



Representing women from witch to womanhood- Mahasweta Devi's '*Bayen*'

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is an eminent voice for the right of equality of unprivileged subaltern and oppressed section of society by expressing the miserable condition through her pen. The play *Bayen* elucidates how a woman is thrown at the margin of society by the male dominated social system. This paper examines the ways in which society constructs the life of a woman and analyzes the character of Chandidasi, as a woman, as a mother, as longing for self identity in this patriarchal society. The play bestows a glimpse of all misery of a woman created and the place of women in this social structure. Chandidasi is the care taker of the graves and assumes her responsibility with great pride from her father Kalu dome, after his death. Her extreme affectionate attitude towards children made her to be labelled as *Bayen* by the villagers. One day, she happens to overhear the conversation of the robber's destructive plans of obstructing the train and causing harm to people. In order to save the people she goes in the direction to approach the train and gives up her life. Her sacrifice is recognized after her death and honoured by the society.

Key words: subaltern, oppressed, dominated, woman, self identity, sacrifice, society

Bayen is the play written by Mahasweta Devi. Her deep and keen interest in literature makes her to write from her young age and she has written several stories and also contributed to literary magazine. As a social activist and reformist, she has associated herself with many social movements that revolt against the landlords, zamindars, moneylenders and the people of high caste or creed to acquire an equal status for the tribal, peasants, untouchables and marginalised people. She wants to bring reformations in the male governed and defined social culture and tradition for the welfare of the country.

The protagonist of the play is Chandidasi Gangadasi. The villagers labelled her as *Bayen* and as confine her to work in the graveyard. She is restricted to talk, see and enter into the village. She is even ostracized from her own son and husband. Right to enjoy and experience the motherhood, the role of wife to Malindar and the mother of Bhagirath are also denied to her. In this case, not only

Chandidasi, but also Bhagirath is constrained from enjoying the motherly affection and he deludes that his mother is already dead. Through the words of Malindar the current status of Chandidasi exposes,

Now I've told you everything. Your mother's been a Bayen ever since. They would have burnt her to death if she had been a witch. But, son, a Bayen is not for killing, kill a Bayen, and the children start dying. (Frowns, speaks hastily). They set up a hovel for her beside the railway track, every Saturday they leave a hamper of food for her at her door step. Once a year they give her two saris and two gaamaccha (87)

The play Bayen has four scenes with simple narration. The play moves generously from the present to the past and past to the present in order to recall the past events and connect it with the present. Thus, Malindar avowals the past joyful life of Malindar with his wife Chandidasi and son Bhagirath is babbled. The play begins with the meeting of Malindar and Bayen and discloses to Bhagirath about Bayen. In the meeting Chandidasi introduces herself to Malindar, *I'm Chandidasi Gangadasi. My father, the late Patitpaban Gangadhar. I bury dead children and guard the graves ...Kalu Dome's my forefather. I'm at the top of the Domes here.* (80).

Malindar says about Chandidasi to his son Bhagirath, *Yes, that's how it happened, Bhagirath....The Brahmans, the sadhus, the sanyasis get cattle, land and gold, and we get all the cremation grounds of the world. All the cremation grounds of the world for us, for us, for us, for us only. Your mother was a descendant of Kalu Dome. Her name was Chandidasi Gangadasi, she used to bury children.* (Bayen 79).

As a woman of integrity, it is evident when Chandidasi's son comes and tries to meet her in personal. She is not even ready to show her face or talk to him. Even though she is banished because of blind superstitious, she wants to heed the restriction laid by the people.

Chandidasi Gangadasi is labelled as a Bayen and also she is separated from her family. In the view of villagers, Bayen is a woman who breastfeeds deceased children, comes from grave, power to curse others and killing Bayen brings misfortune. Villagers are horrified and alarmed not to face her looks as they are evil. They think that her presence may cause mishap, even brings death to them. Thus, she is branded as witch practising sorcery or necromancy by the village people and also exiled from the village to let her live in the shovel of the outskirts of the village because the witch is an evil-doer.

Chandidasi, the Bayen though hails from a reputed ancestry in their community of Kalu Dome, confronts many ordeals at several levels. Pathetically she is denied not only of the social rights but also deprived of those rights which deserve as a human being. She is given food and clothes but the worth of this charity we can learn from the words of Chandidasi, "just a little rice, the salt all mixed with dirt, worms in the lentil – Why should I take it?"(p.75)

Chandidasi has only one sari to wear and very little amount of provisions of basic need to survive. Her son Bhagirath startled to learn that his mother does not even have proper food and clothing. He asks his father, "My mother? Without clothes? Without food? Without oil in her hair?"(78). She is deprived of the minimum freedom to meet her husband and even her son. She has to carry along with her canister to inform people so that they get a stimulus to leave that place. She is placed in such a pathetic condition, where she has to struggle for her basic needs and the struggle for her identity in the society is beyond to the extent.

In Bayen, Mahasweta Devi attempts to focus on the superstitious beliefs that the rural people have and how it has affected the lives of many individuals in a severe manner. Mahasweta Devi aims to throw light on the hard realities behind that respectable existence. Such hard realities are the male domination used by men as well as ignorant women to make people believe the superstitious facts. Chandidasi is pushed forcibly away from her family and relations and she is able to discern the human values to a greater extent in her isolation. Chandidasi is born in a very great family and reduced to the level of a beast or an animal that loves to eat human flesh. It is all because of her “grave” job. Mahasweta Devi portrays the impacts and serious effects that the rural people superstitious have on the poor innocent people. On the one side scientific advancements take place, on the other side, there are some people who can’t go with such scientific knowledge and cling on age old superstitious belief and ignorance. Still, they believe in witchcraft or sorcery.

Chandidasi is a tribal as well as typical Indian woman by character. She is blessed with intense love and she shows sympathy towards the suffering humanity. She is fated to marry Malindar who is an employee in the mortuary. He is an insensitive man and is the representative of the typical modern men who is ready to abide by the male defined social culture and lead a compromising life.

Chandidasi is an uneducated women and her work is to bury the dead children and guard the graves as her forefathers carry out. Chandidasi is labelled as a “Witch” and “Bayen” just because she does the job in the graveyard and so she has the evil power within her. Actually one of the ancestors of Chandidasi has helped the great honest king Harish Chandra when he came to the streets as a beggar having lost his kingdom with his family. The king has rewarded them with a permanent entrusted work in the cremation grounds all over the world.

Chandidasi’s conventional profession makes her feel proud once and now she hates the job because her social status as well as her personal freedom is getting affected. She feels insulted and hurt when the villagers give an opinion as she has an evil eye which will cause ruin to the persons or objects that she perceives. If any infant dies, the parents start to blame Chandidasi by misinterpretation that it all happens because of her necromantic powers. Another reason, she could not spend time with her son because of her work at unexpected times. So she asks her husband to take her away from the place so that they can lead a peaceful and happy life. But he is indifferent and insensitive to her feelings and thoughts like a typical Indian man.

It hurts to do the job these days, the job handed down to me by my ancestors, my hands rebel and yet I have to go on doing it....They say I have the evil eye. The little ones die of summer heat, winter's cold, and small pox, don't they? And is it any fault of mine?....Why can't you see it, Gangaputta, why I think of throwing up the job again and again? When I guard the graves through the night, my breasts bursting with milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by himself. I can't, can't stay away from him. (82)

As a woman, she thinks that she is not fit to the job. The dead infant she buries in the graveyard seems to be her own son’s image as an illusion. But Malindar says that nobody can keep the dead infants with themselves after they die. Thus to him she does a great and useful job and he fails to empathise for his wife as a mother which shows his lack of attentiveness, care and responsibility as a husband.

Chandidasi is a brave women moving among the graves and chasing the vicious jackals. But she becomes weak and has no power to protect herself from the male chauvinism in the form of superstitious beliefs. Her grievances remain unheard. Even in her life of solitude. She leads a life of living dead and finally she has killed herself in order to save the lives of the passengers in the train. Her transformation from a mother to witch or mother to bayen is again transformed to a state of divinity and Chandidasi can be rightly called as a “holy mother” because of her selfless sacrifice.

The sacrifice of the Chandidasi is recognized by the Guard and appreciates for her bravery in saving the life of people at the cost of her life. In the words of the Guard,

GUARD. (hands his torch over to a colleague, and begins taking notes). She's been brave. A brave deed. The Railways are sure to award her a medal, posthumous of course and cash reward too.... who's she? (91)

Shashi, the brother-in-law of Chandidasi replies to the guard her Dome's woman. And the husband of Bayen, Malindar and everybody comes forward at the end the play to give her identity which she could not receive as long as she is alive.

SHASHI. (looks around at everyone, clears his throat). She's a Dome woman, sir, one of us. Bhagirath, in hurt wonder, looks at Shashi first, then at his father)

MALINDAR. (Steps forward humbled tone) May I cover her up, sir? (His voice chokes)

GUARD. Who are you? Does she have any near of kin? The government won't have the body over to just any one or the award.

MALINDAR. Sir, I...I'm (He breaks into weeping.)

BHAGIRATH. (steps forward.) Let me tell you. You can write down.

GUARD. Who are you, boy?

BHAGIRATH. (gathers courage). She's my mother.

GUARD. Mother?

When Bhagirath sees his mother lying dead, he confesses with pride and love for his mother in front of the Railway officer who wants to reward the bravery of the woman posthumously.

BHAGIRATH. Yes Sir. (The Guard takes it all down) My name Bhagirath Gangaputta... My father the revered Malindar Gangaputta...residence, Domoti, village Dahahti.... My mother (pauses for a while, then very distinctly)...my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi (suddenly breaks into loud weeping)... my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, sir, Not a Bayen. She was never a Bayen. My mother.

Mahasweta Devi divulges the greatness, bravery and courage of Chandidasi when she runs towards the moving train in order to avoid a major accident that is about to be caused by the robbers to rob in the train. Thus the playwright evidences the nature of a typical Indian woman through Chandidasi in her play Bayen. In critical situations, women never think about themselves rather around her and are even ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others.

Mahasweta Devi's play depicts the unspeakable truth of ladies wretchedness and their capacity of opposition and persevering. The play warns not to evade women from their society and families who too has a right to live in this community. The identity of a person is not something that can be neglected and suppressed. Moreover, a woman can never be transformed from her feminine subject hood to that of witchcraft.

Throughout the world, women are victimized in every civilized or subaltern society. Thus gender discrimination is the root cause for all the adverse impacts like women's subordination, subjugation and oppression and subsequently it paves the way to social justice of women in the entire world.

Though Chandidasi accepts her social identity, she is always in search of her own identity and quest of self identity because her womanhood and motherhood is always insulted and tortured by the society. The identity of a woman should be ascribed as a Social -self where she would be imminent part of society as well as herself would be secured because self is not self in itself but the question of self could be described in the references of others so we could not think about self separated from the society but as a part of it where the existence of self could be preserved.

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