

# A Critique on Mahasweta Devi's Bayen

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to critically analyse the play Bayen by Mahasweta Devi. It deals with the theme of 'Gender Discrimination' and spots out the ways in which the social position as a 'Bayen' is imposed through continuous abuse and vicious humiliations. Mahasweta Devi speaks about the subjugation of women in patriarchal society. While forcing a woman of her duties, her right to live her life is repeatedly buried in the Patriarchal Society. Chandidasi, the protagonist, is presented as a 'Bayen' and is separated from her husband, Malindar and her son, Bhagirath because of the superstitious belief. Eventhough she wants to quit her job, she is completely trapped in her ancestral tradition. According to the tradition, a 'Bayen' is a woman who feeds the dead children, guards the graves and has the capacity to damn others. Mahasweta portrays the condition of a tribal community and the position of woman called 'Bayen' in the society. Till the end of her life, Chandidasi fights for her freedom, justice and true identity as a mother in the cold-hearted society.*

**Keywords:** Chauvinism, Patriarchal, Subjugation, Alienation, Marginalization, Discrimination.

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is a paramount Indian Bengali woman writer, social activist and journalist. She was born in 1926 in a middle class Bengali family at Dacca, Bangladesh. But after the partition of India, their family moved to West Bengal. She raised her voice several times against the discrimination of tribal communities. The Indian government honoured her with various literary awards such as Sahitya Academy Award (1979), Jnanpith Award (1995), Ramon Magsaysay Award (1997) and also civilian awards like Padmashri Award (1986), and Padma Vibhushan Award (2006). After her schooling she studied the life history of rural life communities in the Indian state of West Bengal and also the women and Dalits. On 28th July 2016, she died of multiple organ failure in Belle Vue Clinic in Kolkata. Bayen is an important play of Mahasweta Devi which speaks about the subjugation of women in patriarchal society. It highlights the life of a bayen in a tribal community of India. The play begins with the obvious picture of Chandidasi: "The curtain goes up on an empty stage, with lullaby droning offstage, till Bayen enters, singing. She looks utterly exhausted and despondent at the end of her tether, dragging her reluctant feet like some condemned ghost debarred entry into human society" (97).

Chandidasi, the protagonist belongs to the descendant of Kalu Dom clan who gave protection to the great King Harishchandra and was gifted with all the cremation grounds of the world. It is portrayed by a voice in the play: “All the cremation grounds of the world are yours. All the cremation grounds of the world are yours. All the cremation grounds of the world are yours, yours, yours”. (103) After the demise of her father, Chandidasi inherits her family profession of becoming a ‘Bayen’. But when she is married to Malindar Gangaputta and gives birth to Bhagirath, she goes through a psychic disturbance. She is ripped off between the maternal love and her familial duties. At the end of the play, she lays down her life to save the passengers of the train, which in turn brings her son Bhagirath proclaiming her as his mother and not a Bayen.

In Bayen, the characters describe the qualities of social norms. The character of Chandidasi is examined to enclose a woman’s emotional turmoil in the male chauvinistic society. She is depicted as a genuine heroine in the real life. She is a woman who abides in her ancestral tradition though her heart agonizes for her son. On the other hand, Malindar Gangaputta, the husband of Chandidasi, is depicted as a weak character. Even though he loved Chandidasi, he doesn’t stand by her through all her humiliations. He is very proud of his government morgue but his modern education doesn’t help him in any way.

Bayen relies upon superstition and encapsulates the construction of gender inequality. The element, ‘Gender Discrimination’ is emphasized in the paternal society. Mahasweta Devi condenses the distressed life of women and their conflicts for survival. She criticizes the hypocritical society that emphasizes more superstition than the human being itself.

Chandidasi, who is a professional grave digger, decides to leave her ancestral profession in order to spend her time with her son Bhagirath. But the community expels her on the charge of becoming a Bayen. Chandidasi says, “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. Can you tell me what I should do?” (107). These words of Chandidasi show us how duty conscious she is, and also the pathetic condition of her in the male dominated society.

Gender discrimination is the main cause of all the women’s subjugation and enslavement. Being a lactating mother, her breasts ache with milk for her son Bhagirath. She loses her mental balance because of her subjugated state. Her illusions as a dog Jhumra is nowhere to be seen.

MALINDAR. Where’s Jhumra? (Scared) whom do you call?

BAYEN. He’s right there. Can’t you see him?

MALINDAR. Don’t you remember, Jhumra’s long dead?

BAYEN. It that so? Then how do I see him hovering about me all the time? Is it all illusion? Come dearie, come come! (100).

She leads no sophisticated life in the graveyard. She is provided with meagre rations on Saturdays with rice, salt, lentil and oil. The pathetic condition is that there is only a little rice, the salt all mixed with dirt, worms in the lentil. Once in a year, she is provided with two saris. When Bhagirath meets her, he sees her saris in shreds. It reaches an extreme level of exploitation. This shows how a woman was exploited, ill treated and suppressed by the male domination society. Gourdas brands her as a witch and forces her to lead a solitary life as a social untouchable. When she needs the love of her husband, he too is stained with the stain of the patriarchal society. And so she is compelled to lead an isolated life.

Malindar is an exact example of male chauvinism. When Chandidasi is accused as a Bayen, he does not oppose the villagers but rather beats the drum and shouts at the top of his voice: “I... Malindar Gangaputta ... Strike my drum ...to declare that my wife has turned into a bayen, a bayen!” (115). Chandidasi is unable to revolt against the unjust society. Even her husband Malindar tries to mock her as a Bayen. Malindar says, “Rubbish! How can you be a witch? Those

who bury children turn into bayens, when they are possessed, not witches”(109). Thus Chandidasi becomes a prey to the male dominated society.

The play deals with the agony of a mother who is marginalized by the society. The reaction of the villagers when Tukni dies changes her life completely. She is held responsible for Tukni's death. She loves Tukni as her child before Bhagirath's birth but the villagers accuse her of casting an evil eye on her. Chandidasi says, “They say I have an 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?” (108). These words of Chandidasi show how she is ill treated and humiliated by her family members, too. Malindar's cousin Pakhi accuses her as a witch, when Chandidasi asks her about the condition of Tukni. Chandidasi says “Now Tukni has small pox. I asked Pakhi, How's the child? And imagine what she had to say! She said, Begone, you witch! (109). Above incident show us that though Chandidasi is a bayen, her heart is broken by each and every one of the society

Mahasweta Devi examines the social space that separates the mother and son in patriarchal system. The density of the mother's love for the son is not reduced with social restrictions. Her breasts ache with milk for her son Bhagirath, when she guards the grave at night. Chandidasi cries “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”. (108).

Malindar Gangaputta never understands the state of women like chandidasi who is alienated from her infant. She is labeled as a Bayen by the male dominated society. Therefore Chandidasi accepts her status as a Bayen, when she speaks with her son Bhagirath. She tells her son, “Oh my God! What do I now? What do I do? The Gangaputta's son should never again come to the tracks in the evening. I promise, I won't cry again (118). Chandidasi is treated inferior in the patriarchal society. The whole community comes against her when she forbids her ancestral duty. On the other hand, when she does the duty, she suffers from alienation and marginalization.

The death of Chandidasi is an act of protest against the superstitious society. The real triumph comes in when Bhagirath announces Chandidasi as his mother. Though he is forbidden from communication with Bayen, he is the only one who shows the true concern towards Chandidasi. While Chandidasi is brave enough to immolate her life, her son Bhagirath is brave to declare her as his mother. The train guard says “She's been brave. A brave woman. A brave deed. The Railways are sure to award her a medal, posthumous of course and a cash reward too... Who's she?” (121). Bhagirath gives her identity as a mother. Thus the universal phenomenon of motherhood is depicted in Bayen. When the train guard enquires the crowd about the details of the dead woman, Bhagirath replies,

Bhagirath. Yes sir. My name Bhagirath Gangaputta...My father, the revered Malindar Gangaputta...residence, Domtoli, village Dharhati... my mother (pauses for a while, then vey distinctly)...my mother, the late chandidasi Gangadasi (suddenly breaks in to loud weeping)...my mother, the late chandidasi Gangadasi, Sir. Not a bayen. She was never a bayen, my mother. (122)

Mahasweta Devi has not used any type of theatrical settings in Bayen. The play moves from the present to past and past to present very smoothly. The character in the present itself acts as a character in the past seems more realistic. There are only minimum characters that bring about the whole play. Bayen has a very simple and elegant structure. The play is precise and has well executed scenes.

Bayen portrays the effect of superstitions on the blameless individuals. We can see Chandidasi Gangadasi as a woman and mother who have been suppressed to the state of abandoned, alienated, ill-treated and marginalized in all forms of male chauvinistic society. She goes through a nostalgic experience when she guards the graves through the night.

In India, there is a considerable part of residents who are immersed in unawareness and superstitions. The majority in the male dominated society consider females as an item of sex, as child bearers and money makers when required. The voice of the women remains unheard in the society. There is a very little thought to respect the personal self of a woman. The woman has to depend on man for all her source of requirements. It is the illiteracy that caused several damages in the play Bayen. We must be grateful for the modern India, because the literacy rates are increasing and the superstitious beliefs began subsiding. Only by shedding all such superstitions, India will become a wonderland to live.

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