

Understanding The Theme Of Subjugation Through Mahasweta Devi's Bayen: A Critical Analysis

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Citation: V. Beulah Rani et al (2024). Understanding The Theme Of Subjugation Through Mahasweta Devi's Bayen: A Critical Analysis, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(4) 11295-11298

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i4.10104

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is a prominent voice for the right to equality of the downtrodden and oppressed sections of the society by expressing the pitiful condition through her pen. The play *Bayen* describes how a woman is marginalized in the society by the male-dominated social system. This article is an attempt to study the status of women in the patriarchal society by reviewing Mahasweta Devi's famous play *Bayen*. Bayens are said to be very dangerous and they should warn people about their approach. The play shows how the society values her but does not let her go beyond its limits.

The crux of the story is that Chandidasi Gangadasi, the mother of a young boy named Bhagirath, is declared a "Bayen" or witch by the patriarchal theocratic society. She is now a pariah and has to live near the railway tracks and Bhagirath stays with his father Malindar and stepmother. The play is depicted with an eye-catching focus that a mother is separated from her son by social forces in a patriarchal society. One day, she overhears a thief's conversation about his destructive plans to block a train and harm people. To save the people, she goes in the direction of the train and gives up her life. After her death, the society recognizes her sacrifice and respects her.

Chandi's death is a test to tell how much cruelty and superstition there is in our society. The play criticizes how people treat women. It shows how the society values her but does not let her go beyond her limits. This story visualizes the nature of a common Indian woman. In difficult situations, women never think about themselves, but are always ready to sacrifice themselves for others instead.

Keywords: *Marginalized Communities, Patriarchal, Theocratic, Subjugation, Witch*

1. Introduction:

The word subjugation means 'bringing someone or something under the dominion or control'. Female subjugation is the active attempt by an individual or society to keep women inferior to men. It is a global problem that varies in severity from place to place, but not all variations and interpretations are acceptable, especially in developed countries. According to Spivak, subaltern women are more oppressed than subaltern men. They lack proper representation, and therefore cannot voice their opinions or share their stories. No one is aware of the daily struggles they face (Spivak 2010). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women, even in literature, were often portrayed as subservient to men. Literature of the time often portrayed women as oppressed by society, as well as by male influences in their lives. Nanda Silima (2013) attempts to portray the exploitation and discrimination of women in Afghan society and the patriarchal social systems of the Indian subcontinent, as depicted in the novels of Khalid Hosseini and Arundhati Roy. In Nanda's two novels: *A Thousand Splendid Sons* and *The God of Small Things*, women share a common plight of suffering, where men treat them as mere objects and are subjected to extreme oppression. The story of these women is rightly portrayed by the novelists who show signs of resistance and try to resist the male order but their struggle is drowned by the ideology of male dominated social systems.

French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir explained the hierarchy of the sexes and said: "It has always been a man's world", (*Beauvoir, 1997 p.93*) and attributed the fact that woman was considered weak and less productive because she remained enslaved to the secret processes of life and therefore man failed to recognize

in her a being like himself. Beauvoir observes: "One is not born a woman, but becomes one". (*Beauvoir, 1997, p.301*) And with this, she tried to emphasize that sex and gender are two different things. Biologically sex is determined at conception, but it is sex that serves as the pre-ground for various interactional phenomena. But the fact is that woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. Woman is not something else. She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of finding her own path to salvation through trial and error (*Ramamurthy, 1991, 115*). In this context an attempt has been made in this paper to study woman in a patriarchal society by reviewing Mahasweta Devi's famous work *Bayen*.

2. About the Author:

Mahasweta Devi is one of the leading voices of the lower castes in India. Her specialty is in the study of the Adivasis, Dalits and lower caste citizens, with a particular focus on their women. They are associated with protestors against British colonialism, Mahajans and upper class corruption and injustice. She left her native place and lived for many years in many Adivasis villages in states like West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and mixed with them to study their living conditions. Her writings are not her creations; they are the stories of her countrymen. That is why all her writings show the underground realities and real sufferings of the lower classes of society. In her extensive Bengali fiction, she often depicts the brutal oppression of tribal people and untouchables. Her characters are ordinary people caught in the web of inescapable politics. These deeply cultural stories were given a dramatic form to best convey the meaning and impact to the intended audience. Her book *Five Plays*, a collection of five stories turned into plays. As a writer with an understanding of the socially and politically exploited Indian people, Mahasweta Devi takes drama as the most effective medium to address the problems of the lower classes. Her drama, therefore, moves away from the dictum of art for art's sake and depicts a realistic picture of post-independence rural Indian society.

The theme of Subjugation in *Bayen* :

Bayen's story reveals the way a woman is oppressed. The theme of 'gender discrimination' in a patriarchal society is emphasized. People in remote areas, especially where there is no medical knowledge, have a strong belief in superstitions, and those who strongly believe in superstitions do not hesitate to sacrifice anyone's life. The play, based on the story of Mahasweta Devi, creates awareness about the main manifestations of her work, i.e. the diversity in socio-economic life. The main character of *Bayen* 'Chandidasi Gangadasi' is a custodian of the graveyards and at a very young age she is thrust into the work of burying dead bodies. She proudly took up this responsibility after her father's death and in order to show her responsibility towards the work of her ancestors, she had to lead a very difficult life. Over time she decides to marry Malinder, who works in the government graveyard and takes up her responsibility. However, the same Malinder later declares her a 'Bayen' and Chandi loses all her rights to live a good life. She begins to believe that her inhuman life of exile is just normal.

The protagonist of the play, Chandidasi Gangadasi is known as Bayen by the villagers and is confined to work in the graveyard. She is restricted from speaking, seeing and entering the village. She is also ostracized from her own son and husband. The right to enjoy and experience motherhood, the role of wife to Malinder and mother to Bhagirath are also denied to her. In this case, not only Chandidasi but also Bhagirath is prevented from experiencing maternal affection and he hallucinates that his mother is already dead. Chandidasi's condition is revealed to Bhagirath through Malinder's words

Malinder ;Now I've told you everything. Your mother's been bayen ever since. They'd have burnt her to death if she had been a witch. But, son, a bayen's not for killing . Kill a bayen, and the children start dying (Frowns, speaks hastily) They set up a hut for her beside the railway track. Every Saturday they leave a hamper of food for her at her doorstep. Once a year they give her two saris and two gaamachhas".

They are waiting to ruin her peaceful life by showering love on her sister-in-laws's daughter. At one point she takes the child's body and buries it in the graveyard. While going through the play, we can understand that she feels that her presence is harmful to her child.

The anger and jealousy of the society leads to her being branded as Bayen. This play also speaks about the oppression of women in the society. The concept of gender oppression in patriarchal culture is also emphasized. In rural areas, people believe in superstitions. Chandidasi is a woman who is separated from her family and from the village due to the superstitions. It brings them bad luck. Considering her to be a witch, the villagers ostracize her from the society and make her live in a hut. But in reality, the character of Chandidasi is very soft, yet she lives near graves. We can also see this by observing her sacrifice of life to save people.

Women are very conservative when it comes to education and employment even when they are reaching their full potential. Chandi is blessed to marry Malinder and give birth to a son Bhagirath. Unfortunately, due to the superstitions around her, she was blamed for the death of her sister-in-laws's daughter Tukni. Chandidasi is accused of murdering Tukni, a girl suffering from chicken pox. She was not even willing to continue her duties as she had a child at home. However, she convinces herself to perform the funeral of her brother-in-law, mother-in-law and Tukni. Though understanding Chandi's anguish, the villagers named her Bayen because she was absorbed in her son's thoughts and talked to herself. When she visits Tukni's grave for her guard, she affectionately carries the baby's body from the crematorium and expresses her love. The society accuses her of being a witch, eating or hunting the body of a child. She tries to convince them but to her surprise, Malinder

asks her why her saree is dripping milk. Their conversation is as follows:

Mahinder questions her : “Why your sari is dripping with milk ? whom were you suckling”(P 87).

It is a common thing for a mother who has just given birth to a child to get her saree wet with milk. But the narrow-mindedness of a patriarchal society is closing the minds of men and perpetuating the situation in the wrong direction.

Malinder :(Shouting at the top of his voice,crying heartrendingly at the same time) I...Malinder Gangaputta...strike my drum (beats the drum fanatically)... to declare that my wife has turned into a bayen, a bayen!(P87).

At that moment, she was denied not only her rights, but also what she deserves as a human being. She willingly sacrificed herself for the society. After her death, the society rewarded her. This shows how the cult of women is still alive and prevalent in our society. (Chakravarti., p.102). The problem of identity is that society constantly identifies women as individuals and makes them believe they are. The play shows how Chandidasi Gangadasi, a once independent woman, becomes a wife and mother after marrying a man known for his social commitments. She has a dilemma about her ancestral job. Chandidasi thinks of quitting her job. On one hand, she wants to continue working, on the other hand, she wants to minimize the damage to her reputation. As a result of this violence, absurdity and cognitive status she was ostracized by the society, branding her as Bayen. Initially, she resists this idea but later accepts herself as a Bayen.

The Bayen Chandidasi Gangadasi, despite coming from a prominent ancestor in her community in Kalu Dom, faces many trials on many levels. Not only is she denied social rights, but she is also deprived of what she deserves as a human being. After being branded as a Bayen by society, we learn the value of these words from the food and clothes she is given.

Bayen ;Just a little rice,the salt all mixed with dirt, worms in the lentil—why should I take it?" (page 75).

She was ostracized from the community on the pretext of superstition. Ironically, she too is mentally convinced and begins to believe herself as a Bayen. The following words support this view, where she orders Malinder not to let her presence affect her son.

Bayen: (a tired voice,she is tired of the superstitious terror she carries with her). Tie knots in your hair and in what you're weaing. (Malindar ties knots in his hair and his dhoti) Spit on the head of the child. Tell me when you've done it (page 76).

When Malinder insisted her to take money,she expressed her grief,

Malinder ; Will you take money?Money?.

Bayen :Who'll sell me anything?(P 77).

The utter humiliation faced by Chandidasi Gangadasi is revealed in this sentence. This discrimination, irrespective of caste, creed, gender etc., leads to the creation of victims; it always dominates the lower levels. Women are victims everywhere in every civilized or subaltern society in the world. Gender discrimination is the root cause of the oppression and subjugation of women. Subsequently, it paves the way for social injustice of women in the entire world. Therefore, this situation justifies the sentence that women are created at the lowest rung of humanity.

When Chandidasi's son Bhagirath starts to realize that his mother has only one saree to wear and very few basic necessities to survive, he asks his father,

Bhagirath; My mother? Without clothes? Without food? Without oil in her hair?"(page 78).

She is deprived of the minimum freedom to meet her husband and even her son. She has to carry her can with her to inform people to get out of that place. She has to struggle for her basic needs and the struggle for her identity in the society goes beyond that.

In a patriarchal society, women are also oppressed to the extent that they accept dominance as a part of their lives. She even avoids looking directly at her own son Bhagirath. She also strongly believes in complaining to her husband about the way her son talks to her . The inherent gender bias in the society makes her a subaltern (Devi 1998;75-91). She is unable to manage her life.

After reading the play, it can be understood that Chandi is an illiterate and intellectually inferior woman. She never tries to suppress her inner desire for freedom and hates anything that she feels may hurt her feelings. The seeds of a most important conflict are visualized between the committed mother and the professional gravedigger, as well as between the female group and the male-dominated social forces. As long as she remains unmarried, she does not experience any internal conflict. She feels proud of being a gravedigger and shows boundless enthusiasm for her job. She is conscious of her social status in her caste.

Towards the end of the play, she overhears the sabotage plot of some villagers on the way to lodge a complaint against Malinder against her son Bhagirath. They pile up bamboo sticks to block the train and rob it.she screams. The roar of the train drowns her voice and the train lights swallow her, followed by sudden darkness. Chandidasi, who lies dead, is surrounded by all the villagers who are talking in unison. The train guard silences them.

Guard: (hands his torch over to a colleague, and begins taking notes).She's been brave. A brave woman. A brave deed.The railways are sure to award her a medal, posthumous ofcourse and cash reward too...Who's she? (P 91).

Shashi, her brother-in-law replies to the guard, 'She is Dom's woman'.

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

Malinder: (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 anyone nor the award!

Malinder : 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?

Bhagirath: Yes, Sir, (guard takes it all down). My name Bhagirath Gangaputta... My father, the revered Malinder Gangaputta... residence, Domtoli village Daharhati... My mother (pauses for a while, then very distinctly)... my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi (suddenly breaks into loud weeping)... my mother, the late Chanddasi Ganga dasi, Sir, Not a Bayen. She was never a bayen. My mother (P91-92).

Therefore, Chandidasi patiently endured the label as the best evidence of the oppression and subjugation of women in a patriarchal society. Unfortunately, Chandidasi is recognized as a human being after her death and is rewarded posthumously.

Conclusion:

Mahasweta Devi's play criticizes the way women are treated by the society. It shows how society values her but does not let her go beyond her limits. Chandidasi's death is a test to tell how much cruelty and superstition there is in our society. The play warns women who have the right to live in this society not to be separated from their society and families. A person's identity is not something that can be ignored and suppressed. Moreover, a woman can never be converted from her femininity to witchcraft. **Thus the play conveys "minimum rights of marginalized women are taken away by social forces".**

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