

REPRESENTATION OF GENDER AND DENIAL OF MOTHERHOOD IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *BAYEN*

M. SAMUEL SRIDHAR

Abstract: Indian English drama is a general term that encompasses Indian plays written in English as well as plays produced in local languages and translated into English. In the postcolonial situation, to write drama in English was considered to be politically incorrect because English was considered as the language of the ruler. The art of Indian drama enjoyed a prestigious status in ancient India. However, the practice of Indian drama in spite of its roots in classical traditions was developed only during the British period in India. It was encouraged by Western dramatic influences and also by native theatrical traditions of India. The play *Bayen* is a dramatic representation of the bitter reality of life associated with women's life in rural India. Chandidasi, the protagonist of the play, appears as a professional grave digger whose work was against feminine sensibility.

Keywords: *Bayen*, Indian Drama, English literature, Feminism.

Introduction: Indian English drama is a general term that encompasses Indian plays written in English as well as plays produced in local languages and translated into English. In the postcolonial situation, to write drama in English was considered to be politically incorrect because English was considered as the language of the ruler. The art of Indian drama enjoyed a prestigious status in ancient India. However, the practice of Indian drama in spite of its roots in classical traditions was developed only during the British period in India. It was encouraged by Western dramatic influences and also by native theatrical traditions of India.

From times immemorial, India had a rich heritage of drama. India is a land of many types of dramas in numerous languages. It is with Sanskrit plays, that drama in India began its sojourn. It has its roots in the Vedic age. A prominent historian, A.L. Basham, is of the view that "the origin of Indian theatre is still obscure" (A.L. Basham, 1954: 2).

A writer through his skill and craftsmanship can break the language barrier and transcend socio-cultural boundaries to create a universal impact. In this regard, contemporary Indian drama has shown remarkable growth and versatility. Earlier drama, though rich and vibrant, had no immediate relevance for the present. But theatre today is a representation of a society in transition. It is an attempt to explore the ever-changing face of modern society by evolving novel techniques to suit the demands of the contemporary audience. A rich theatrical tradition evolved by great ancient writers scaled its heights in skillful hands. Likewise, the Indian genre like dramatic art form in English, has made innovative experimentation in terms of thematic issues as well as technical

merits. It has been progressively moving to folklore, history, legend and myth elevating their reputation with impressive grades.

Mahasweta Devi's first published piece of writing was an essay on Tagore's *My Boyhood Days* for a Bengali children's magazine. She started writing when she was thirteen. This play is examined for how it reflects an overwhelming concern for the human plight and assure hope for a better dawn for mankind. The present paper strives for empowerment of the downtrodden, exploited, suppressed, oppressed and marginalised sections of the Indian society.

Mahasweta Devi continued her fight against the subjugation of the women in the patriarchal society. Through the play *Bayen* she explored the hypocritical shades in the society which prioritize superstition over the human beings. The plays *Bayen* and *Mother of 1084*, advocate the minimum rights of women that are taken away by social forces. They show how these social forces have separated a mother from her son in the patriarchal society and explain the same with an eye-catching attention. Devi's theatrical script mostly deals with subaltern characters, and her plays have been performed in tribal and rural areas. Devi's political theatre is one of the first performance-based grassroots movements within the ambit of subaltern studies. And it is possible that her writing influenced many other forms of performance that deal with subaltern characters. Devi's playwriting can be considered as operating sinuously between ethnography fiction, history and chronological narration. She addresses the inherent issues that dominate South Asian Studies, including the exploitation of labourers and gender discrimination. In addition to these,

Devi re-examines the issues of subalternity that have otherwise been misinterpreted or uncared for.

The central character of the play *Bayen*, Chandidasi, is a caretaker of the graves. Though it is a menial job, she assumed this duty with great pride from her father Kalu Dome after his death. She married Malindar and was blessed with a child Bhagirath. For her contented life, she became a cynosure in her village. Her happy life was envied by her sister-in-law and the villagers. And they waited for the time to destroy her peaceful life when she showered extreme affection on the dead body of her sister-in-law's daughter, who was buried in the graveyard. On one particular occasion, out of love and affection for the dead child, she took the dead body of her niece from her grave and expressed her affection, which is noticed by Shashi her sister-in-law's husband and the villagers who labelled her as a Bayen. Later on, out of envy, this blame is intensified by the society and her husband Malindar too. Her extremely affectionate attitude towards children leads to her being labelled as Bayen by the villagers. Nevertheless, she feels her presence to be harmful even to her child who is craving to see and talk to her. Therefore, Chandidasi wants to go to Malindar to complain to him about the daring steps of their son. While going to Malindar she overhears the conversation of the robber's devious plans of obstructing the train and looting the passengers. In order to save the people she goes in the direction of the approaching train and gives up her life. Her sacrifice is recognized after her death and Bayen was honoured posthumously. Mahasweta Devi uses the story of Bayen to disclose not only the oppression of a woman but also the destiny of women in the lower strata of the society.

The element of 'gender subalternity' is emphasized in the patriarchal society through character of Chandidasi. People in the remote areas, especially where medical awareness is lacking, place firm belief on superstitions and being staunch believers of the superstitions; they go to the extent of taking someone's life to preserve their own well-being. Chandidasi is separated from her family i.e. from her husband and son by the superstitious society, after being labelled as a Bayen. In the words of the villagers, Bayen is a woman, who breastfeeds deceased children, raises them from the grave, and has the power to curse others. Nevertheless, they believe that killing the Bayen brings bad fortune to them. Thus they have

displaced her from the society to let her live in a hovel on the periphery of the village. Chandi's presence is considered inauspicious, as she is branded a witch. People are horrified and alarmed to face her as she is supposed to cast an evil eye. Her very presence may bring misfortune and even death to them. The witch is an evil-doer. She is alleged to have been "the enemy of the stage, the individual, and of her village even for own salvation" (Wiener, 1973: 521).

The playwright uses the theatrical tool of a character in the present enacting a happening in the past like Malindar acting out his love affair with Chandi and the branding of Chandi as a Bayen. In the words of Samik Bandyopadhyay, "The metaphoric core of *Bayen*, in which a mother is branded as a witch and separated from her son till the latter acknowledges the dead woman as his mother, lies deeper than the obvious protest against the inhumanity of superstition" (Bandyopadhyay, 2002 : xiii). In Scene I, the son encounters the witch-mother who herself fears the conflict more than the son. Mahasweta Devi deals with the larger expanse of the social forces that divide mother and son in a male-dominated system. In the final acknowledgment of the mother, there is thus the assertion of a value that is too often ignored or denied, 'the natural commitment that binds mother and son together'. The play opens with the Bayen singing a lullaby from her hovel outside the village, where she is condemned to live. She looks utterly exhausted and despondent, at the end of her tether, dragging her feet reluctantly like some condemned spirit who has been denied entry into human society. She draws a canister attached to end of a string, rattling and clanging along the floor. She wears a soiled red sari without the customary border; her hair uncombed, and does not wear any jewellery. Chandidasi, the Bayen, though hailing from a noble lineage in their community of Domes, confronts many ordeals at numerous levels. Embarrassingly she is deprived of not only the societal privileges but also dispossessed of those rights which she deserves 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?"(75).

On the flimsy grounds of superstition, she is exiled from the society. But ridiculously, she too gets convinced psychologically and starts believing that she is a Bayen. The following words support this point of view, where she instructs

Malindarto make her presence inconsequential: “(a tired voice, she is tired of the superstitious terror that she carries with her) The knots in your hair and in what you’re wearing. (Malindar ties knots in his hair and his dhoti) Spit on the head of the child. Tell me when you have done it” (76). The pathetic plight of the Bayen can be perceived when she complains to Malindar regarding the inadequate quantity of food that she is provided with. In her words: “what do they give me in their hamper? It’s only half a kilo of rice, a fistful of lentil, fifty grams of oil and pinch of salt, is that enough for a week?” (77). When Malindar insisted on giving her money, she expressed her grief. “Will you take money? Money?” Bayen replies, “Who’ll sell me anything?” (77). The terrible humiliation faced by the Bayen is revealed in these sentences. Chandidasi is labelled as a Bayen and discriminated against in a humiliating way.

This type of discrimination, irrespective of caste, creed, gender etc., leads to the creation of victims since it always holds sway over the marginalised sections of the society. Women are victimized in every subaltern community in the world. Thus gender discrimination is the root cause of all the adverse repercussions like women’s subordination, subjugation, and oppression. The playwright by projecting the victimised position of Chandidasi establishes that women are the most marginalized creation of humanity. Chandidasi has only one sari to wear and she is provided with a meagre amount of provisions on which she is expected to survive. She is deprived of the minimum freedom to meet her husband and even her son. She has to bring along with her a canister to alert the villagers so that they take caution to depart from 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 the scope of imagination. The progress of women is hindered and their capacity is undermined in the social system that is structured conservatively.

Shashi, her brother-in-law, who already labelled her as a Bayen, pretended to show veneration to her profession and forefathers. He repeatedly exhorts Chandi about her sacred ancestral profession and insists on her continuing the work. He says: “if you do not bury them, their soul remains hovering far from their destination....You’re a progeny of the illustrious Kalu Dome...you are the destination, you embody the mother Ganga...”(84).

In the end, when Chandi sacrifices her life for the good of society, she is appreciated as a noble lady

by the society after her death. Here various examples of Chandi’s life epitomize how these cults are kept alive in our society. Radha Chakravorty remarks in her scholarly critique on Mahasweta Devi’s mothers: “Her (Chandi) traditional maternal qualities, such as love, care, and protectiveness, are played off against the grotesque, travesty of motherhood that the Bayen is supposed to represent” (Chakravorty, 2011: 6). The problem of self-identity is also attached to such lives in a society which is male dominated. She is compelled to believe that she is a Bayen. In the course of the play, Chandi is seen struggling with her own identity; at last, it is restored by her own son. Before getting married, she led the life of an independent and free woman. She continues her ancestral profession of burying the children.

This perpetual concern with visual experiences indicates that subalternity is enforced through the village’s panoptic discipline, a trend that frequently happens throughout other performance-based deliberations on subalternity. The play shows how the gruesome manipulative device, stretching its ugly tentacles all over, reduces the human being to the level of a mere beast. Abject poverty has the effect of pushing the rural folk into perpetual servitude. Gangadasi Chandidasi tries to recover the lost subjectivity of the female subaltern subject by recovering the personalised history and identity of the woman. Chandi is ensnared in an ambush laid by vested and narrow interests. As Sachi Arya writes, “it is a fine study of the effects of the exploitation political, social and economic on the psyche of a sensitive individual who is essentially humane” (Arya, 1991:145). The major portion of Mahasweta Devi’s creative writing has been devoted to exploring the inhuman subjugation of women and their struggles for survival, although they do not conform to any school of feminism.

The play Bayen emerges as an intensely human story, touching on the outsized space of the social forces that keep a mother and a son apart in a male-dominated society. The play showcases how a woman is being treated in our society where her subjectivity is either denied or defined according to phallogocentric norms. The play Water continues the theme of exploitation and deals with the rural life and exposes powerfully, man’s inhumanity to man highlighting how the persecution of the innocent folk continues unabated in the rural area with an implicit acquiescence of the ruling class. The play further retrieves the intricacies of the dynamics of countryside poverty with the

intrigues of the local landed elite in collusion with local village officials and the police.

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M. Samuel Sridhar
Lecturer in English, Andhra Christian College, Guntur, AP