have unquestionably continued in its rituals and practices suddenly become unsettling. The arena of conflict shifts to the mind of Praneshacharya, the most conscious point of the community’s existence, thus interrogating what he symbolizes.

In the first section of the narrative, the action is presented largely in terms of the different voices of Brahmins who discuss their relations with others in the village in terms of property and filial disputes. Naranappa obviously becomes the point of reference whose life and actions even after death
haunt the Brahmins. It is a community presumably united in its belief in the Ancient Law Books, but their voices belie this unity. In the discourses of the Brahmins we read the insecurity of the agrahara. Although they gather to discuss the rites of burial, their discussion digresses in ways that only serve their greed, jealousy, self-interest, family feuds and class divisions. The Brahmins are more concerned in not losing their Brahminism in the act of burying a Brahmin, who never lived the life of a Brahmin. The spiritual head of the agrahara, Praneshacharya lays before them the problem at hand - “who should perform the rites? The Books say, any relative can failing that, any brahmin can offer to do them” (pp.4-5). Both Naranappa’s relatives Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya immediately find excuses to free themselves from the fear of performing the burial rites. Even the other Brahmins Dasacharya, Durgabhatta and Padmanabhacharya decline, citing one reason or the other. The Brahmins instead of finding solution to the problem delved into Naranappa’s associations with low-caste women and Muslims and his wilfull ways and questioned his Brahminic identity. Garudacharya, Naranappa’s relative, while recognizing the Ancient Law Books and the acharya as the true dispenser of authority, washes his hands off the burial citing the irreparable differences he has had with Naranappa, further saying, “Lets set aside the question of whether I should do the rites. The real question is :is he a brahmin at all? What do you say? He slept regularly with a low-caste woman...” (p. 5). Lakshmana and Padmanabhacharya
agree to Garuda at once, Lakshmana adding that "he even ate what she cooked" (p. 6) and Padmanabhacharya chipping in with "And he drank too. Besides drinking, he ate animal flesh" (p. 6). Thus, from burial rites their conversation shifts to question of identity, in this case their Brahminic identity. It is ironical that the very Brahmins who are questioning the Brahminic identity of Naranappa are themselves susceptible to the same question as is revealed in their conversations hereafter. The question that the narrative posits is who after all is a true Brahmin?

As their conversation turns to a question of identity, it is interesting how it leads them to trace the identity of their ancestors. What comes across is also the divisions that exist within Brahminism. In this agrahara dominated by Madhvas there resided a Brahmin from the Smarta sect, who never lost any opportunity to check and measure the rival sect's orthodoxy. He was Durgabhatta and while the others were questioning Naranappa's Brahminic identity, he had no doubts about it, citing their ancestors as examples: "O no, a brahmin isn't lost because he takes a lowborn prostitute. Our ancestors after all came from the North...history says they cohabited with Dravidian women. Don't think I am being facetious. Think of all the people who go to the brothels of Basrur in South Kanara" (pp. 5-6). The purpose of their gathering takes a backseat as the Brahmins become engaged in a war of words concerning their respective sects. Stung by Durgabhatta's attack to their sect, Garuda on his part turns his attack on Shankara, the
founder of the Smarta sect: “Shankara, your great founder, in his hunger for full experience, exchanged his body for a dead king’s and enjoyed himself with the queen, didn’t he?” (pp.6-7).

As the argument of the Brahmins lead to a maligning of their genealogies, Praneshacharya interrupts knowing full well that the protection of the entire agrahara was now on his shoulders. While Praneshacharya had answers as to how Garuda could absolve his feud and perform the rites of burial, he could not answer with certainty how someone could actually perform cremation rites of someone like Naranappa who abused Brahminism. He was ironically certain of the fact that “he may have rejected brahminhood, but brahminhood never left him. No one ever excommunicated him officially. He didn’t die an outcaste, so he remains a brahmin in his death” (p.9). Retaining their own Brahmin identity became more important to this community of Brahmins. Unwilling to lose their identity in the act of performing the rites, they are afraid of “sullying” their brahminhood by letting someone else do it. Unsure of what to do next Praneshacharya seeks to find answers in the Law Books.

Towards the end of the first section as Chandri, the low-caste mistress of Naranappa, is brought to the scene, we are taken closer into the sham of this Brahminic community. She gives up all her jewelry to meet the expenses of the rite. All the brahmins who had refused to perform the rites were now afraid
that the attraction of gold might tempt others to do what so far they had disagreed upon. The duality within the Brahmins is exposed as they are caught between their lust for gold and retaining their brahmin purity. "But in the heart of everyone of them flashed the question: if some other brahmin should perform the final rite for Naranappa, he might keep his brahminhood and yet put all that gold on his wife's neck" (p.10). The new reason inflamed further the jealous hatred among Lakshmana and Garuda and afraid that someone else might be tempted to agree, every brahmin present "vied with the others in lurid account of Naranappa's misdeeds - things done not to them but always to others" (p.10). In the course of their conversation, the Brahmins also reveal the divisions that exist within Brahminism which re-inforce the question of who is a true brahmin and what kind of Brahminism were they trying to maintain. Within the text we come to know of the Durvasapura Brahmins who were Madhvas and the Parijatapura Brahmins who were Smartas. The Smartas were not considered orthodox brahmins and "not quite out of the upper set, their lines being a little mixed" (p.12). The brahmins of Parijatapura were "pleasure-lovers, not so crazy about orthodoxy and strict rules" (p.13) but they were rich. At one point Dasacharya had suggested that the brahmins of Parijatapura could perform the rites being close friends of Naranappa but when the question of gold ornaments came up, there were yet others who thought otherwise.

The dialogic mode of presentation conveys a sense of the insecure
ritual economy. Rituals, dharma, Ancient Law Books are the regulators of behaviour but in this decadent agrahara the ancient laws don't seem to hold good anymore. The Brahmin world is shown to be disintegrating as it can not keep younger generation Brahmins like Naranappa and Shripati in its fold. The insecurity is manifested in the Brahmins looking upto their acharya as perhaps the last hope of their Brahminhood. In the conflict between tradition and modernity, significantly it is the figure of the Muslim and women who are scapegoated. The patriarchal nature of Brahminism becomes evident not only in the attitudes of the other Brahmins, but also in Naranappa and the protagonist Praneshacharya. Although the theme of the novel is death of a Brahmin the novel is more about Brahminism. The narrative alternately turned into a quest - a quest of self-discovery. What is intriguing is that the quest displaces the dialogic formation turning monologic in that it marginalises the voices of women and others considering them as incidental not central to the formation of the quest.

At the beginning of the novel, Praneshachara is very much a part of the agrahara. To the people living in the agrahara, Praneshacharya embodied the true spirit of Brahminism. They believed he had all the answers to their problems. “We don’t have to advise our great Praneshacharya. He knows all about alliances and misalliances, has studied it all in Kashi, he knows all the scriptures, earned the title Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning.”(p.6). But once the Naranappa issue comes to the foreground, Praneshacharya knows
that the ground is slipping under his feet. He is confronted with the ques-
tion: if he rejects his brahminhood what remains of his self? Delving deep
into the scriptures to find a solution, Praneshacharya is more bothered about
guarding his reputation," He sat there thinking, "Whatever one loses, one
shouldn't lose one's good name, it can never be retrieved" (p.46). He
weighed everything in terms of victory and defeat. For him getting the right
answer was also proving Naranappa wrong, who always challenged his
Brahminhood. Naranappa was a threat to his Brahminhood and the old ques-
tions come back to him as he questions why in the first place he did not
excommunicate Naranappa. Praneshacharya is forced to realise that: "There
was a time when the brahmin's power of penance ruled the world. Then one
didn't buckle under any such threat. It's because the times are getting worse
such dilemmas torment us"(p.47). "It's hard to know the inner workings of
dharna... the inner meanings of dharma are inscrutable" (p.48).

As a last resort, Praneshacharya goes to the temple of Maruti
but his desperate wait did not yield any answer. He leaves the temple rem-
inded of his duty toward his wife. What strikes the reader is Praneshacharya's
devotion to duty. Brahminism appears to be a role acted out by Pranesh-
acharya. Whether it is looking after his wife or finding solutions to the prob-
lems of the agrahara, Praneshacharya is governed by the Brahminic code
and operates mechanically. The tension within Pranesh is how well he could
maintain this code in the face of transition. At this point in the novel the
shell of custom and ritual breaks as in the forest, in the dark, the Acharya,
the upholder of Brahminism, finds himself in the arms of a woman—“the Sanskrit formula of blessing got stuck in his throat” (p.63). In Chandri, he finds a release from the structures that imprisoned him for so long. Hereafter, he can no longer fit into a stratified and coded existence of the agrahara. His encounter with Chandri wakes up his other self and challenges his social self. There is no social niche he can occupy and his actions and speech can no longer be determined by the expectations of society. When he sets out on his journey in the third section of the novel he is really in search of the residual self that remains after the outer shells are discarded. Pranesh's reply to the hopeful Brahmin's "I'm lost, I couldn't get Maruti to say anything. I know nothing. You do whatever your hearts say" (p.78) is the beginning of the deeper conflict within; a conflict between authority and identity. His words show the universal problem of a man who has equated himself with a particular role for so long that the role becomes his self, and without the role he feels lost. As he makes the journey in search of new identity he finds it difficult at times to be himself. "When you shed your past, your history, the world sees you as just one more brahmin. He was a little disturbed by the thought"(p.93). It is interesting that his journey has no destination but when confronted by Putta, he answers that he was going to Kundapara - the place where Chandri was said to have gone.
What we read here intact is that after his first experience with Chandri, Praneshacharya wanted more of this pleasure and it was only an inversion of his early code. What he had preached against before, he was now willing to put it into practice. In order to do that he had to move out of the agrahara. “He was entering another cave of self-deception” (p.92). Inside the agrahara, existence is codified but beyond lurks the unknown, a space where rules do not apply.

Throughout the novel, action is presented in terms of the different voices of Brahmins and the narrative is centred first around the community of Brahmins and then dominantly around the Brahmin Praneshacharya. What *Sanskara* projects is a patriarchal form of Brahminism. Within this Brahminism, women’s place is almost non-existent and they are relegated to a sphere where myths, rituals and customs bind them in such a way that it renders them impossible to emerge. The novel is also about Brahminism’s collusion with modernity. In this collusion young generation Brahmins like Naranappa and Shripati are swayed by modernity and pose a threat to the rigid Brahminism of Praneshacharya, but the winds of change offer no hope for a change in women’s situation. Both tradition and modernity have been embedded in India to patriarchal ideology. All around a woman are forces, not merely of surveillance but of patriarchal rituals of pleasure and desire that try to keep her precariously poised on a razor’s edge. Where reality itself is gendered, can women expect for an escape? Myths of Indian womanhood act on the
reality of the lives of the women of India and are, in their turn, acted upon by the same reality. The myth of Indian womanhood has naturalized not merely gender oppression, but has encoded the programme for caste and class oppression as well. Brahminic patriarchal ideology is all too dominant in *Samskara* in spite of its success as a revolutionary work. Semiotically, Naranappa stands both as lack and as the other. In this structure if he weakens Brahminism from within, he also strengthens the bonding of the marginalized such as the Muslims and the Dalit women whom he has given some status from without. This semiotic structure undercuts and challenges a conventional interpretation of the text. Women’s presence in the text is no better than an absence. Women occupy the peripheral spaces and appear only in their familial spaces and only in their caste-related identities. They do not rise above their stereotypical and mythical roles of submissive wives, mothers, mistresses and prostitutes. Women are classed and considered as caste and communal subjects undergoing through a process of privileging and deprivileging that foregrounds their identities. In *Samskara* we find different groups of women: Brahmin women, low-caste women and women in the Scriptures. The text provides an interesting space from where to locate the nature of women’s representation and trace their voices.

A novel on Brahminism, at the outset, invites us to examine the status of women within the Brahminic discourse and women outside it. Since
women are rendered voiceless within the narrative it is only through the Brahmin’s voice that Brahmin women are represented. There is no place for women within the Brahminic discourse. A Brahmin woman is supposed to be the perfect adjunct to a Brahmin man, a shadow of his person. Either she is there to enhance her husband’s status or she is a medium for a man’s salvation. While Lakshmana fully agrees with wife Sitadevi regarding Chandri’s jewellery and felt the rightness of his wife’s words, he did not want his status as a husband to be lowered in public. So he snarled, “You shut up now. Why are you prating in an assembly of menfolk?” (p.14).

Lakshmana’s words articulate women’s position in the community. A Brahmin wife’s place is forever confined within the private sphere of the household. She cannot participate in any discussion and her role is limited to observing the rituals of dharma and procreation. Praneshcharya’s devotion to Bhagirathi is a part of his religious routine and she is only used as a medium for attaining his salvation. While the Brahmin men discuss the problems arising out of Naranappa’s death, brahmin wives are shown to be positioned in the periphery, the place prescribed for them. “The brahmin wives had come in through the backdoor into the middle hall, unable to contain their curiosity, afraid their husbands might do something rash” (p.4).

However, there is hardly anything that these wives could do as they remain where they are in the narrative, and they do not come out of their stereotypical roles. The Brahmin wives are more concerned in protecting their husbands prestige and their sons. Interestingly, the Brahmin women are shown
to lead a very passive and inactive life and pushed almost to oblivion. In a particular place they are mentioned in the context of observing rituals: “Only women bent on earning merit, uttering the names of gods...were his (Praneshacharya’s) audience now” (p.26). At other places she is mentioned as keeping fasts and offering vows to the goddess for the preservation of the husband and the son: “Sitadevi had offered vows to the goddess: ‘Give my husband peace, may his love be constant for his son.’ And had given up her food even on Saturday nights” (pp.27-28). These women are considered either too pious or greedy as exemplified in Lakshmana’s wife Sitađevi. Otherwise they are simply non-entities. Their Brahminic identity while on the one hand makes them believe that they are superior, in reality Brahminism conversely negates their superiority.

While Brahmin women do not figure in the Brahmin’s discourse, women outside Brahminism become the subject of their discussion. While discussing Naranappa’s burial rites, the Brahmins’ question his Brahminic identity because of his relations with “a low-caste woman.” The low-caste woman is seen as a threat to Brahminism. Disregarding Chandri’s presence, the Brahmins discuss her relationship with Naranappa in sexual terms. Garudacharya, noticing Chandri nearby, says boldly: “He (Naranappa) slept regularly with a low-caste woman...” (p.5). Durgabhatta as well as Praneshacharya maintains that a brahmin remains a brahmin inspite of his relations with a low-born prostitute. This suggests that a low-caste
woman can be used any time for a Brahmin's pleasure but his Brahminhood never leaves him. Thus, a low-caste woman in a brahminic discourse remains only as an object of pleasure and denied her subjecthood. Her identity as a whore, a mistress, a prostitute is legitimated within the Brahminic discourse. Beyond that a low-caste woman has no existence. Chandri becomes an object of sexual pleasure both in the hands of Naranappa and later in the hands of Praneshacharya. Women like Chandri, are also pushed to oblivion once their sexual roles are fulfilled. Thus, both Brahmin women and low-caste women become victims of Brahminic patriarchal ideology. If the traditional brahminism of Praneshacharya is patriarchal in its adherence to customs and rituals, the liberal Brahminism of Naranappa too is no less patriarchal because in both instances women are exploited and oppressed and denied their self-hood. Brahminism in full force burdens and silences women.

If women's representation is negated in the Brahminic discourse, within the narrative, women are presented as representative of class -- the Brahmin woman and the Shudra or the low-caste woman and in binary opposites such as sexless/sexual, passive/active, spiritual/physical, respectively. There are two classes of women in the novel -- the Brahmin and the low-caste women. Whereas the Brahmin women appear in the novel as wives of their Brahmin husbands, the lower caste women appear as mistresses of the Brahmins. The Brahmin wives Bhagirathi, Sitadevi, Anasuya
are never considered as individuals. They occupy very little space in the novel and even in those spaces where they appear are portrayed as sexless, unappetizing, smelly, invalids at best. The Brahmin's themselves consider their wives as "barren". Says Naranappa to the Acharya. "O Acharya, who in the world can live with a girl who gives no pleasure -- except of course some barren brahmins!"(p.21). He considers his wife as a 'hysterical female'. Bhagirathi, Praneshcharya's wife is an invalid, "a dried up wasted peapod," who in her paralytic state can only think of her husband's joy and her barren womb; "Being married to me is no joy. A house needs a child. Why don't you just get married again?"(p.1). For a Brahmin woman her highest attainment of life is motherhood and a life without a child is shown to be lifeless. This is also articulated by Sitadevi, Garuda's wife. Even Praneshcharya who once considered his wife as "sacrificial altar" for his sacrifice notices her "sunken breasts, her bulbous nose, her short narrow braid"(p.76) and is disgusted with it. Lilavati, Shripati's wife too is portrayed as sexless, a woman who, "when her husband came at night to embrace her ...would come crying to her mother ..."(p.32). Shripati has the same opinion about Brahmin women as Naranappa. "Which brahmin girl,—cheek sunken, breast withered, mouth stinking of lentil soup which brahmin girl was equal to Belli?"(p.37). The Brahmin women are thus represented as passive characters with no function whatsoever in the novel's plot. As a class, they remain ritualistic given to chastity, sativa and penance. The Brahmin woman is confined in
her image as buttressed by myth, legend, religion and tradition. Colonised by her caste, the Brahmin woman is rendered immobile and is silenced under the burden of patriarchy. She looks down upon the lower-caste women and joins their oppressors in doubling the exploitation of the lower-caste women. They have appropriated the patriarchal system of belief to denigrate the lesser women, unaware that they themselves are also the victims of the same set of values.

If women of the upper-caste are represented as sexless, ritualistic and upholders of patriarchal values of purity and penance, the lower-caste women appear in opposites. Chandri, Belli, Padmavati are the lower-caste women mentioned in the text. While they are good enough to be mistresses of Brahmins they do not qualify to be their wives. All the low-caste women remain unmarried and they appear only as instruments of sexual pleasure. Chandri, Padmavati and Belli’s role in the novel is only to satisfy the male desire. They are portrayed as mere sights for the male gaze. Naranappa’s relationship with Chandri is just for “a little bit of pleasure” (p.21). “Naranappa had guzzled at her body like a ten year old, tearing and devouring like a gluttonous bear at a honeycomb”(p.45). She’d wasted ten years of her life with Naranappa and in the end “though she had got everything, yet had nothing”(p.54). If Chandri is devoured by Naranappa physically, she also becomes the object of Durgabhata and Shripati’s lustful desire in their thoughts, While the Brahmins are engaged in discussion over Naranappa’s rites
of burial, Durgabhhatta ogles Chandri: “He sat unconcerned in his place, ogling Chandri. For the first time his connoisseur eyes had the chance to appraise this precious object which did not normally stir out of the house, this choice object that Naranappa had brought from Kundapara... Look at those breasts. In sex she’s the type who sucks the male dry”(p.8). Out caste or lower-caste women are endowed with a greater sexual vitality than their high-born counterparts. The sensuousness of women like Belli who are outside the agrahara occur again and again, sometimes even extended to by mythic references to Urvashi, Menaka and Matsagandha-temptresses of the sages. Shripati is charmed by Chandri’s beauty, “a beauty beyond compare”(p.38). He is surprised “that no one’s eye had fallen on Belli.” He had taken on Belli at the river when she had come to get water and alludes her beauty to Shakuntala. After hearing the Acharya speak of Shakuntala’s beauty, he couldn’t get over Belli “as she stood in the moonlight bouncing her breasts, the colour of earth—she’d looked like Shakuntala herself”(p.39). In contrast to his frigid wife who would tighten and twine up her thighs when he approached her, there was always Belli in the outcaste hutments: “her body...the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun”(p.37).

Naranappa kept Chandri as a mistress, Shripati made love to Belli, Praneshacharya too is sexually initiated by Chandri, Padmavati is the pros-
stitute who has Brahmin clients. All these low-caste women are good enough only to the point of sex. This is articulated by Shripati: "Belli was alright for sleeping with, she was no good for talk. If she opens her mouth, she talks only ghosts and demons" (p.41). In other words the Brahmins "measured and judged all the low-caste women." Low-caste and outcaste women are hallowed and romanticized by their references to classical heroines like Shakuntala and Menaka. While on the other hand, their bodies appear no more than just objects and have no equality of status with socially constructed respectability. They remain as creatures of pleasure not fit enough to be the Brahmin's wives.

Low-caste women are under constant male gaze as contrasted to the Brahmin women. Outside caste, a lower-caste woman perhaps enjoys more freedom than a Brahmin woman but her life is a hard struggle in which she has to constantly negotiate the thorny terrain. As she traverses the public space, she is prone to sexual violence. A low-caste woman's mobility makes her more susceptible to exploitation. Belli freely moves in the Brahmin agrahara but this poverty stricken girl soon becomes an object of male gaze. Her poverty is used as a gaze. "It's amazing that no one's eye had fallen on Belli; she walked around everywhere in rags, picking up manure. But then it wasn't surprising either. How can brahmin eyes see anything, dimmed by looking for meals everywhere?" (p.38). A low-caste woman in her search for subsistence has to guard herself from sexual exploitation. Her poverty makes her
an easy prey for her captors as women are converted into no more than commodities.

However, a low-caste woman, even in her limited space enjoys more individuality than her upper-caste counterparts. Padmavati, the prostitute in Kundapara, has an individuality of her own. Outside society, outside class, she has a liminal existence. But in her profession she enjoys the freedom of choice. She is the master of her own body and is selective about her clients. Says Putta to the Acharya. "Don't think that the woman's a common prostitute. No, Sir. No lowcaste man has been near her. And she isn't the kind of spirit that'll accept any ordinary brahmin either. Not for money, not for a few coins...She has an estate. Even the ancient sages would fall for her, she's like that" (p.125). Chandri comes out as a stronger individual trying to subvert the heirarchical discourse of Brahminism, trying to offer an alternative. Chandri and her ilk like Belli and Padmavati express themselves through their body. Rendered speechless, they let their bodies do the talking. They celebrate their sexuality and encroaching upon Brahmin territory, they create their own space.

Both the class of women -- Brahmin and low-caste -- occupy very little space in the novel and are represented through male eyes. If they are presented as extremes, they end up being two extremes of the same pole. Under patriarchy, both sets of women characters are drawn negatively, although the low-caste women is shown to enjoy more mobility than a higher
caste Brahmin woman. The Brahmin wives cannot give voice to their oppression, silenced by their caste and the low-caste women if we consider them as the 'subaltern', have no language to speak in. Either ways, women are silenced.

Indian womanhood has been imaged after women in the Scriptures. Men often cite the scriptures to legitimize their authority on women and justify male domination. Caste and class interests are serviced by the myth of Indian womanhood drawn from the mythology of Hindu scriptures. To establish its regime of caste, class and gender oppression, men often take recourse to the scriptures. In Samskara the Brahminic discourse often refers to women in Scriptures. Durghabhatta, in order to justify a Brahmin's liaisons with low-caste women and prostitutes cite how history will bear testimony to the fact that their brahmin ancestors cohabited with Dravidian women. Thoughts of Belli make Shripati go into a trancelike state where he could see visions of Goddess Lakshmi waking up her Lord Vishnu with her morning song. He remembers of all the heroines in the legends and how "there isn't a sage who doesn't fall for some woman"(p.38). He is reminded of the temptress Menaka, who destroyed the penance of Sage Vishvamitra. Praneshacharya's expositions of the Puranas do not have any religious influence on young men like Naranappa and Shripati. Rather they consider his phrasings as evocative and in them the divine transforms into the mundane. Praneshacharya's depiction of Kalidasa's Shakuntala arouses the desire within Shripati for Belli.
Naranappa was the first one to be moved after hearing Praneshacharya's description of Kalidasa's heroine Shakuntala. Seeing an outcaste woman bathing in a river under moonlight "He (Naranappa) fantasied she was the Shakuntala of the Achari's description and this pure brahmin youth made love to her right there-- with the moon for witness" (p.25). After his sexual experience with Chandri, Praneshacharya likens all female beauty to the "beauty of Goddess Lakshmi, queen and servant of Lord Vishnu. All sexual enjoyment was Krishna's when he stole the bathing cow girls' garments, and left them naked in the water" (p.77). Durgabhatta compares Chandri to Matsagandha while Praneshacharya refers to her as Urvashi. What is significant is that the women in the Scriptures are portrayed as angelic, evocative, connoisseurs of beauty but interestingly they do not transcend to be divine. This reflects the ambivalence of Brahminic discourse. While women are expected to subscribe to myth of womanhood where the given values are purity, chastity, self-sacrifice, men on their part, to justify their promiscuity evoke a totally different image of women in Scriptures. Thus, even the women in Scriptures are subjected to the object of lust in Brahminic narrative. Reference to Urvashi, Menaka and Matsagandha are made as 'temptresses of the sages.' The apsaras stand outside social and ethical parameters and embody in them the feminine essence unfettered by familial relationships. Therefore, they are constantly referred to in the context of the low-caste
women, who are also outside the agrahara and unfettered by familial relationships. Just as women in the scriptures do not form the object of the Brahmin's worship, women in brahminic discourse also do not form objects of worship. Praneshacharya's devotion to his wife Bhagirathi cannot be interpreted as an act of worship. His is a devotion to duty and his devotion does not elevate her status as a woman.

Perhaps the only woman character in the novel who offers a challenge to the patriarchal Brahminic ideology is Chandri. Chandri is a low-caste woman, who, when the novel opens, is introduced as the mistress of Naranappa. Chandri makes her presence felt not through her voice but through her actions. In an indirect suggestive way Chandri becomes the protagonist of the novel as in the end it is Chandri who is sought after. Chandri's role in the novel is functional. She is the bridge between the rebel brahmin Naranappa and the traditional Brahmin Praneshacharya. It is she who links the two combatants. She embodies in her a natural wholeness and an instinctive spontaneity which Praneshacharya can never achieve. By her sexuality she has tamed both the Brahmins- Naranappa and Praneshacharya. Thus, she is instrumental in the process of initiation of the Brahmins. By virtue of her profession she is both outside structured society as well as recognized by it. She is linked to the river Tunga, which flows through the village and is unshackled by it. "How can sin ever defile a running river? It is good for a drink when a man is thirsty, and it is good for washing god's
images with. It says yes to everything, never a no" (p.44). She sees the hunger in Praneshacharya -- in the literal and physical sense- and feeds him. She feeds him banana and then gives him access to her body, opening out a new world of naturalness and wholeness to the Acharya. Chandri is untroubled by this act of hers even as the Acharya is stricken by his conscience: "She was a natural in pleasure, unaccustomed to self-reproach" (p.68). Whether as a mistress of Naranappa, or a momentary companion to Praneshacharya, Chandri is explicit in her action. She knows that she is outside the stratified society and by virtue of her caste status she makes the most of this space which she enjoys. From her location even without a voice she can assert herself, through her action. Hers is a language of sexuality and through it she creates a discourse, in that, she interrogates both kinds of Brahminism.

Chandri's presence in the narrative is also made by virtue of her beauty. The Brahmins are disturbed by her beauty. "Chandri was utterly beautiful, beyond compare" (p.38). Not only men, but even the Brahmin women consider her beauty disturbing. Frigid and withered, the Brahmin women fail to excite the imagination of their starved husbands and so they fear the earthy Chandri would seduce their husbands. Separate sets of values are laid between women of upper-class and lower-class. While in a Brahmin woman pati-vrata, satitva, chastity are instilled, in a low-caste woman beauty, sexuality, eroticism are preferred. Chandri, therefore, uses
her beauty to trap the males for her own ends. It is Chandri who makes the first move towards Praneshacharya thus fulfilling in her a desire to have such a relation with a holy man like the Acharya: "A great good fortune had suddenly rushed into her life" (p.68). "There was also a hope in her that his touch might bear fruit in her body. And a gratefulness that she too might have earned merit" (p.67). Chandri has thus taken on the Acharya in her own terms and this is also an expression of her individuality.

Chandri rises above her elemental nature and demonstrates a humane nature when unmindful of the horrid stench, she takes upon herself the responsibility of burying therotting corpse of Naranappa. While the Brahmins including Praneshacharya fail to find a solution to bury Naranappa's corpse, it is Chandri who puts an end to this crisis. "She was grief-stricken that she'd left the body orphaned, unprotected, the body of the man who'd antagonized the whole agrahara for her sake" (p.69). Thereafter, taking the help of Ahmad Bari, a Muslim fish merchant, she cremates Naranappa. Chandri, in this instance too speaks through her action. Not bound by any rules, outside the brahminic code, she does what was most practical for her to do.

Towards the end of the novel, Praneshacharya discovers Chandri as an individual. After his wife's death, he can no longer live in the agrahara and his legs take him to a journey, which many interpret as a journey in quest of
an identity shorn of Brahminism. Praneshacharya has already experienced Chandri physically and even his journey can be interpreted as a quest for Chandri, who, we are told at the end of the second section, fades away to Kundapara. Chandri has always been in Praneshacharya's unconscious throughout the novel, but it is only towards the middle that their meeting is realised. Besides, their union does not take place within the agrahara but in the forest -- outside the limits of stratified society. The author has chosen the 'silent' encounter between Chandri and Praneshacharya and that too in a neutral place, where Praneshacharya is perhaps free from the prying eyes of his caste-cousins.

Voices have to be muted for this union to take place, because Chandri is a low-caste woman -- a woman looked down upon. A subaltern, Chandri has no voice and so the author lets an encounter take place -- but an encounter without words. Chandri's disappearance thereafter is also a narrative ploy on the part of the author, because in the event of a Brahmin acharya's union with a prostitute, the author finds it difficult to provide her a space sanctioned by the Brahmins. Anantha Murthy's existential text fails to provide any viable subject position for woman. The attempt at portraying interiority in a male subject does not suggest the possibility of any interiority for woman.

Within the text the women and the minorities are spoken of in the same vein. There are references in the narrative of Muslim women who enamour Brahmin men and in burying Naranappa, Chandri also takes the help of a Muslim. Naranappa himself threatens the acharya's threat of excom-
munication by vouching to become a Muslim. " Try and excommunicate me now. I'll become a Muslim, I'll get you all tied to pillars and cram cow's flesh into your mouths and see to it personally that your sacred brahminism is ground into mud" (p. 11). The Muslims are occasional references and alluded to for the Brahmin's convenience. No wonder, that it is a Muslim who helps Chandri, united as they are in their marginalisation. Women and the minorities, outside rigid formations and part of a hitherto acceptable liminality, is threatening.

Once Chandri's function is over she fades away -- fades away without any sentimentalism. She perhaps disappears as she has to move on in life to find a means of survival -- perhaps in a world where she would rightfully belong. In this sense, her disappearance is necessary for the author because within the framework of his world, he does not find a suitable place for woman like Chandri. Within the text Chandri is allowed no conflict, no inner space, no speech, no dreams, no desires and no self. But despite the limitations of a patriarchal society, Chandri carves an identity of her own. A whore, a mistress, through her body she speaks a language of rebellion. Her action is undoubtedly revolutionary, subversive and outside male definition of the 'perfect female'. Her body language articulates a resistance to patriarchy's defined role of a 'virtuous' woman. By stepping outside the set norms of the society, she has freely encroached upon a Brahmin territory. In
her silence, if she is identified with the subaltern, in her actions she proves her femininity. It leaves a question to be answered, had Chandri been voiced what would have been the nature of her voice? How would Anantha Murthy have handled her? In fact, in Chandri's silence, it is clear that the oppression of Indian women continues without end.

**Paraja**

Written in Oriya in 1945, Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* is a classic of modern Indian fiction. Mohanty was a prolific writer and he has written more than ten novels and many volumes of short stories. Most of his writings are in his mother tongue Oriya and only a few have been translated into English. *Paraja* was translated into English by Dr. Bikram K. Das and published in 1987. As was the trend in the second stage of novel's development in India, Mohanty's writings too are pre-occupied with social issues and everyday problems of the rural community. He was a writer to whom social commitment came naturally. Having worked as an administrator in the backward tribal areas of Orissa, he found materials for his novels in the simple life of the tribals. From his first hand experience he saw the exploitation of the innocent tribals and this find expression in his novels. Like all his other novels, *Paraja* is also an indictment of social oppression and abuse.

*Paraja* is the story of a tribal family, their sufferings and struggles, in their fight for survival. It is a story of exploitation where the agents of exploi-
tation are those who wield authority. It is also a story of how a tribal way of life is encroached upon by an entire ethos of a materialistic civilization. Weave into this story are characters whom Mohanty has met and known, a landscape that he was familiar with. "He has known the sounds and smells of the jungle he so lovingly evokes; what is more, he has obviously suffered and exulted with Sukru Jani and his tribe, drunk rice beer with them, sung their songs, danced at their harvest festivals and starved with them when rains failed." Sukru Jani is the main protagonist of the novel and the story revolves around him, his two sons Mandia and Tikra, and his two daughters Jili and Bili. Sukru Jani’s wife is already dead when the novel begins. Initially the family leads a happy existence. They are simple people with simple needs and have enough for a peaceful living. They live in the hamlet of Sarsupadar and belong to the Paraja tribe. But as the novel progresses the happiness of Sukru Jani and his family are shortlived. The blissful innocence of tribal existence cannot endure; it is foredoomed. Even as we are brought close to lives of Paraja men and women, at work or at play we are warned "The disapproving eyes of a modern society were a million miles away." The disapproving eyes soon appears to trap the tribals in all their innocence. The novel traces the saga of exploitation of the tribals like Sukru Jani and how a once happy family slowly disintegrates by its impact. Things change in the tribal world beyond comprehension of the simple people and before
they realise, their lands are seized, they are transformed into bonded labourers and their daughters are commodified. Sukru Jani and his children can only gape and sigh as the world under their feet slips away. Their happiness is turned to grief, free men become slaves and young girls become commodities and sexually exploited.

The novel brings into conflict two world views and two value systems. While the tribal world view aspires to a life of harmony and joy, the other world view interrupts it by its machinations propelled by greed and suppression. In the conflict of contesting world views: one almost prelapsarian and other dehumanising, Mohanty builds up his narrative. The description of the landscape, the social practices of the Parajas move beyond anthropological reporting and naturalises the broader issue of domination and subordination. Self and other binary dichotomy is conflated with a subtle implication, that in free India the process of colonisation with its brutal force is still on.

The situation of the Paraja tribe becomes a mirror image of the idyllic life that the dominant discourse corrupts and disrupts as the other is rendered vulnerable for its modes of social protection and preservation and are very tenuous. The conflict between the dominant and the dominated, authority and identity are not confined to the tribal vs non-tribals in Orissa.
only it rings loud as a matter of concern throughout the world.

The issue pertinent to this study is what happens to women characters in the scene of exploitation and what is the nature of exploitation. Since the novel is about a tribal way of life, we also get a glimpse of how tribal women are represented in literature and the narrative provides ample scope to study a tribal woman's life in contrast to non—tribal woman. However, an understanding of tribal way of life is important for a proper reading of tribal woman's life in her context. The opening chapters of the novel take us close to the Paraja tribe. Mohanty gives a detailed description of the village where Sukru Jani lived. "The hamlet consists of two cluster of thatched huts huddled together under the shade of some trees"(p.1)*. In one cluster lived the Paraja tribe and in the other the Dombs lived. Every Paraja hut was "flanked by patches of green - tiny squares of land sown with maize, chillies or tobacco and fenced in by hedges of the wild tania shrub. Beyond the hedges are fields of mandia, olsi and kandula, different kinds of millet which form the staple food of these tribes"(p.1). Sukru Jani's hut has a single room divided into three compartments. The central compartment is used

* All textual references are from Gopinath Mohanty, Paraja, 1945, Translated into English by Bikram K. Das (New Delhi: OUP, 1994, fourth impression)
both as a living room and as a store. The store is full of food-grains which suggests the prosperity of this family. Sukru Jani "never lacked" the simple needs of his family. Roles are defined for the girls as for the men. Jili is cooking the evening meal and both Jili and Bili are waiting for the pot to boil when we are first introduced to them. Jili is seventeen years and Bili just fourteen. They sit outside the porch waiting for their father and brothers to return home after their days work of hoeing on the hills. "In the evening the family crowds round the fire in a happy circle" (p.7).

The scene shifts from the family to the tribal world at large in the subsequent chapters and we are taken close to the life of the community. The Paraja community has a separate bathing pool of their own and most of Paraja women bathe here in the open. The passersby are usually oblivious of the bevy of beauties bathing in the open, which is a telling of this tribal custom. "While the girls (Jili and Bili) were bathing in the stream, two men of the Paraja tribe could be seen going up the mound that overlooked the pool" but as they went "they looked neither to right nor to left" (p.8). It is in this 'watering-pool' that most of the girls meet where 'joking and making fun of people', spills into peals of laughter. "Not concerned with such matters as the clearing of jungle and the planting of millet" (p.13) the girls enjoyed their freedom. Laughter was something which came "naturally to them" (p.13). The girls do not suffer from any sense of shame and inhibition as they bath na-
ked in the open, casting off their clothes. Besides, in this tribal society girls and boys could mingle freely. Courting between young girls and boys had the sanction of the community. The dormitory system was prevalent among the Parajas: "In the centre of the village was a hut which served as a dormitory for all the unmarried girls in the village, while a little way off was the men’s dormitory. It was an ancient Paraja custom for all unmarried boys and girls to sleep in their respective dormitories, rather than in their parents’ homes" (pp. 14-15). Thus young people slept every night in their dormitories away from their parents, with no taboos or restraints imposed upon them. Eloping was also not uncommon. Boys and girls in love had the inalienable right to elope, which they often did. The traditional concept of protecting women was not there because the tribal sense of enjoyment is vastly different. Teasing among the young was a part of life. The Paraja boys would play on their dungudunga and seduce their loved ones, singing ancient ballads and composing new ones. The songs sung are usually overt with meanings as this was one of the ways how young people courted. In the novel two young couples Jili-Bagla and Kajodi-Mandia are shown to be indulging in this custom.

However, the bliss of the tribals do not last forever as their actions become susceptible to new authorities of power. "The man of the hills cannot comprehend any situation until he feels the full impact of experience" (p. 42).
"It never occurred to Sukru Jani to question his belief in his birth right, or to reflect that one did not become the owner of something merely because one could see it everyday before ones eyes. He had never worried about the legality of his actions; yet here he was, up to neck in trouble" (p.42).

Sukru Jani was found guilty for felling trees from the Raja’s property. It never occurred to the simple Sukru Jani that they were committing a crime having taken permission from the Forest Guard. But permission by word of mouth had no evidence as the Forest guard denies it and thus trapping the innocent Sukru Jani. By thwarting the Forest Guard’s desire for his daughter Jili, Sukru Jani had to face the consequences. This was exactly what Kau Paraja had told Sukru Jani when he had gone to his place to ask for Jili at the Forest Guards orders: “When they ask for something, it has to be produced – even if it’s our wives and daughters; or else they’d have us all in handcuffs on some excuse or another in no time at all?” (p.30). This is just the beginning of Sukru Jani’s sufferings as this leads him to become a goti to meet the expense for his bail. Subsequently, both his son’s end up as gotis of the Sahukar. The dreams of Sukru Jani shatter before his eyes as they get caught in the unending web of exploitation.

Mohanty portrays two worlds in Paraja the primordial and elemental way of life of the tribals and civilizing and exploitative world of the Forest Guard, the Sahukar and the Supervisor. The tribal world is shown to be in conflict with the new world that encroaches upon their territories and to
their lives. The tribal ethos, customs, traditions and values stand in contrast to the mainstream discourse. Mohanty’s *Paraja* is a working on the theme of how alien factors disturb the dynamics of tribal discourse. However, the tribal discourse is also not free from scrutiny. What strikes the reader in the otherwise simple life of the tribals is that even in this society the sphere of work is demarcated for boys and girls. Women like Jili and Bili are given the sphere of kitchen and work related to it, whereas a man’s sphere of activity is outside. The masculine/feminine paradigm works in tribal culture as well. Jili and Bili are described in feminine terms: “Her raven-black hair is oiled and combed into a smooth, slanting bun into which she has stuck a red flower. Her sister sits by her side. She too has a red flower in her hair” (p.2). Mandia Jani and Tikra are on the otherhand described in masculine terms. Mandia is “strong and robust, with the face of a child” while Tikra is “wide-eyed and hurried in his speech” (p.7). In the Paraja village the memorial to the dead is also suggestive of this masculine/feminine dichotomy: ‘a stone planted vertically for a man and laid flat for a woman’ (p.6). A reading between the lines suggest that patriarchies operate even in an otherwise free tribal society.

The tribal way of life is better understood when it is contrasted with the non-tribal world. Within the text Mohanty delineates this contrast and the narrative is a telling in many ways of this contrast especially in the treatment
ment of women characters. Although the novel revolves around Sukru Jani and the exploitation of the tribals at large, yet in the limited spaces they inhabit the women characters open up for a re-reading of tribal representation of women and their representation outside their community. Tribal society is a permissive society where its women enjoy more freedom and mobility than her non-tribal counterpart. As has already been mentioned courting between young boys and girls is legitimated by the community. Therefore, a girl exercises her right to choose a partner. Moreover, the custom of bride-price is different from the dowry custom because here it is not the girl but the boy’s family that has to pay to the brides family. The traditional concept of protecting women was not there among the Parajas. The girls had the liberty to indulge in jokes, move out of their homes. Even sex is not a taboo within this community. Within their own community Jili and Bili can freely move about, bathe in the open, sleep in the dormitory, make fun of men without any fear and inhibition. In all their activities they seem natural and spontaneous. But the permissiveness of the tribal society for their women is restricted within their own community. Outside the community the tribal women are protected. When Sukru Jani is told by Kau Paraja that the Forest Guard wanted his daughter Jili, his anger is aroused and he becomes protective about his daughter. The Forest Guard does not belong to his world and so he has to guard his daughter against his evil designs. Similarly, towards the end of the novel when Jili moves in with the Sahukar, Sukru Jani is grim because “the honour of his tribe had been outraged” (p.310). A girl going outside the
tribe is an act of humiliation and violation of a social code. "All doors were closed to Jili" after her relationship with the Sahukar was made public.

Thus, whereas a tribal woman is granted freedom within her own community, the society does not give her the freedom outside of it. A woman's role and place in other words, is defined by the society-- whether tribal or otherwise. The tribal world is possessive about its women. While the tribal man exercises his control over his woman he does not give that right to others. Within the community sex is not a taboo and is not a thing to be sold. "Young people slept every night in their dormitories, away from their parents, with no taboos or restraints imposed upon them" (p.17). The dormitory system is an indication that sex among them was not uncommon. "If something went wrong, the elders would sit together...and the culprits would be penalized by having to offer four annas' worth of liquor to all the villagers" which would be followed by song, dance and drink "so the matter would end" (p.17). "This was the only punishment for the indiscretions of youth" (pp.17-18). Outside the tribal community, in the hands of the Forest Guard, Sahukar and Supervisor, sex becomes a commodity to be bought for a price. Women are debased and devalued in this sex market. Money becomes the bargaining point. The Forest Guard takes advantage of Sukru Jani's vulnerability and considers Jili, his daughter as a mode of exchange. Under the burden of economic vulnerability Jili is rendered speechless and she cannot tell her father about the incident of the Forest Guard. Sex when
forced, becomes oppressive for women.

Şukru Jani no doubt resists and protects his daughter from the Forest Guard, but not for long because both Jili and Bili fall into the hands of first the Supervisor and then the Sahukar. Once their father and brothers become gotis, the condition of Jili and Bili become pathetic. Their foodstock runs out and in their hour of need even their own community deserts them. “They were never asked for subscription for village festivities...Ever since Şukru Jani and her brothers had gone, the village looked on them with disdain, as though they were destitute widows living in misery. No eager young men lounged before their door now with songs of invitation”(pp.117-118). Jili is deserted by Bagla who marries her friend Kajodi. Stricken with grief, rejected in love, driven by hunger, the two girls make their way to the Dooars with dreams in their eyes that “life in the camp would be one long holiday, with dancing and music and liquor enough to drown in! And the young girls would have young men in abundance to pay them court. Money was almost a minor temptation”(p.203). However, Jili and Bili’s dream soon turns into a nightmare once they move out of their village to the town. Money which was a minor temptation when they started out, becomes the bargaining point and the major attraction in their new habitation. Life in the camp does not turn out to be ‘a long holiday’ but a sinking deeper into their already miserable existence. Once outside their society, money becomes tempting. Body becomes their value as sex is the first thing to be sold out. Young and
beautiful, Jili and Bili become the object of the Supervisor’s pursuit and lustful desires. Under compulsion of economic pressure, Jili and Bili end up trading their bodies. Jili’s sexual exploitation continues as she also falls into the hands of the Sahukar. This is the sad truth of a woman’s reality, suffering under immense exploitation. Body becomes the site of exploitation and exchange. When sex is commodified, it crosses the boundary of caste and class. Whereas the Sahukar does not mind a little bit of sex with a tribal girl like Jili, he cannot think of legitimating the relationship in marriage. In matters of marriage and social status, caste and class become determinants. Economic marginalisation as seen in Paraja throttles the women’s voice. Neither the tribal world nor the Sahukar’s world is an idealised one for women. The tribal world is also shown to be patriarchal and marginalises its women in the absence of male members. The attitude of the community here, as elsewhere depended entirely on the known extent of one’s possessions and in this context, the quantity of grain one possessed. If the tribal society would have supported Jili and Bili perhaps they would not have had to look for ways outside the community to earn their livelihood. Deprived in their own community of the means of subsistence they move out, only to be doubly exploited. Any kind of negotiation for tribal girls outside their community is sex. It is only their sex that the outside world recognises. Bereft of any other mode, the girls Jili and Bili trade their sex for their livelihood. Sex is thus put in the counterpointal location of the two cultural values – the tribal
and the non-tribal.

*Paraja* shows that for a woman nothing is ideal, but comparatively the status of a woman is better in a tribal society. In a tribal society, sex once sold out is not a problem to be received again. This is a positive thing about this community. In the tribal world there is no concept or myth of ‘fallen’. This stands in stark contrast to the Hindu culture where a sexually promiscuous woman is considered an outcaste. This is evident in Nandibali’s relationship with Bili. He has no objection in taking Bili as his wife and the bond they share is one of love and understanding. In contrast, Jili’s relationship with the Sahukar from the outset was artificial. For him Jili was like any other girl to be used and discarded. He never gave her the place of a wife and his evil intentions get articulated when Jili’s father and brothers approach him seeking their land back:

Yes, Jili! And isn’t there another called Bili at home still? Bring her to me. I’ve taken the land; I’ve taken one sister; and I shall take the other too. I shall take your wives... (p.372).

In the Sahukar's gaze the tribal women have been commodified. The absence of non-tribal women in the narrative haunts the reader about the voicelessness of women in such a society.

Outside the women’s issue what the novel attempts to focus is the social organisation and the oppressive mechanisms of control. Goti or
bonded labour is a dehumanised mechanism of control. It is slavery. Economic condition may be its cause but the very practice snatches away all freedom of a bonded labourer as he is treated like an object. The owner of a bonded labourer is in fact the master of his body and physical function. This evil practice puts the Sahukar in a privileged position and he not only steals the property of Sukru Jani but takes possession of his children's life. If a male bonded labourer is put to inhuman physical condition, a woman who is taken as a mistress not a wife from among the tribals could be a female goti for satisfying the owner's sexual lust. Here again her body is owned on a price.

From this follows a kind of paradigm that while privileges the dominant, deprivileges the subordinate. Money economy it appears is shattering for the tribals who lived under barter system of economy. In tribal society the exchange value of sex is a kind of barter. The barter economy does dehumanise and denude exchange of honour. But money economy is more powerful, it tramples one's honour. This economy has given rise to other systems of control such as law, property rights, etc. In a tribal world justice is instant and direct. But the elaborate mechanism of civilized control has little respect for age old taboos and customs. This conflicting point indeed further polarises the values of a tribal world with that of the non-tribal world. Law, courts, etc, part of the non-tribal world are symbols of a written culture in contrast to an oral world. Literacy (not the traditional learning), law and
money combine together to subvert the values of an oral society. The narrative reaches its climax when Sukru Jani murders the Sahukar. Ideologically, Mohanty at this point might have put into perspective the annihilation of class enemy of course not working towards a classless society. Because the murder semiotically, on the one hand, implied direct/instant justice of eliminating the evil from a tribal position, on the other hand, it implicates the dispensasor of justice as a criminal who is tried according to written law. This semiotic fracturing does not allow a conclusion that is ideologically coherent as two systems of social values come into conflict. In the process the weaker one suffers. Justice delayed is justice denied. One of the parallels to the story which could be referred here to is Mrinal Sen's film Mrigaya. In Mrigaya Ghinua goes to the police station with his prize hunt, the head of the Sahukar only to learn that he has committed a crime.

The novel has been successful in bringing to the fore the contestations of many a binary oppositions without working towards any solution. Indeed, the narrative remains open ended admitting various readings of the text. As the present study is concerned with tracing the women voices in the novel, it is in a sense limited in the absence of representations of non-tribal women. However, it is evident that the novelist, as a male writer taking refuge under realism has not been able to delve deep into the emotional and psychic challenges the tribal women confront. The silences of Jili and Bili are total both under the tribal and non-tribal situation as they lack agency.
The only agency that foreground the development of their characters is to listen what men speak and follow it. In their songs and dances they might have spoken of their heart but in the societies they lived in, no one is concerned to the meaning of those words and rhythms. Their articulations die out into silence under the oppressive mechanism of social control. Both sisters become 'subalterns' as they represent doubly marginalised positions.

**Rudali**

*Rudali* published in 1980 is a powerful short fiction by Mahasweta Devi. Originally written in Bengali, *Rudali* has been translated into English, adapted into a play and has also been made into film in Hindi. A journalist, creative writer and an activist, all three roles seem to inform her writings making it difficult to conventionally categorize her work in a definite genre. Many critics in fact refuse to consider *Rudali* as a work of fiction preferring to call it antifiction. Their objection perhaps is because in *Rudali* Mahasweta Devi has intentionally constructed a text which defies the formal characteristics of a work of fiction. As a woman writer, perhaps, Mahasweta Devi's strategy is not to conform altogether “to the generic prescriptions of the male canon.”

In another context Judith Gardiner says “female identity is a process.”¹² “One reflection of this fluidity is that women’s writing often does not conform to the generic prescriptions of the male canon”. ¹³ The roving female identity cannot be captured within one genre. At one and the same time therefore, a woman's text can blur different genres in keeping with the “continual crossing
of self and other."\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Rudali} Mahasweta Devi writes about real people learnt at first hand from her travels in the Palamou village:

The background of \textit{Rudali} extends much beyond. I have travelled the whole of Palamou extensively by foot. I have seen all kinds of exploitation including bonded labour...A good number of my stories including 'Bichan', 'Shikar', 'Jagmohan's Death', 'Shishu' and 'Rudali' are placed in this particular locale.\textsuperscript{15}

Mahasweta Devi, therefore, presents reality as perceived by her—real characters with real life-stories.

\textit{Rudali} is an ironic tale of exploitation and above all of survival. The exploited are the lowcaste ganjus and dushads and the exploiters are the rich malik-mahajans. It is Mahasweta Devi's powerful critique of an exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system. The story revolves round the character of Sanichari, who within the story's time frame has been a mother, a grandmother and has nurtured three generations. She is a low-caste woman, belonging to the ganju caste. Sanichari turns out to be the main protagonist of the story as she adapts, survives and manipulates the very system that oppresses her and her likes, thereby attaining agency.

Mahasweta Devi usually writes from a class point of view, "stories of people's struggle, their confrontation with the system."\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Rudali} is also the story of people's confrontation with the system. In the very first part of the
story we are brought close simultaneously to the life of the protagonist Sanichari as well as to the life of the community. Sanichari, who takes on the exploitative system is one of/with the community. The individual is not highlighted to the exclusion of context. The opening of the narrative situates Sanichari in a depriving socio-economic context that makes poverty visible in its bareness: "In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads were in the majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villagers her life too was lived in desperate poverty" (p.54)*. Poverty is a condition Sanchari like others of her community are born into. Poverty becomes a measure of class, caste and gender oppression.

A look at the ‘events’ in Sanichari’s life shows a direct connection between the personal events and the exploitative system. Every death is mediated by the religious demands that follow for rituals which further impoverish the already poor. Stricken by any deaths in the family, followed by the expensive death rites, Sanichari is rendered poor and helpless. Her helplessness and poverty is capitalised by the malik-mahajan Ramavaatar Singh, who exploits the occasion to force her into bonded labour. Sanichari was so pre-occupied performing one death rite after another that “there was no

time to cry." Emotions become secondary and strategies of survival become primary. There is a continuous suturing of her private life to the socio-economic situation. Pre-occupied with ways of keeping the stomach fed Sanichari slogged in the fields. Her suffering is endless as she is deserted by her daughter-in-law and grandson. If through all her sufferings, the support of the community was constant, what comes out starkingly is also the oppression of the malik-mahajans. Ramavatar’s oppression is a constant presence in the narrative. He embodies a system which dehumanizes, brutalizes, invading the most private space of an individual. In the process private emotions are trampled as even grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival. Grief is turned into a commodity and mourning into labour. The malik-mahajans hire rudalis to cry for their dead which enhances their social prestige. With few other alternatives open for them, women like Sanichari and Bikhni exploit this market to their advantage for survival.

Though ideologically, Mahasweta Devi refuses to be labelled a feminist, feminism informs her writing. There is no doubt that the text privileges class over caste and community yet it has a special significance when read as a feminist text. It is a discourse of women’s struggle against exploitation and a discourse of empowerment. It is a story of how women regroup to
use their constrained resources in the midst of exploitation to find modes of survival. Sanichari, the protagonist of the story is a break from the stereotypical roles in which women are generally confined to in India in life as well as in literature. As a wife, a mother and a grandmother Sanichari is an exception to the traditional Indian conception. Sanichari does not come across as a docile, ritualistic and passive Indian wife. Rather she is conceived as an equal partner to her husband. After her mother-in-law's death, she leaves her child at home to work for the security of the household. The work she engages in, is generally associated with men. "Sanichari laboured hard for the sake of a little security in her household. She would go off to the malik's house where she would split wood, gather fodder for the cows, and in the harvest season work alongside her husband in the fields" (p.56). Sanichari's sphere of activity is not circumscribed within the four walls of the house. Even after her husband's death she works in the mahajan's fields where her fellow labourers were males. Her place is thus not demarcated from the males. What Mahasweta Devi shows is that among the lower castes there was equality of status between men and women. It goes to her credit that she is able to bring such a woman in the written domain. The same equality however is not manifest among the upper-caste men and women,
because the few women who appear are definitive of their roles as wives and mothers. They are steeped in mutual jealousy, spiteful gossip and one-upmanship, over and above internalizing the class values and attitudes such as pride in display of wealth and power.

Sanichari is a powerful creation by Mahasweta Devi. Although Sanichari is just an ordinary woman when the story begins she rises above her ordinariness manipulating the system that exploits her type using the very system to her advantage. She exposes the hypocrisy of the exploiters. We first notice Sanichari's cunningness when she manages to get her debt waived from Ramavatar Singh choosing a perfect time for the same. Her debt to Ramavatar Singh might never have been paid off, but for her scheme. On the deathbed of Ramavatar Singh's uncle, a calf's tail was placed in the dying man's hand to help him cross the Baitarani river into the afterlife. At that time Sanichari was looking after the calf. In the presence of Ramavatar’s peers and kinsmen Sanichari pleaded to Ramavatar that her debts be waived. Ramavatar had to bow to her pleading, Sanichari succeeding in her scheme. Ramavatar, however, had to face the criticism of the other jothedars for this act.

If *Rudali* traces the empowerment of women, it also provides a strong statement on women bonding. Women bonding is rarely to be found in texts by male writers. There is the subtly nuanced closeness between Sanichari and Bikhni which is especially poignant, as such friendships are rarely detailed in literature. The two women meet at that point in their lives when they are free from all familial bonds. “They eyed each other closely before each relaxed in the realization that the other was no better than herself” (p.65).
Bikhni's husband is dead and due to differences with her son, she leaves her home for a life without shelter. Bikhni adapts herself to her new situation in Sanichari's place and they are shown to complement each other. Bikhni managed the housework but housework did not just include everyday chores of cooking, cleaning and washing clothes, it also meant digging the land and tending a vegetable patch. Women like Bikhni and Sanichari are shown to easily fit into different roles according to the demands of the occasion. Sanichari initiates Bikhni into the profession of a rudali and together they form a formidable duo. Bikhni "visited the market and the shops near the bus-stop and brought home news—who was on his deathbed, who gasping his last in which malik's house" (p.74). When Dulan suggests forming a union of rudalis and randis, Sanichari was apprehensive but it is Bikhni who at once accepts the idea, herself taking the initiative to get the prostitutes with them. She says: "It's the women who are ruined by the malik-mahajans who turn into whores (p.80). She opens Sanichari's eyes to the fact that prostitutes are women like like them who have been forced into prostitution compelled by trying circumstances. Whether it is 'rudalis' or 'randis' women have become victims of institutions and systems created by men and therefore by uniting the women, could rub salt into the eyes of their
Mahasweta Devi presents a humane picture of prostitutes in *Rudali*. While dwelling on a trodden area, she depicts them with a difference in treatment. Within the narrative the prostitutes are not condemned nor are they treated as outcastes. When Sanichari’s daughter-in-law became a prostitute “no one mentioned that Buddhua’s wife had become a whore” (p.62). Mahasweta Devi portrays them with a sense of understanding. She exposes the circumstances and the system that makes young girls like Parbatia and Gulbadan take to prostitution. Refusing to submit to the harsh conditions at home, Parbatia ends up being a prostitute, the only choice available for a low-caste woman. Similarly, Gulbadan is forced into the flesh-trade after her natural father refuses to own her, being the child of his relationship with a prostitute. The malik-mahajans treat the low-caste women as objects of pleasure to be used and discarded at their leisure. Gamphir Singh has no qualms about Gulbadan submitting to the lustful desires of his nephew. Considering the market place a better option, she resigns herself to a life of prostitution.

While critiquing the system that turns young girls to prostitutes, Mahasweta Devi traces the history of prostitution. Dulan becomes the mouth-piece of the writer as he holds the upper-class mahajans squarely responsible for this class of women: “It’s the malik-mahajan’s who’ve turned them
into whores, ruined them, then kicked them out, isn't that so?"(p.90). At no point in the narrative the prostitutes are treated as the 'other'. Sanichari's initial inhibitions are discarded when she is made to see the truth of their situation. The prostitutes are poor working women trying to earn their livelihood as everyone else, as much victims of exploitation as everyone else. Prostitution is shown as just one type of exploitation amidst a myriad of exploitations that low-caste men and women are subjected to. Parbatia is a good example of this exploitation. She escapes from a severely circumscribed, poverty-ridden existence, leaving behind all duties and responsibilities driven by hunger. She runs off only to be back in a few years, a down-on-her-luck prostitute in Tohri. At the end of the story she is drawn back into the fold by her mother-in-law, who beckons her to join the community of rudalis. The text closes on a positive note for the outcaste and marginalised women with Sanichari organizing and training them into a group. Parbatia and Gulbadan are gathered into the space of the narrative, included.

The situation of the upper-caste women does not miss the ironic vision of Mahasweta Devi. They appear in their roles as wives and mothers and remain so unable to extricate themselves from what culture and tradition have introjected in them. Privileged by their caste, the upper-caste women
are made to suffer under the burden of their caste. Nathuni Singh does not spend any money in trying to cure his mother but prepares to spend thirty thousand for a sensational pyre! A system where mothers of sons are valued and respected, Nathuni Singh’s middle wife feels devalued being the mother of a girl. Even the wealth of her father cannot win her the respect of her co-wives who are mothers of sons. Internalising the values of their caste, these women become victims of oppression. The networking, the bonding shown among low-caste women is found to be absent among the upper-caste women.

In their quest for survival, the marginalized women characters find bonding in sorrow— a sorrow without tears. The ending of the text is a triumph of the theme of survival, a triumph of the movement started by Sanichari. Sanichari turns the ritualized, commercialized system of lamentation not just into a means of survival, but an instrument of empowerment, a subaltern tool of revenge. Not only is Sanichari empowered but within the text she helps other women as well to gain agency. Gulbadan is present in the last scene as a rudali turning lament into a mockery as she casts a sneering wink at the nephew over her father’s corpse. It is Sanchari, fully alive to the ironic overtones of this system of lamentation, who urges the prostitutes to use it as a means of revenge. By the end of the text, the custom of rudali has
been politicized as it turns out to be an agency of empowerment. The text literally closes on the clamouring, jubilant cries of the disempowered and the outcaste, banded together to invert a howl of grief into a howl of triumph.\textsuperscript{19}

If the ‘cry’ is used as a subaltern tool of revenge, the sharp, observant eyes of the subaltern keep the privileged in perspective. A major narrative tool used to this end is the construct of the character of Dulan. Dulan embodies the resistant will, the sharp intelligence, the irreverence, the cynicism and the cunning that the subaltern uses to subvert the total control of the masters.\textsuperscript{20} He is the oral narrator of their history, the one who constantly questions authority and power relations and teaches others to be critical of the dominant. It is Dulan who at every stage contributes to the growing empowerment of Sanichari, who shows her how to adapt and cope. Dulan succeeds in diverting Sanichari’s mind from helpless despair (mourning her fate, her dead husband) to a realization that actually she is angry about the unfairness of her situation—and then he presents her with a survival strategy, a way of turning the situation around so that she is using the system instead of just being used by it.\textsuperscript{21} Throughout, Dulan’s is the voice stripping away sentimentality and blind prejudice in favour of adaptation and rational argument. His is the voice that criticizes, accuses and condemns the upper
classes, highlights their moral corruption, greed and hypocrisy. By doing so he is helping maintain a critical perspective on the system, and in effect politicizing the community. He refuses to believe or allow them to believe that there is anything ordained or natural about their situation.

Dulan helps keep memory alive, reminding the community of a past in which they organized themselves in resistance, a past of heroism and courage. He talks to them about the militant rebel tribal leaders, of tribal uprisings brutally repressed by the Rajput soldiers sent by the raja of Chottanagpur, who burned entire villages and murdered the innocent, etc. He politicizes the Rajputs and coming from one of them his analysis carries greater impact. Similarly, he analyses for Bikhni, Sanichari and his wife how the malik-mahajans create prostitutes by keeping women and then casting them off, thereby forcing them into the market place. He explains that whores are not a separate caste, but merely poor women like them who are forced to earn a living. He establishes that the exploitation of the poor by the rich takes many forms, that the prostitutes too are victims, and should not be treated like outcastes and untouchables. Dulan proposes solidarity rather than prejudice. 22

In addition to Dulan, the narrator’s voice also offers a subaltern view
of local politics and the hypocrisy of the privileged class. For example, the episode in which Lachman Singh makes his appearance beside the murdered corpse of his kinsman Bhairab Singh is recounted by the narrating agent, focalized through the observing village community. This entire passage employs a 'no comment' technique, using an ostensibly objective 'reporting' mode to expose the hypocrisy and corruption of 'the masters.' In a single passage the author spotlights their criminality, greed, vicious discrimination against the lower castes, power to manipulate police and investigative procedures, infighting, and the determination with which they close ranks in the face of a possible threat. 23

The subaltern can only keep the privileged in perspective, because the subaltern has no voice. They may not be colonized, but nevertheless repressed. Since the subaltern has no voice, he/she has no identity. In Rudali the author has tried to create women's presence but the exploitative system represses women's voice. As a result voices are muted. The voices, when articulated turns out to be a 'cry'- a cry of survival- a 'cry' without tears. Rudali is a telling of women's exploitation as even grief, one's most private emotions, is turned into a commodity.
Endnotes:


3. Quoted in Meenakshi Mukherjee, Realism and Reality, op. cit., p. 7.

4. Ibid., p. 8.


6. Ibid.


11. Ibid., p. vii.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

16 Ibid., p.16.
17 Ibid., p.4.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., pp.23-24.
20 Ibid., p.9.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., pp.6-7.
23 Ibid., pp.5-6.