

The Public and the Private Mourner in Mahashweta Devi's *Rudali*

Prof. Lakshmi Muthukumar

It is popularly believed that the 'public' and the 'private' are two separate spheres with their own distinct boundaries and their own discrete logic. According to most political theorists and feminists this is primarily a legacy of early liberalism which sought to protect individual freedom by reducing state intervention in private matters. Mill (1971:98) for instance, made a distinction between that 'part of a person's life which concerns only himself and that which concerns others.' Going by this distinction, one could infer that he intended that the part of a person's life that 'concerned only himself' should constitute the realm of the private, and must be left to the free will of the individual. On the other hand, the part of an individual's life and actions that concerns others would fall under the domain of the public, and the state could therefore interfere and regulate such actions.

Such a distinction has since been questioned by feminists, and today most liberals accept that almost all actions impact upon others in some way or the other. In spite of these predominantly academic arguments, in popular opinion and in everyday life, people generally assume that there is a rigid wall between the private and the public and our actions can be clearly compartmentalized into the two spheres. In this paper I seek to show how the central protagonist, in Mahashweta Devi's *Rudali*, Sanichari cuts across the boundaries of caste and class and effectively straddles the private and the public spheres. In the process, she radically empowers herself and also, other underprivileged women.

It is a popular assumption that the relationship between the private and the public spheres is a dichotomous one. The private is usually perceived as a domain of the woman and is usually associated with invisible and valueless work; the public on the other hand, is perceived as a domain dominated by the man and is perceived as the more visible and valuable of the two.

The cultural theorist Jürgen Habermas conceives the public "as a meeting place of 'equal' members of an informed bourgeoisie who engaged in critical, rational and enlightened discussions ultimately aimed at formulating the 'common good'. The 'common good' is a communitarian enterprise in Devi's *Rudali*. The oppressed subaltern are united by their suffering. I see in Devi's work a unique feminist and subaltern representation of the Habermasian public sphere. Since much of feminist scholarship is engaged in clarifying the structure of the social and political world and the way in which gender functions to produce and reproduce male domination and female subordination, Habermas' work can be very useful to feminists engaged in such a clarification.

The Habermasian public sphere, in sum, refers to a common and publicly accessible space which serves the purpose of framing public opinion, while citizenship is membership in a political community. Feminist critics like Nancy Frazer, Jean Cohen and Joan B. Landes have however, critiqued Habermas' model of the public sphere. Frazer posits the view that while Habermas looks at the public sphere as an area mediated by consensus and shared values, the sphere as he envisions it is one where consensus is suspect as it excludes women entirely and is achieved through a dialogue that is vitiated by unfairness, coercion and inequality.

Devi's work shows how the public sphere can be a fair and inclusive one characterized by a communitarian zeal where the uniting characteristics are poverty and suffering. As a work of fiction, *Rudali* is strangely asexual and very communitarian in its approach. This is what makes it possible for Sanichari's character to straddle the private and the public. The community, in the fictitious Tahad village in Rajasthan, goes against the norm – it explodes the conventional patriarchal construction of gender roles and the patriarchal appropriation of the private and public dichotomy. The men and women share a unique communitarian bond. Sanichari tends to the household chores and works with equal energy on the farm land. Her husband tends to a vegetable patch and chips in for a fair share of the domestic work. Her son attacks household chores with a gusto and enthusiasm that is only matched by a Bikhni! Dulan's wife is able to interrupt her husband without fear of censure and openly speaks her mind. Here the men and women share an equal footing. Dulan is never shown talking down to Sanichari – there is always a generous exchange of ideas that shape Sanichari into a character that grows and matures dynamically into an empowered woman. Dulan helps her to become self-reflexive and becomes a catalyst for the change that comes over her. She is made to understand that her daughter-in-law, Parbatia, became a prostitute not out of choice, but because of circumstance. She forgives her and accepts her into her fold of rudalis.

Jean Cohen notes that "Habermas' analysis suffers from a gender blindness that fails to differentiate the social and political status of men and women", which "leads to a failure to appreciate a certain fluidity between the public and the private spheres" (Meehan, p. 8) Devi's fictional work *Rudali* is an interesting exercise that shows how this fluidity can be achieved at the grass-roots level in the life of the central protagonist, Sanichari, which flows freely between the private and the public spheres.

Joan B. Landes is of the opinion that the Habermasian public sphere falls short of being democratically equal because of its "exclusion of the private sphere of emotions.." (Meehan, p.9) I see Landes' observation very evocatively represented in Mahashweta Devi's *Rudali* where an otherwise extremely private space of emotions is invaded upon by an oppressive religious and social system, and yet the system is subverted and used by Sanichari to eke out a living for herself and others like her. What fascinates me is the epiphany Sanichari

arrives at in *Rudali*. She realizes (helped by Dulan's convincing arguments) the difference in the economic valuation of women's domestic (private) work and women's public labour. It is with the value that is placed on 'tears' as a commodity that Sanichari chalks out her strategy for survival. 'Tears' in *Rudali* are commodified and neatly compartmentalized by the professional mourner into two distinct and separate categories – the private (personal) grief and the public (visibly displayed and economically valuable) grief. It is the latter that can be rated and bargained for. There are different rates for different services rendered by the professional mourner.

“Just for wailing, one kind of rate.

Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka.

Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees two sikkas.

Wailing and beating one's breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground there – for that the charge is six rupees.”

(Devi: *Rudali*, p. 97)

Tears are popularly perceived as futile and valueless. Here Devi interestingly overturns the popular notion about tears and makes them a valuable source for a livelihood. The story thus perceives tears in material terms, and as AnjumKatyal puts it “commodifies grief”. Interestingly, the story is taken from a collection called *NaireyteMegh* which literally translated means “Clouds in the Southwest Sky Herald a Storm”. Tears are therefore employed by Devi as an extended conceit, where like the rain which is fruitful and life-generating, the tears that these rudalis shed are also useful and valuable.

This paper is thus an attempt to apply the feminist critique of the Habermasian public sphere and see it manifested in Devi's *Rudali* which shows how an underprivileged, lower caste, uneducated woman and widow, Sanichari empowers herself using grief as a commodity and professional mourning as a tool. Devi's *Rudali* is an interesting work that demonstrates how the popularly accepted dichotomous relationship between the private and the public spheres can be exploded and how the two spheres collapse into each other in complex and fascinating ways. The title effectively adumbrates the narrative that follows.

The story revolves around the life of Sanichari, a lower caste, poor, underprivileged, uneducated woman, who seems doomed to a life of hardship. None of her familial ties last her very long. She loses first her mother-in-law, then her husband, then her son to contagions and finally, her daughter-in-law and then her grandson desert her leaving Sanichari lonely and desolate. She has never had the luxury of grieving over them. She has never had the time! So caught up is she in the economic conundrum of having to bear the costs of so many funerals and religious rites made mandatory by caste.

Arriving in Sanichari's life as another catalyst, who brings change and companionship, is her childhood friend Bikhni. Bikhni shows her the path and Dulan (a well wisher and

friend) plays the role of the local philosopher and guide. Together they inspire Sanichari to dynamically transform herself into a professional woman who not only becomes a rudali herself but also networks with other underprivileged women, primarily prostitutes, and gives them an opportunity at a respectable livelihood. As AnjumKatyal puts it, "The custom of the rudali... is not just a means of survival, it is an instrument of empowerment, a subaltern tool of revenge... the clamouring, jubilant cries of the disempowered and the outcast, banded together to invert a howl of grief into a howl of triumph." (Katyal, pg. 30)

When Bikhni dies, on her way to Ranchi, in a futile bid to meet the son who deserted her, Sanichari is devastated but refuses to cry. In a line which is loaded with irony she declares "money, rice, new clothes – without getting these in return, tears are a useless luxury." (Devi: *Rudali*, translated by AnjumKatyal, 1997, p.114) She reserves her tears for the public display of grief that the upper caste folk of Tahad village, in Rajasthan, pay her for. She straddles the private with the public and the two spheres collapse and intermingle with each other thereby contributing to a thriving democracy where women (in Devi's work, the underprivileged, lower caste woman in India who is otherwise never given a voice) mobilize themselves at the grass-roots level.

Devi as a writer seems excited by the collapsing of this dichotomy and the sight of a hundred strong women dressed in black (comprising largely of prostitutes from the randi bazaar) thronging Gambhir Singh's funeral with the gomastha wringing his hands in anguish at the thought of having to shell out the money to pay these women bears testimony to this. Individual freedom is the central organizing principle of the private sphere and Sanichari exercises just this freedom to enter the public and professional world of the *rudali*, thereby puncturing the Habermasian conception of the public sphere with an act of mourning that is at once personal and political.

Works cited :

- Bhargava R. and H. Reifeld (ed.), *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship Dialogues and Perceptions* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2005).
- Katyal, Anjum, "The Metamorphosis of 'Rudali'", *Rudali*, trans. AnjumKatyal (Calcutta, Seagull Books, 1997).
- Mahajan G (ed.), *The Public-Private: Issues of Democratic Citizenship* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2003).
- Meehan, Johanna (ed.), *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, (London, Routledge, 1995).
- Mill, John Stuart, *On Liberty, Representative Government and Subjection of Women: Three Essays* (London, Oxford University Press, 1971).