



## Subaltern Maternalism: A Study of Non-Biological Motherhood in Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.85](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.85)



### Article info

Article Received: 24/03/2025  
Article Accepted: 10/05/2025  
Published online: 14/05/2025

### Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* delivers a compelling critique of entrenched socio-economic hierarchies and caste-based oppression through its vivid depiction of subaltern lives, particularly those of marginalised women. This paper explores the concept of subaltern maternalism, emphasising how Sanichari and other women establish non-biological maternal bonds that transcend conventional family structures. Utilising a feminist theoretical framework, the study examines how these maternal relationships become apparent as responses to systemic deprivation and shared experiences of caste and gender oppression. These connections, established beyond biological kinship, operate as powerful forms of resistance and resilience, challenging patriarchal norms and redefining motherhood as a collective, transformative force. By analysing the intersections of caste, class, and gender, this paper illustrates how maternal roles in *Rudali* are characterised not merely by biology but by solidarity, caregiving, and survival. These alternative kinship structures reconceptualise traditional notions of family and caregiving, portraying motherhood as a source of agency and empowerment for women navigating the challenges of subaltern existence. The study critically engages with the socio-political dimensions of maternal bonds in *Rudali*, offering a transformative perspective on reimagining kinship within marginalised communities.

**Keywords:** kinship, maternal, motherhood, rudali, subaltern, woman.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* stands as a landmark in Indian literature, exploring the intersections of caste, class, and gender within the socio-economic realities of rural India. Set in

the fictional village of Tahad, the narrative unveils the lives of oppressed Dalit women, who navigate systemic exploitation and harsh survival conditions. At its core, *Rudali*

challenges traditional notions of family, motherhood, and kinship, presenting a raw portrayal of how marginalized communities create alternative systems of support and solidarity. The story revolves around Sanichari, a widow struggling against poverty and caste-based discrimination, who transforms into a professional mourner—a “rudali”—to sustain herself. This shift in her role not only underscores the commodification of grief in an exploitative system but also highlights the resilience and ingenuity of women like Sanichari. As critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, Devi’s works reveal “the silenced histories of subaltern groups” (Spivak 285). *Rudali* exemplifies this by amplifying the voices of Dalit women in a deeply hierarchical society. By weaving together themes of systemic oppression and female agency, Devi crafts a profound narrative that questions the patriarchal and caste-bound constructs of identity, survival, and human relationships.

The term “subaltern,” originating from Antonio Gramsci’s writings, refers to groups excluded from hegemonic power structures, particularly those unable to represent themselves politically or culturally. Gramsci’s concept of subalternity highlights the systemic exclusion and marginalization faced by oppressed classes within capitalist societies. Building on this framework, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interrogates how colonialism and patriarchy exacerbate the silencing of subaltern voices. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak critiques the erasure of subaltern agency in academic discourse, emphasising that subaltern women face a “double oppression” of gender and class (Spivak 94). Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali* embodies this concept by depicting the struggles of Dalit women like Sanichari, whose lived realities are shaped by caste, class, and gender hierarchies. Devi, through her narrative, aligns with Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern can only “speak” when their agency is reclaimed and represented authentically. The alternative

kinship bonds formed in *Rudali* illustrate how subaltern women resist systemic marginalization and assert their agency through solidarity and mutual care.

The concept of “Subaltern Maternalism” is pivotal in understanding the dynamics of non-biological motherhood in *Rudali*. Unlike traditional maternal roles defined by biological ties, Subaltern Maternalism emphasizes the nurturing bonds formed in response to shared struggles and socio-economic marginalization. In *Rudali*, Sanichari and other women transcend biological constraints to form maternal relationships rooted in empathy, survival, and collective resilience. These bonds offer alternative forms of kinship that challenge conventional patriarchal norms. Scholar Susie Tharu has noted how Devi’s narratives often “expand the boundaries of motherhood to include community-building among women” (Tharu 104), and this is evident in the relationship between Sanichari and her friend Bikhni, which evolves into a maternal connection. Mutual care and protection become the foundation of their bond, as they forge solidarity in the face of shared adversities. Devi uses these relationships to illuminate how subaltern women redefine motherhood through their lived experiences of marginalization and resistance. By exploring these unconventional maternal bonds, *Rudali* reconfigures the understanding of kinship, presenting it as a fluid and adaptive concept within oppressed communities. As critic Rajeswari Sunder Rajan highlights, *Rudali* “lays bare the gendered economies of oppression” (Rajan 175), and through its portrayal of maternal resilience, it critiques the socio-economic systems that perpetuate caste and gender exploitation, offering a new perspective on maternal roles rooted in collective endurance and subaltern agency.

Maternalism and kinship, central to feminist and postcolonial discourses, challenge conventional understandings of motherhood as a biological and patriarchally determined role.

Feminist scholar Sara Ruddick, in *Maternal Thinking*, argues that maternal practices are shaped by relational responsibilities, transcending biological ties (Ruddick 20). Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, critiques traditional motherhood as a patriarchal construct while advocating for maternal roles as sites of resistance and empowerment (Rich 45). Postcolonial theorists extend these arguments to marginalized communities, where maternalism often emerges as a survival strategy. In *Rudali*, non-biological motherhood becomes a powerful framework for reimagining kinship. Sanichari's bond with Bikhni exemplifies a maternal relationship rooted in shared adversity and mutual care, challenging patriarchal and caste-based norms. These bonds align with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's assertion that "maternal roles in subaltern contexts often involve collective survival strategies" (Rajan 102). By highlighting non-biological motherhood, Devi critiques traditional kinship models and underscores how marginalized women forge resilient networks of care, redefining maternal roles within subaltern frameworks.

In *Rudali*, Sanichari emerges as a maternal figure whose nurturing extends beyond biological ties, creating a network of care that challenges traditional notions of motherhood. Her relationship with her biological son is marked by loss and detachment, as poverty and societal pressures force her into emotional resilience rather than overt affection. However, her maternal instincts are vividly expressed in her bond with Bikhni, a fellow marginalized woman who becomes a surrogate daughter and companion. This bond, forged through shared adversity, reflects Adrienne Rich's assertion that "motherhood is both a biological and a social construct" (Rich 45). Sanichari's protective and nurturing role is shaped by necessity and solidarity rather than blood ties, illustrating how maternal care can transcend traditional family structures. Mahasweta Devi emphasizes this dynamic through Sanichari's relationships, suggesting

that survival within a patriarchal and exploitative society often fosters organic, non-biological kinship.

Sanichari's transformation into a professional mourner further underscores how maternal care can extend to the collective. By embracing this role, she not only secures a livelihood for herself and Bikhni but also participates in a broader network of mutual support among the women in her community. Devi writes, "In Sanichari's world, survival was the only necessity, and relationships formed like water finding its own level" (Devi 52), highlighting the fluid and adaptive nature of these maternal bonds. The women in the community, though often unnamed, contribute to this network by sharing labour, grief, and moments of solidarity, reinforcing the idea that subaltern motherhood is a collective and resilient practice. Through these relationships, *Rudali* redefines kinship as an act of shared resistance against systemic oppression, portraying motherhood as a dynamic force shaped by social and economic circumstances rather than biological imperatives.

In *Rudali*, maternalism operates within the intersecting frameworks of caste, class, and gender, profoundly shaping the roles and relationships of marginalized women. For Sanichari, a woman belonging to a lower caste and living in abject poverty, traditional family structures fail to provide emotional or economic stability. The oppressive systems of caste and class compel her to extend maternal care beyond biological bonds, forming nurturing relationships with other women who share her struggles. Her bond with Bikhni exemplifies how marginalized women create alternative kinship networks based on shared adversities rather than familial obligations. Mahasweta Devi portrays Sanichari's resilience as "a woman who carried the burden of grief silently, turning her tears into strength" (Devi 48). This resilience is not just an individual trait but a collective force that empowers women like Sanichari and Bikhni to navigate a world

designed to exploit them. Their relationship redefines motherhood, emphasizing solidarity and emotional support over biological ties.

Sanichari's revolution into a more professional mourner further illustrates how maternal care becomes a tool of survival and defiance. By professionalizing grief alongside Bikhni, she subverts societal expectations, reclaiming agency within a system that marginalizes her. Mahasweta Devi writes, "In a world where hunger ruled, the women's only wealth was their ability to console one another" (Devi 53), emphasizing how these maternal bonds foster both emotional and economic resilience. This form of collective motherhood challenges caste-based hierarchies by creating spaces of agency and mutual support, underscoring the power of kinship as an act of resistance. The network of women in *Rudali* demonstrates how solidarity among the oppressed can transform maternalism into a collective practice, redefining it as a dynamic and adaptive force. Through their shared labour, grief, and determination, these women carve out an existence that resists the systemic dehumanization imposed by caste and class, showcasing the transformative potential of maternal care in marginalized communities.

In *Rudali*, Mahasweta Devi redefines motherhood by presenting it as a source of empowerment and solidarity that transcends biological reproduction. The maternal figures, particularly Sanichari, embody a form of motherhood rooted in shared experiences of oppression and collective survival. Sanichari's bond with Bikhni illustrates how non-biological maternal relationships become a foundation for emotional and social support. Devi writes, "It was not blood but the mutual suffering of their lives that tied Sanichari and Bikhni together like mother and child" (Devi 49), emphasizing the transformative power of these relationships. These bonds create networks of care that sustain the women through their hardships, enabling them to navigate systemic oppression. As leaders and caretakers in their community, these

women challenge the patriarchal family structure that confines motherhood to biological ties and reproductive roles. Instead, their maternal roles are acts of defiance against a system that marginalizes them, as Devi notes, "In their shared laughter and tears, they found a kinship that defied the hierarchies of caste and class" (Devi 54). By professionalizing grief and forming supportive networks, the women in *Rudali* disrupt traditional expectations of motherhood, showcasing maternalism as a strategy for resilience and resistance within an oppressive social order.

Sanichari's role as a maternal figure in *Rudali* extends far beyond her biological ties, reflecting her adaptability and emotional resilience in the face of systemic oppression. After the death of her biological son, Sanichari redirects her maternal instincts toward Bikhni, forming a bond that becomes central to their survival. Their relationship, rooted in mutual care, reflects an alternative form of kinship that challenges societal norms. Devi writes, "Sanichari felt a strange sense of comfort in Bikhni's presence as if the emptiness left by her family's deaths had found a silent companion" (Devi 48). Sanichari's nurturing role is not limited to emotional support; she also takes on the responsibility of sharing resources and work, effectively becoming a provider for Bikhni. Through her actions, Sanichari redefines motherhood as an act of solidarity and shared survival, moving beyond the confines of biological motherhood to forge a maternal bond that is equally powerful and transformative.

The concept of collective motherhood in *Rudali* emerges as a survival mechanism among marginalized women, highlighting the significance of shared maternal roles in their community. Scenes of women supporting one another, whether through sharing grief or participating in communal work, underscore the strength of these bonds. Devi portrays this vividly: "In the courtyard, the women sat together, their laughter and tears blending, a temporary escape from the harshness of their

lives" (Devi 53). This collective kinship enables the women to resist isolation and exploitation, creating a network of care that sustains them emotionally and materially. The shared act of mourning, professionalised as a means of livelihood, exemplifies how these maternal bonds subvert societal expectations. As Devi writes, "Grief became their trade, and in it, they found a way to survive—together" (Devi 60). These instances of collective motherhood not only challenge patriarchal structures but also reimagine maternal roles as sources of empowerment and resistance within the subaltern context.

A profound exploration of subaltern maternalism and non-biological motherhood, redefining kinship and maternal roles in a context shaped by caste, class, and gender oppression. The narrative illustrates how women like Sanichari create alternative maternal bonds through shared experiences of suffering and resilience, challenging traditional patriarchal notions of motherhood. Through her relationship with Bikhni and the formation of collective maternal networks, Sanichari demonstrates that motherhood can transcend biological ties and become a tool for survival and resistance. Devi emphasizes this when she writes, "In a world where hunger and grief dictated relationships, the bonds formed among the women were stronger than blood" (Devi 55). These maternal roles not only provide emotional and material support but also subvert oppressive systems by empowering women to claim agency in their lives. The implications of this study extend beyond *Rudali*, suggesting that non-biological motherhood offers a lens to understand the reimagining of kinship and gendered experiences in marginalised communities. As Devi expressively notes, "Their lives were bound by chains of caste and poverty, but in their shared sorrow, they found the strength to break free" (Devi 61), underscoring the transformative potential of maternal solidarity in oppressive contexts.

## Conclusion

In *Rudali*, Mahasweta Devi redefines traditional notions of motherhood by illustrating the transformative potential of subaltern maternalism and non-biological motherhood within oppressive socio-economic structures. The narrative highlights how women like Sanichari forge maternal bonds beyond biological ties, driven by shared experiences of caste-based discrimination, poverty, and gendered exploitation. These relationships, exemplified by Sanichari's bond with Bikhni, underscore the resilience of subaltern women as they create supportive networks to navigate systemic oppression. By professionalising grief and building emotional solidarity, Sanichari and the women around her challenge patriarchal norms that confine motherhood to biological reproduction and dependency within the family. This reimagined motherhood becomes a source of survival, agency, and defiance, enabling these women to reclaim their autonomy in a society designed to marginalise them. The study of maternalism in *Rudali* offers broader implications for understanding kinship and gendered experiences in marginalised communities, shedding light on how alternative familial structures can function as tools of empowerment and resistance. These findings invite further exploration into the intersections of gender, class, and caste in postcolonial feminist literature, particularly in how maternal roles are reconceptualised to subvert traditional power dynamics. Devi's work thus serves as a vital framework for examining the broader socio-political functions of non-biological motherhood in marginalised contexts, paving the way for a deeper understanding of kinship as a form of collective resistance and survival.

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