

## Victimisation of Women through Witch-Hunt in Mahasweta Devi's Play *Bayen*.

Dr.Hukum Chand

Asst.Professor, Department of English

Bareilly College, Bareilly, UP, India

### Abstract

In the literary world, Mahasweta Devi is widely known as a writer dedicated to the advancement of social, political and religious concerns, particularly those pertaining to the marginalised and oppressed tribal communities. In many of her works, which include plays, novels and short stories, she effectively addresses a variety of issues such as gender discrimination, inequality and caste prejudices. She has devoted her life as a writer and activist to fighting for the rights of India's impoverished, exploited and disadvantaged indigenous people. As a woman, she has a special place in her heart for issues related to women's communities, including patriarchy, exploitation and gender discrimination. In her most well-known works, including *Mother of 1084*, *The Hunt*, *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver* and *Rudali*, she has depicted the various forms of persecution meted out to the women folk of tribal groups in the name of superstition and class hierarchy.

The play *Bayen* is also such an iconic play in which Mahasweta portrays one of the most heinous practices of Indian society namely 'witch-hunt', which still exists in many parts of the country, especially the tribal belts. The play centres around the story of a woman from a tribal society belonging to the Dom caste. She becomes the victim of collective superstition of her own people and community. But in a final act of self-sacrifice, she saves the very community that has ostracised her by branding her a witch. The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate how the women from disadvantaged tribal communities are suffered at the hands of self-seeking elements of a superstitious society that still supports inhuman traditions as witch-hunt. The play is a scathing critique of patriarchal control and discriminatory social practices, where by women are perpetually victimised as an easy target and exploited as scapegoats by the male-dominated society in order to further their own self-serving and evil purposes.

**Keyword:** Superstition, Gender- discrimination, Patriarchal control, Female subjectivity.

There is no denying that Mahasweta has voiced for the suffering, exploitation and rights of the voiceless, oppressed and disadvantaged in most of her writings. However, she feels more compassion for the women community as they are doubly suffered both as gender and class. Hence, in many of her writings including novels, stories and plays like *The Queen of Jhansi*, *Mother of 1084*, *Giribala*, *Rudali* and others, she is highly critical of the double standard that Indian society applies to women. On the one hand the society places them on an extremely high pedestal of divinity and on the other they are denied their womanly, motherly and societal rights in the name of superstitions, worn-out traditions and patriarchal norms. As correctly noted by Radha Chakravarty, when she states "these works demonstrate how the traditional deification of motherhood can often conceal a collective attempt to circumscribe women within socially prescribed roles while denying them the right to articulate their individual needs and desires( Chakravarty XII)." *Bayen* is one of these plays in which Mahasweta Devi exposes the evil of the practice of witch-hunt. In the play the playwright portrays the plight of a deeply loving mother who is forced to part with her cherished son due to a superstitious society that still believes in the cruel tradition of the witch-hunt. The helplessness of a woman

as a mother and wife is in the stark contrast with the callousness of the patriarchal society, which has no empathy for a nursing mother and her infant child. Talking about the chief aim of the plays *Bayen and Aajir* the writer Anjum Katyal writes, “Their chief aim seems to be to arouse horror and distaste over such archaic, exploitative, and superstitious customs. The author’s determination to create awareness of such unfair practices, however traditional they may be considered, seems to be the driving force behind these plays( Chakravarty 143).”

In the play, Chandidasi, the main character, is a member of the Dome caste, one of the lowest castes in the Hindu social structure. She is a descendant of a legendary Kalu Dome. Aside from it, she is also incredibly attractive and bold. The graves and the gloom don’t frighten her. Following her father’s death, who was a grave-digger, she inherited the caste obligation of burying dead children below five year’s age and keeping their graves safe from Jackals and other predatory animals. She marries Malindar Gangaputta, a government worker at the sub-divisional morgue; where he cleans skeletons for usuary and medical schools. Her husband holds a respectable status in his community due to his government job, which he obtained merely by his ability of signing his name. Chandidasi continues her profession even after her marriage and takes utmost care of the dead children and their graves. There is every reason to accept it that her family is quite happy in every sense. However, after giving birth to a lovely son, Bhagirath, she finds it challenging to continue her work as she has to leave her young son at home. Her motherly concern for her little child and her job of burying young dead children now begin to disturb her so much that she finds it extremely difficult to carry out her task. Therefore, one day she expresses her desire to leave the job to her husband, who doesn’t take it seriously and laughs it away.

The prosperity and happy life of Devi’s family causes jealousy into the hearts of the privileged in the society. They start conspiring how to destroy the happiness of Chandi and her family. They get an opportunity to take advantage of Chandi’s desire to renounce her ancestral job and exploit it to their own evil ends. By using Tukni’s death from small pox, who was the daughter of Malindar’s cousin and by making Shashi, Chandi’s brother-in-law an instrument, the dominant people of the village with the help of Gourdas and others trapped Chandi in their net. The villagers begin to call her a bayen. They also blame Chandi for Tukni’s death. Chandi quits her job on that very day and asks others to take the job but no one comes forward to take the responsibility. However, things take a bad turn on a stormy night when Chandi due to her loving and sympathetic nature visits the cemetery to check the condition of the children’s graves whom she buried. The sole purpose of her visit to the cemetery was to put brambles on the graves’ grass so the wolves couldn’t access to the children’s remains. But, after seeing Tukni’s grave, she began to think of her, whom she fed, bathed and even gave her a pair of anklets before Bhagirath was born. Due to these loving sentiments, her breasts start oozing out milk as happened during some past few days and her blouse and sari are wet with it. By chance some locals happen to spot her there. She is misunderstood by them to be breast feeding to the deceased children. They gathered before the Malindar’s house calling his wife a bayen. She is instantly branded to be a bayen by the villagers in the very presence of her own husband who too becomes a party to the branding due to pressure and his own superstitious beliefs. Declared as bayen, she is now forced to adhere rigorously to the harsh and dehumanising social norms that society has set forth for bayens. She is forced to live alone, isolated from the society. She is kept away from her loving husband and infant son. The people in the area insult, stone and drive her away so they can avoid her negative effect. After a life of troubles, torture and tormentation, the story ends with Chandidasi’s valiant act of sacrifice. She dies in an attempt to prevent a rail accident caused by the local robbers. The railways commend her bravery and provides her family with

reward. At the play's end, her son Bhagirath comes forward to accept Chandi as his mother and emphatically declares that his mother was never a bayen.

Through the horrible torture, inhuman treatment and suffering that Chandidasi endured, Mahasweta Devi reveals the cruel, discriminatory and dominant face of patriarchy. According to her, women across the world have suffered more than members of any other caste or class because of this very mindset. This is truly reflected in the play *Bayen*. Throughout the play, it is evident how a woman endowed with so many attributes, such as beautiful, loving, honest, sensitive and daring, becomes an easy victim of a vicious conspiracy hatched against her by the members of her own community. Despite being a member of the lowly caste of Domes, Chandi is a great social reformer. She buries the dead children of the entire village and then takes on the extra duty of watching over their graves with an uncommon amount of love and passion, as if each grave were her own child. Despite her outstanding service, she is subjected to such cruelty and suffering because the dominant group of her village envies her husband's social standing and her family happiness. The following conversations between Malindar and Chandi are worth quoting here. On Malindar's statement that he will buy a red shirt for the son, and a red sari and a yellow blouse for the son's mother, Chandi responds quickly—

CHANDIDASI: No, no, not for me. It only makes people envious and they cast an evil eye.

MALINDAR: Don't I know that? At the primary school, they were always skipping classes. I alone learnt how to sign my name, and they were all envious. I landed a government job, more envy. I married a golden doll of a wife, a descendant of the great Kalu Dom, still more envy. I built a new hut, had two bighas of land for share-cropping, how could they help being envious?..... Bastards, get as envious as you can. I can take it all, I, Malindar Gangaputta. I'll send my son to school—over there, beyond the railtracks.

CHANDIDASI (laughs). And what else?

MALINDAR. I'll make a real gentleman of him (Bandyopadhyay 107).

It is actually this state of her family, her husband's government job and his high sense of pride that become the cause of her misery. Being apprehensive of this feeling of jealousy among the people of the village and its future consequences, she wants to quit the job of burying children. She repeatedly tries to tell her husband about her decision of quitting ancestral job but he wants the status quo in this matter. Her intense concern about it finds full expression in these words she says to her husband—

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 the milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by himself. I can't, can't stay away from him (Bandyopadhyay 108).

The above words spoken by Chandi make it quite evident how society uses women as a prop for personal, political and individual vendetta. The powerful members of the village, such as Gourdas, Shashi and others, are envious of Malindar's prosperity and success and wish to ruin him. However, rather going straight for him, they plot against his innocent wife, making her the victim of their malicious plan because these individuals typically view women as simple and easy target. This kind of thinking towards women is pervasive in society and has long been used as the most powerful weapon. As in this instance as well, motherly weaknesses of Chandi are skilfully manipulated by Gourdas and Shashi. How is it possible that on the day that Chandi quits her job, Shashi, her brother-in-law together with Gourdas and others arrives at her home and makes a heartfelt plea for her to bury Tukni, whom she raised and cared for prior Bhagirath's birth? This is not by chance but a result of Gourdas, Shashi and their company's highly astute stage management. What hurts Chandi's heart and soul more deeply than the mob's calling her a witch is the unexpected behaviour of her own husband who queries about her visit to the graveyard at this strange hour and his subsequent public declaration that she has become a bayen. Mahasweta Devi very successfully presents the branding scene of Chandi on the stage. The scene is so heartbreaking and full of irony and pathos that is a typical of her style—

Malindar. Why did you leave your bed and come here?

Chandidasi. I heard the jackals tugging at the thorn-bushes, scratching at the grave. I heard them and came out (to Shashi, with a nervous smile) for your Tukni's sake, brother-in-law.

Mob. (awestruck, they point their fingers at her). You are a bayen.

Chandidasi. (her eyes wandering from face to face, in sheer bafflement). I came to guard the grave.

Mob. (rising above their awe to savage violence). Yes, you are a bayen.

Chandidasi. No, no, I'm no bayen.

Malindar. Then who was it with whom you were so lovey dovey? (His voice mounts) Why s your sari dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling? For whom was the lullaby?

Chandidas. (pleading for mercy). I am no bayen. I've a suckling child, and that is why my breasts ooze milk all the time. Gangaputta, you know it's truth. Why don't you tell them?

Malindar comes closer to her. He takes up the lantern and peers into her face. They stand face to face for a time. Malindar's eyes have a frenzied look. Chandidasi stares at him, terror-stricken. Trembling uncontrollably, Malindar puts the lantern down. Then he mimes a wild drum dance, beating at the air with both his hands, as he runs in a circle and streams: 'Ha -ri-ri-ri-ri-ri....' He rushes off stage and returns almost instantly with a dhol.

Malindar. (shouting at the top of his voice, crying heartrendingly at the same time). I...Malindar Gangaputta...strike my drum( beats the drum frantically)... to declare that my wife has turned into a bayen, a bayen!

Chandidasi. (overlapping). Save me. Gangaputta, save me!

Malindar. (overlapping). Turned into a bayen!!

Chandidasi. O my Bhagirath! My little darling...my life! (The villagers try to drag her away in savage fury). No no, oh no, my Bhagirath... (Bandyopadhyay 114-115).

This branding scene of Chandidasi, no doubt, draws a real picture of the predicament and pathetic condition of our tribal women folk, especially those who belong to the weaker and marginalised sections of society. They are so vulnerable and defenceless before this cruel practice that they have no way to protect themselves. How can their identity and existence from a human being to a witch or bayen be changed just by an accusation and a declaration by their husbands or fathers and sons? Here, Malindar is very powerful symbol of the blatant insensibility, callousness, cowardice, hard-heartedness and disrespect that men have been showing towards women for generations across the globe. Chandidasi is faced with the most pathetic condition when she is declared to be a bayen by her own husband, who, she assumed, would protect her from other people's attacks. Talking with her son, whom she met one day by coincident, she expresses her deep anguish about this harsh treatment—

Bayen. Hasn't the Gangaputta told his son, there is poison in the air into which I breathe, there's poison in my touch? And the schoolgoing son, doesn't he know it?

Bhagirath. I have no fear.

Bayen (to herself). The very words the Gangaputta had once spoken. His son says the same thing once again, 'I have no fear'. He said it too. But then he panicked, I gave him a fright, he didn't dare provoke his community ( Bandyopadhyay 117-118).

Even more shocking and inhuman face of this society is revealed in the rules and restrictions chalked out for a bayen to strictly follow. Chandidasi's predicament following her declaration as a bayen speaks volumes about this dehumanising practice and the society that forces it onto women. As per the social norms that a bayen is obliged to adhere to, Chandidasi is required to live in a hovel far from her husband, the village, society and most importantly, her beloved son. She must make an announcement before entering the village or a public place. As a bayen, she can't eat too much and therefore, she is provided by the society with 'only half a kilo of rice, a fistful of lentil, fifty grams of oil and a pinch of salt', and that is only for a week. She is also forbidden by tradition from looking at men but if it is absolutely essential, she may do so through a reflected surface, as it is believed that if she looks a man in the eye, his life is in danger.

These restrictions imposed on the victims of witch-hunt, according to the playwright, are nothing but a well-woven web of blind beliefs. They are ingrained in the tribal people's mind to such an extent that it is challenging for one to break away from their tight hold once one is entangled in them. It is unfortunate that after being labelled as witches or bayens, the victims start believing in the evil effects of their own eyes and actions. The greatest examples of it are when Chandidasi happens to meet her husband and beloved son in more than one encounters, she quickly turns her head away or turns her back on them. In one of her meetings with Malindar and her son, she requests Malindar to tie a knot in his hair or dhoti and spit on her son's head in order to protect them from her evil influence. This marks the culmination of the victimisation of an innocent woman who is also a wife and mother by the vicious superstition of the witch-hunt, perpetrated by those who, because of lack of education, superstition and patriarchal attitudes, permit such unscientific beliefs to persist even in this age of scientific and technological advancement.

Being an accomplished writer, social worker and activist, Mahasweta Devi is quite aware of the reasons behind the deplorable and barbaric customs that persist in tribal society. With the help of this play, she attempts to explain why such a regressive belief persists in many backward places of our nation even in the twenty-first century. The reasons are not too far to seek. She blames two major reasons for its existence. The first is the terrible superstition that still exists in some tribal areas in the name of safeguarding their cultural identity, which they believe is under threat from recent influxes of city people, The second is a hidden-link that exists between witch doctors, who are known as Jangurus in the tribal regions and their associates. She blames this particular nexus mostly for the continuation of this vicious witch-hunting tradition. This practice of witch-hunting has been turned into a thriving business by these so-called gurus and their associates. Since their survival is relied on this superstition notion, it is natural that they will not let this practice die down.

This is why, in one of her essays Mahasweta Devi confirms this connection when she says, “ The money collected through fines or from the land of those declared witches, is not spent to benefit of the person, whose disease or death triggered off the search for the witch. A part of it is pocketed by the Janguru, the person who actually identifies someone as a witch, and the rest goes on liquor and meat (Devi 16).” This caucus of dominant locals, Jangurus and their associates take advantage of the rural people’s unschooling, ignorance and innocence for their own benefits. Mahasweta believes that this evil can only be eliminated from the country’s rural and backward areas by awareness, right education and scientific approach. Furthermore, fighting against this regressive evil may benefit from the enactment and implementation of suitable laws. Only significant actions in this area, claims the playwright, may save many more mothers, wives and unfortunate woman like Chandidasi from falling prey to the witch-hunt and other oppressive practices that are pervasive in Indian society.

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