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Ritualisation of Mourning: Transcreations of 'Rudali'

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Add Aim of the Study in your paper.

Abstract

Many cultures and religions have distinct traditional mourning rituals which help them deal with death. Mourning traditions often include common themes like observing a certain period of mourning at someone's death, wearing modest clothing of particular colour and saying prayers for the dead. Another practice which has drawn attention of writers particularly, women writers is the practice of hiring mourners by the rich to wail over their dead by landlords in some parts of Northern India.This paper seeks to study the ritualisation of mourning, a practice which employs women as Rudalis (Mourners/Lamenters). Mahasweta Devi's Story 'Rudali' set in south Bihar offers a large discourse of struggle and exploitation within the frame of this custom. It explores connectivity between personal loss and money, memory and bereavement in addition to theme of empowerment of tribal low caste women. It critiques a system which dehumanizes and invades the most private, emotional space of an individual, so that even grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival. Feminist theatre is the process of women's awareness and empowerment; functioning as a counter cultural space of women. The subject matter of 'Rudali' therefore had special appeal to women dramatists committed to socio-realistic proscenium theatre. Usha Ganguli produced an adaptation of the story in 1992 adding to it her inner experiences targeting the urban audience. The dramatic essence of the story is transferred to the stage as well as screen with adaptations by distinguished women– Usha Ganguly and Kalpana Lajmi. Each medium have striking similarities and differences though they are essentially feminist texts. The paper seeks to analyse this business of "Funeral Wailing", and the circumstances leading to it. Personal grief transferred to a public scenario becomes a creative practice. Are socio-economic reasons contributory factors to this practice? Can one delve into interconnections in the binary oppositions of public and private, community and society, gender and culture through a study of ritualisation of mourning is the object of the present study.

Keywords: Ritual,Mourning,Adaptation,Transcreation, women.

Introduction

Many cultures and religions have distinct traditional mourning rituals which help them deal with death. Mourning traditions often include common themes like observing a certain period of mourning at someone's death, wearing modest clothing of particular colour and saying prayers for the dead. Mourning is a custom prevalent in all cultures round the globe. Grief is personal, yet the community is present to impart a customary farewell to the dead. People even gather to comfort the near and dear ones of the dead. But another practice which has drawn attention of writers particularly, women writers is the practice of hiring mourners by the rich to wail over their dead by landlords in some parts of Northern India.

This paper seeks to study the ritualisation of mourning, a practice which employs women as Rudalis (Mourners/Lamenters). Feminist theatre is the process of women's awareness and empowerment; functioning as a counter cultural space of women. The subject matter of 'Rudali' therefore had special appeal to women dramatists committed to socio-realistic proscenium theatre. Usha Ganguli produced an adaptation of the story in 1992 adding to it her inner experiences targeting the urban audience. So did Kalpana Lajmi in her film version in the next year. A critical intercultural frame can be employed to study the creative practice of public mourning or lamenting by women wailers known as Rudalis in India. Their public performance and location in the village hierarchy is best understood as subaltern. Since they are unable to present the pain and poverty in their daily lives more broadly within creative media that upper class women can, their lamentations are rarely understood as art or creative practice. They

are invisible in the national arena and no idiom has been developed to understand their creative contribution to society or the economic reasons behind this creative pursuit. In examining this public cultural practice of private emotional experience, the interconnections in the binary opposition of public and private- community, gender and culture need to be looked into.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to study the enlightening discourse of struggle and exploitation of tribal women within the frame of the custom of Mourning, offered in the various versions of 'Rudali': the text, the play and the film.The fact that social customs perpetrate thedestruction of the emotional space of an individual in his/her struggle for survival is a matter for grave deliberation.

The practice of hiring professional mourners for funeral ceremonies is not uncommon. In many countries, tradition dictates that the family of the dead must express their grief in a very outward manner. It was considered as a sign of lack of filial piety. So people started hiring professional mourners to ensure a noisy and very passionate farewell. The idea of paying for grief makes us uncomfortable today. In most cultures, the mourners were primarily women because of their ability to cry with ease. M. Berenes traces the history of Public mourning thousands of years back to the Bible and Egyptian ritual. In Egypt, the number of mourners present at a person's funeral symbolized his status. Families would hire professional mourners to ensure that there were large numbers of participants at a funeral and these mourners would cry hysterically, throw dust in their hair and wave their arms. Thus mourning became a performatory act.

In Victorian times, professional mourners were hired and made to walk behind the hearse. They wore black and deployed a suitably miserable expression despite the fact that they had never even met the deceased or the family. In those days funerals were very elaborate affairs and there was a very strict etiquette in place that gave rules for everything from the colors of mourning dress to mourning timelines that had to be observed. Victorian mourning practices spread throughout Europe and professional mourners leagued together striking for higher wages. This practice however, came to be abandoned in the later years because the entire funeral ceremony became a shortened affair.

In the 17th century some churches had to impose restrictions on this practice for it was believed that women wielded too much public power due to this profession. In some countries, it came to be believed that the practise of hiring mourners at a funeral was shameful and unethical. Yet, today, professional mourners are seeing somewhat of resurgence in popularity at funerals in some Asian and African countries. In China today, wailers have developed into a professional, competitive market over the last decade. Women make up the majority of wailers. They are paid for their performance and they even receive additional incentives for good performances. The ritual starts with mourners lining up outside a funeral parlor and then crawling into the service hall, which symbolizes the daughters who have rushed back from their husbands' families on hearing about a parent's death. In Taiwan, staging a dramatic funeral for relatives who have passed away is of the utmost importance. So, to create the proper atmosphere, wealthy families hire professional mourners who cry, sing and crawl on the ground to show their grief. A professional mourner's job description in Kenya varies, some families prefer them to weep and prostrate themselves while others ask them not to cry but to sing joyously along with family members. The professional mourners are served rich food and provided alcoholic drinks to stimulate their crying. Payment for one session includes a crate of beer, fruits, and local alcoholic drinks.

In northern India, professional mourners are known as Rudalis and families still hire them to take part in funeral ceremonies. It is a custom more prevalent in rural parts rather than the urban. Rudalis' fees are determined by the decibel level of the wailing they accomplish and the vigour displayed in their acts of grief. Aristocratic women were long kept secluded and veiled. So it was customary to hire professional women mourners on the death of a male relative, a *rudaali* (pronounced "roo-dah-lee"—literally, a female "weeper") to publicly express the grief that family members, constrained by their high social status, were not permitted to display—or at times, perhaps did not feel. Dressed in black and with unbound hair, the rudaalis beat their breast, danced spasmodically, rolled on the ground, and shed copious tears while loudly praising the deceased and lamenting his demise; the ability to hire such performers was a mark of social status.

Mahasweta Devi's Story 'Rudali' set in Tahad village in south Bihar offers a large discourse of struggle and exploitation within the frame of this custom. It explores connectivity between personal loss and money, memory and bereavement in addition to theme of empowerment of tribal low caste women. It critiques a system which dehumanizes and invades the most private, emotional space of an individual, so that even grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival. She provides Sanichari, the central character a socio-economic context and relates her problems with those of her caste and gender. Her appearance, mannerisms and dialect are similar to others of her class. Socio-economic situations force Sanichari to hold her tears. The caste struggle and oppression turn all grief into desperate struggle for survival. Mahasweta Devi's story Rudali a feminist text was transcreated in turn by Usha Ganguli for stage and kalpana lajmi for film. One needs to analyse each version to underline the differing purpose of the three authors in dealing with this ritualization of mourning.

Mahasweta Devi's Rudali is a discourse of class and gender but Usha Ganguli's Rudali is a portrayal of different kinds and shades of women. While the story paints a factual picture of rural life, the play aims at addressing concerns common to 'all of us', that is women. The socio-economic set up of the story is adapted through the use of props like chakki

and charpoy by Ganguli. The chakki becomes a metaphor for Sanichari's demeaned existence, yet establishes her role as the sole bread winner of the family. Other props like drab clothing, tattered covering and the costumes reflect the desperate situation of the family. Instead of emphasizing on class struggle, familial tensions are highlighted. Ganguli's Sanichari is strong, bold and capable of decision–making. She retorts at being addressed 'Daain'. Individual struggle for survival results in friction among family members as well as amongst villagers. In fact, the character of the self- indulgent, greedy and aggressive Parbatia is more distinctly delineated on stage compared to the page. Anjum Katyal terms this portrayal of Parbatia as 'an urge to construct a strong anti Sanichari character/relationship to balance the strong Sanichari-Bikhni alignment that marks the rest of the play.'(43) An upper class entrant, the vaid is as callous and insensitive as his counterpart in the story. His insistence on being paid despite the death of the subject and the economic pressure on Sanichari in the wake of Parbatia's running away, seeks to establish the overpowering of grief due to socio-economic conditions. Religious compulsions of performing last rites compel Sanichari to sell her Chakki which is her sole provider. These socio-economic compulsions leave no room for private grief. The fact that the upliftment of her economic status will come through expression of public grief despite carrying loads of burden of private grief makes the very subject of mourning ironical. Authorial comments reinforce the struggle and exploitation of the protagonist in the story but the stage employs another feature which is present in the story too, that is use of oral history. Dulan who is a constant reminder of the atrocities perpetrated upon women. His manipulative abilities give him a significant role in the play. He is a conscience raiser, 'What one is forced to do to feed oneself is never considered wrong'. He says.( )

The play highlights only friendship placing it above familial and social ties. Metaphors of caring like combing of Sanichari's hair by Bhikni and helping in household chores gently bring out the strong bond of friendship.It is to Bikhni that Sanichari confides her inability to mourn and the economic reasons that have compelled her towards this end. In many scenes there is remarkable fidelity to the original text intended to serve the adaptor's purpose, as the exchange between Sanichari and Bikhni. But unlike the story Dulan's speech on 'this crying is for money, crying as a business'(166,Sc7), debates the social acceptability of the profession of public mourning involving other women too. This reminds one of Freud's advocating of 'normal mourning' as against pathological melancholia.

Similarly, the prostitutes in the play enjoy a perverted kind of freedom in their state of permanent social disapproval rather than being portrayed as suffering through and through as in the story. Another deviation from the text is the arrival of the thakurain at Sanichari's house. This episode signifies a cross cultural gender bonding despite the fact that the upper caste woman is unable to shed her patriarchal values. She is only there to hire their services as rudalis at her father's impending death. Anjum Katyal points to the gradual shift of the food metaphor to money. It is noteworthy that the chakki displayed in the first scene no longer exists as a prop. The mourning of Bikhni's death by Sanichari is as private as in the story. It serves as contrast to the sham display of grief in public which is more of a commercial act. Ganguli again deviates from Mahasweta Devi's stress on community and offers no solace to the protagonist. She has to move on. Freud rightly points out that mourning constituted a 'work'; a time consuming process of revisiting emotional connections with the lost person'. Another episode which makes the adaptation very effective is the debate initiated at the whores' quarters, to initiate them into the profession of mourners. The debate results in positive impact. Woman intensive casual labour sector gets transformed into an organised sector. Disability turns to an enabling force.

The visual impact of the stage and the screen offer more scope to display the performance of the newly trained rudalis. Ganguli does not seek to deplore the profession of the prostitutes and overtly states that it might continue, 'they have a profession, they cannot just become rudalis overnight!'( ) as one of the rudalis Gulbadan slips away with Madho Singh at the funeral of Gambhir Singh. The stage gradually empties leaving Sanichari alone. It is a gradual evolution for Sanichari in the story- particularly economic empowerment, but in the play Sanichari survives through despair, not struggle. She is where she was at the beginning lonely and unloved. Yet her stoic courage in the face of adversity equates her with Brecht's Mother Courage.(1955).

The story was yet again transcreated in the cinematic medium by another woman Kalpana lajmi in 1993.The director changed the locale from Bihar to the dreary desert of Rajasthan. Lajmi uses the Rajasthani locale to stress upon the subjugation of women in the patriarchal order in a society more known for the purdah system, Sati and landlords. The director has explored the cinematic medium fully to contrast the landscape with the details of the hardships faced by the protagonist and those of her gender. The tale of Shanichari's life, told to the sympathetic Bhikni, unfolds in a series of flashbacks that occupy much of the film. In addition to the socio-economic trials Lajmi's Sanichari is not a grandmother unlike the page and the stage but beautiful, seductive and a target of lust for the landlords.The attraction between her and the local landlord constitutes a significant portion of the film. The relationship fails to progress despite some emotive scenes of togetherness. The director has exercised this restraint deliberately to bring out the class divide. She attends on his spoiled but strictly secluded wife, and periodically converses with her benefactor, who lectures her on social equality and urges her to "look up" into his eyes when speaking to him (rather than averting her gaze as other women do)—these talks (given the evidence of a romantic attraction between master and servant) hover somewhere between idealism and seduction, and eloquently express the

constraints on love in a feudal, patriarchal order. The film's dialogue, in a rusticized standard Hindi meant to substitute for the Marwari speech of the Rajasthani desert, effectively expresses its stark hierarchies of gender, caste, and class. Villagers never refer to the zamindar and his son by name, but only as "Hukum" (literally "order, command"—identifying them as embodiments of power) or "Sarkar" ("government, authority"). The stereotypic local brahman capitalizes on the villagers' credulity, demanding stiff fees for 'shraddha' ceremonies professes to be a scholar of Sanskrit but when addressing Sanichari, after whom he secretly lusts uses cruelly crude language. The protagonist here fights back verbally and reminds the old lecher of his crimes—although her ability to do so evidently rests to some extent on her own favourable relationship with the zamindar. The film's credits roll against a stylized backlit chorus of five such women, their faces concealed in shadow, dancing in unison on a surreal parquet floor that is (apparently) the film's only soundstage set. The urgent drumming and orchestral music that accompanies their dance will recur periodically as an ominous motif throughout the story. Kapadia's dignity and conviction, as well as her effective body language and gestures, lift her character far beyond bathos.

Conclusion

The original text as well as the transcreations can be seen as discourses on emerging feminine consciousness and enable us to analyse afresh position of women today.

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