

Exploitation of a Woman: A Case Study of Mahasweta Devi's Play *Bayen*

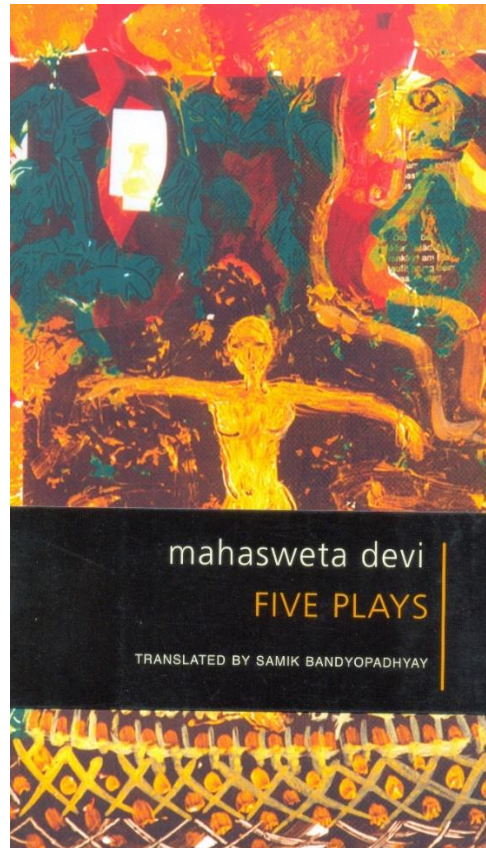
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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is a legendary figure among the Indian Writers. She is one of the greatest contemporary writers, who used to write in Bangla. Till the last breath of her life,

Mahasweta Devi raises her voice against illiteracy, displacement, ignorance, and other issues related to exploitation.

The Play *Bayen* was published in ‘Five Plays’, with other four plays – *Mother of 1084*, *Aajir*, *Urvanshi* and *Johnny and Water* in 1997. Mahasweta Devi’s play *Bayen* exposes exploitation of women, caste, and gender. I would like to discuss the situation of a lower caste woman Chandidasi and gender discrimination in this play. In this play, there are many dimensions, where women are shown as victims. Samik Bandyopadhyay comments on Mahasweta Devi’s *Bayen*, “The metaphoric core of Bayen...lies deeper than the obvious protest against the inhumanity of superstition...Mahasweta touches the larger space of the social forces that separate mother and son in a male-dominated system”¹.

This paper attempts to see the struggling woman figure in Mahasweta Devi’s play *Bayen* and discuss how a lower caste woman is accused as a Bayen. According to village people *bayen* is a woman, who has ability to curse others and breastfeed the dead children. Chandidasi is separated from her son and family.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the identity of a woman, which is constructed by the society and fake beliefs of society.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Exploitation, Gender, Feminism, Mother, Caste, Woman, *Bayen*.

Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi was born in a middle-class family in 1926 in Dhaka. Mahasweta Devi is famous for works especially for women and tribal community and poor people, who are exploited. Mahasweta Devi’s play *Bayen* was published in 1997 and was translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay. The play *Bayen* is one of the best creations among her works. Chandidasi the main character of this play is being accused as a Bayen, who breastfeeds dead children and she also has the ability to curse others.

¹ Devi, Mahasweta. (1997). Five Plays. Trans. and Intro. Samik Bandyopadhyay. Seagull. Calcutta. pp. xviii-xix

This play deals with superstitions, where a woman is accused as a Bayen. This woman was separated from her son and her family as well as from the community because of their blind faith. This shows how sick our society is. In this play we also find glimpses of patriarchal systems.

In many rural areas of India, women are always victims of injustice and gender discrimination, and they have to live in the male dominated system. When we read Mahasweta Devi's play *Bayen*, we can find these types of discrimination, where a lower caste woman named Chandidasi struggles with superstitions and the sick mentality of people.

The Structure of the Play

In scene I, we can see Malindar (Chandidasi's husband), and how he temporarily feels guilty for misbehaving with Chandidasi.

In scene II, we see that Chandidasi begins to feel how she turns into **bayen** due to societal pressure upon her. Her state of condition depicts the conflict between personal self and societal self. By the Chandidasi's word we can see that how she started believing that she is a **bayen** "It's forbidden to talk to us ...I'm a Bayen." (Devi 1997: 88). We can see how she has forgotten her own identity.

In scene III, Devi depicts how Malindar discloses the "truth" of Chandidasi to his son Bhagirath, that she was a woman (a human) before becoming a **bayen**. At the end of this scene, her son knows the truth and the present condition of his mother and how his mother was exploited by the villagers. He asks his father Malindar "My mother? Without clothes? without food?" (Devi 1997:78)

In the concluding scene, Mahasweta Devi depicts the sacrifice of Chandidasi for the same society, by whom she was accused of being a Bayen, but her son Bhagirath identifies her as his mother and not as **bayen**.

Chandidasi

The play *Bayen* is concerned with a woman Chandidasi, who is separated from her son Bhagirath by the male dominated system. The effect of woman exploitation is revealed here.

Chandidasi is a mother and wife, who is a professional grave digger. As per the profession her work is to guard the graves and bury dead children. This profession is inherited by her from her ancestors. Because of the work she does, Chandidasi is accused as a bayen.

Chandidasi gets married to Milendar, who is a permanent employee in a morgue. She gave birth to a child. When she was unmarried, she watches the graves without any problem and she feels satisfied with her job, but after giving birth to a child Chandidasi feels deep pain for every dead child and feels restless. She finds the image of her son among dead children. She decides to leave the profession, which was handed over to her by her grandparents. She has a conflict between her profession and being a mother.

Glimpses of Patriarchal System

Chandidasi is beautiful and her husband has a government job, so all people have evil and jealous eyes on her. She is accused of being a **bayen**, and she is separated from her son Bhagirath as well her husband. She has to live according to the conventions of her society.

The play *Bayen* exposes the sad reality of our society, where a lactating woman is charged as being a **bayen**, accused of breast feeding the dead children. This woman, exploited by and exiled from village, was given rice which could not be consumed even to survive. Chanddasi describes this shocking situation:

“just a little rice... the salt all
mixed with dirt... worms in the lentil – Why should I
take it?... is that enough for a week”. (Devi 1997:75)

Bayen

The protagonist of this story Chandidasi is professional grave-digger, who buries dead children and she guards the graves at night as per her profession. In the village there was no one as beautiful as she was. She married Milinder, who works in a morgue. She gave birth to a child, named Bhagirath. After giving birth to a child, Chandidasi faces a conflict in herself between a mother’s responsibility towards her son and her ancestral accountability, which was given by the ancestors. She was charged of being a *bayen* by the community people. When

Chandidasi's sister-in-law's husband Shashi blamed her for his daughter Tukni's death, whom Chandidasi herself loved a lot.

Tukni suffered from chickenpox and died. Before Baghirath was born, she was burying dead children without any problem as part of her caste-based, inherited job, but after her own child was born, she started feeling a deep pain for every dead child. When she was guarding little Tukni's grave, her breast started aching and her sari was wet with milk and her sister-in-law's husband Shashi started calling her **bayen**. He told the villagers that Chandidasi breast-feeds the dead children and has the ability to curse others. She is not human anymore.

Chandidasi's husband also started calling her **bayen** and throwing stones at her. Afterwards, villagers assumed that Chandi is a **Bayen**, who breastfeeds and raises dead children as well as has power to curse others. Therefore, she was exiled from the village by the community people. She was separated from her son Bhagirath, was suppressed by the village people continuously but still she saved the lives of hundreds of passengers. She loses her life, while stopping a train full of passengers from disaster. She was humiliated, even denied her motherhood and separated from her son by the community people. Despite this, she willingly sacrificed her life for the sake of society. After her death she was rewarded by the society and even regained her identity as a woman or as a human being.

Superstitions

Mahasweta Devi in her short story *Bayen* portrayed the ill effects of superstition on innocent people. In India there are many places, where people are controlled by these types of superstitions and the feudal system makes their lives worsen. The rural superstitious people believed that Chandidasi had the ability to curse people since she breastfed dead children. They believed that Chandidasi was used by evil spirits. People believed that she practiced witchcraft and breastfed dead children. Chandidasi's sacrifice of her life itself is a slap on the rural superstitious people. Because of these people's superstitions she had to live alone and suffered as a *bayen* and had to keep herself away from the village, even from her son and husband, whom she loved a lot.

In this play Mahasweta Devi shows that the village people believe in superstitions and followed by her husband Malindar. While his wife was a lactating mother, milk flowed from

her breasts which is natural. But because of his superstitions he started questioning his wife: “Why your sari is dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling?” (Devi. 1997: 87).

This shows unethical and male dominated society’s glimpse. He started questioning her, instead of defending her from evil eyes of the villagers.

Later on, Malinder has a conversation with his son Bhagirath about her sari dripping with milk. Here Mahasweta Devi depicts the superstitious belief of the community people and Chandi’s husband as well.

Malindar said that’ “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. They set up a hovel 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 gaamaccha” (Devi. 1997 :89)

Exploitation of a Woman and Chandidasi After Accused of Being a Bayen

Chandidasi could not keep her son with her and she affectionately and emotionally sang for her son, when she was forced to miss him and not keep her son by her side. This shows her motherly concern towards her son Bhagirath. This shows that how sick our society is, where a mother could not keep her son by her side:

Chandidasi sings for her son Bhagirath: “Come, sleep, come to my bed of rags, My child god sleeps in my lap ...” (Devi 2011: 97).

Chandidasi sings for her son every night. She has to keep herself away from her son because of the rural superstitious people. But they could not dissociate a mother’s emotional attachment and motherly love from her son.

Chandidasi confesses, that: “When I hadn’t become a **Bayen**, I had everybody” (Devi 2011: 97).

This shows that how she becomes lonely without her son and husband. She suffers from a terror of loneliness.

Chandidasi accepts, that: “I can’t bear it alone through the night” (Devi 2011: 100).

Conclusion

The domination of superstitions in society separates a mother from her son. A mother’s quality of motherly love, care, protectiveness as well as her motherhood are neglected by society and society accused her as a *bayen*.

References

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