

## QUEST FOR SELF DISCOVERY AND INDEPENDENCE: A FEMINIST READING IN MAHASWETA DEVI' S BAYEN

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### Abstract

*Mahasweta Devi, the eminent Indian Bengali writer. She is a social activist and writer who is insightful in choosing myths. Her deep and keen interest in literature made her write from a young age and she has written several stories and contributed to literary magazines. Mahasweta Devi continues her fight against the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society. She wants to bring reforms to the male-governed and defined social culture and tradition for the welfare of the country. The play Bayen advocates for the minimum rights of women that are taken away by social forces. These social forces have separated a mother from her son in the patriarchal society is explained with eye-catching attention. The play Bayen presents an account of a woman who had to face cruel realities in rural India. Chandidasi played a dominant role in this play. The play focuses on the concept of unusual transformation that a normal woman undergoes through the process of being scapegoated by society. The main character of the play is Bayen Chandidasi, who is the caretaker of the cemeteries. She assumed this duty with pride after her father passed away. They waited for her to destroy her peaceful life by showering affection on the daughter of her deceased sister-in-law. On one occasion, she took the child's body and buried it in the cemetery. Society's anger and envy led to her being labeled as Bayen. She feels that her presence is harmful to her child. While going to Malinder, she heard the conversations of the robber who was planning on looting the passengers. To save the people, she gave up her life. This story talks about the oppression of women in society. The concept of gender subalternity is also emphasized in the patriarchal culture. In rural areas, people tend to believe in superstitions. From beginning to end she searches for his own identity whether she is a woman, daughter, wife, and also mother.*

**Keywords:** *superstition, illiteracy, marginalization of women, self-identity.*

Mahasweta Devi, the eminent Indian Bengali writer. Mahasweta Devi is an important figure in Indian literature, and her works are known for having a substantial impact and shedding light on the challenges faced by impoverished communities. Mahasweta Devi's writing is known for its honest, vivid stories that probe deeply into the lives of individuals who are marginalized and persecuted in society. Her work typically touches on subjects like caste discrimination, social injustice, gender inequity, and the exploitation of indigenous traditions. Mahasweta Devi's fiction has a significant impact on both Indian literature and feminist writing. Meera Bai

observes 'Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women by others. It is the voice of dissent of the women to be treated as a doormat or a piece of furniture mat for the convenience of men. To still others, it is the refusal to accept the set of values, moral codes, and social norms made by the male-dominated society. (27). The play begins with a sorrowful song which has sung by Chandidasi to express her loneliness and also her melancholic situation. The song represents her finding for an unseen child. She is followed by an imaginary dog named Jhumra. She became very exhausted due to starvation and

despondent because she was prohibited from entering the village. Her appearance may be very disgusting to others. She wears a filthy saree and also has a disheveled hair. She says "I don't have anybody anymore, nobody. When I hadn't become a Bayen I had everybody". (55). She looks utterly exhausted and depressed, and she is dragging her reluctant feet like a condemned ghost. Chandidasi, who is a Bayen, doesn't wear the customary attire. She also doesn't have jewelry, and her hair is messy. Despite this, she still confronts various issues. She is given food and clothes, but the worth of this charity is not known. Why should I take it?"(75). The root cause of all the evils that women face is gender discrimination. It is the most prevalent form of oppression in the world. She is given food and clothes but the worth of this charity can be learned from the words of Chandidasi, "just a little rice, the salt all mixed with dirt, worms in the lentil – Why should I take it?"(p.75). After her father's death, she was forced to take up the profession of her father, burying the dead bodies of children. She continued her ancestral job till she got married and even she gave birth to a child. She is beginning to lose her identity in the village.

In the beginning, she leads her as a normal human being but later she also even not allowed to see her own child for the sake of society's eyes. Both ignorance and illiteracy make the village people blind in the view of Chandidasi. Max Muller has insisted on honoring women: Where women are honored, there the Gods are pleased; but where they are not honored, no sacred rites yield awards. —The houses, on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. (65). From the beginning to end she searches for his own identity whether she is a woman, daughter, wife, and also mother.

Malinder began to narrate his story to Bhagirath, the story moved twelve years back. He belonged to the kingdom of Harishchandra who is the king of Gangaputta. It has provided all cremations to the people. Chandidasi is a descendant of Kalu Dome whose are in the profession of burying the dead bodies of the children. Malinder falls in love with her and also gets married. It has happened through a tribal song which indicates that Mahasweta Devi has celebrated their love and marriage. Marriage subjugates and enslaves women. De Beauvoir states that —aimless days are indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose (466). After marriage, she gave birth to Bhagirath. Meanwhile, before the birth of Bhagirath, she didn't find any difficulties in her profession. But, after his birth, she feels an anonymous situation while performing his duty to bury the dead children under the Banyan trees. Besides this incident, many children from their village have been affected by some diseases and also found death. Unfortunately, the people believed that it was created by Chandidasi and also she must be an ill-omen with an evil eye who made disasters in the village. If she stares at any children it will be a sure death. Even though the people began to throw stones on her and also beat her cruelly. So, she decided to stop her ancestor's work. These made Malinder think as indifferent about her wife Chandidasi. Meanwhile, she was sent as a guarding personality to the graveyard throughout the night. She felt that her breast burst with milk and also got a headache to see her son Bhagirath. She became helpless to be in a state of normal. Her mind is filled with full of conflict between her motherhood and her ancestral profession.

After the end of these incidences, Tukni, Shashi, and Pakhi's children die of some diseases, who are the sister and brother-in-law of Malinder. They put the whole blame on Chandidasi's responsibilities. After

all these calamities, she has almost turned mad at them. On that night, she got into her profession of Bayen by performing raving and randing in the burial ground. She began to talk to herself and also sing lullaby. The people make use of the situation and also make her husband believe that his wife Chandidasi has turned into Bayen, an ill-omen. They proclaimed that all over the village by the announcement of Chandidasi became Bayen. The candidate was forced to carry a filament with a canister tied to her neck and also hung it along the floor while in her walk. It made others not to cross over her way. The villagers are afraid to kill her. So, the people kept her in a little hut near the railway tracks.

Chandidasi is an uneducated woman and her work is to bury the dead children and guard the graves as her forefathers carry out. Chandidasi is labeled as a “Witch” and “Bayen” just because she does the job in the graveyard and so she has the evil power within her. Mahasweta Devi used the character of Chandidasi as Bayen to represent the marginalized role of all women in Indian society. The colonial domination continues in the form of male domination towards women, As S. Suresh Kumar and Leema Rose say, —Women continue to be colonized and subjected to the oppressions put into place by colonialism and consolidated by patriarchy (52). The decolonized man asserted his mastery by his unjust treatment of women. It describes that how a normal woman, has turned into a Bayen by the superstitious belief and illiteracy of the villagers. Bayen came to the village on Saturdays for her ration and also to see her own Bhagirath. Malinder, her husband not permit her to see their son. Because he considered that her evilness may spoil the future of their son. Malinder feels sympathy for her sometimes. So, he wanted to help her by giving money and also ration things. Even it is also banned by the villagers. So, he kept those things at the foot of a tree and told her to pick them

from there. Whenever Malinder threatened her not to see their son, she became afraid and also left the place. Once Bhagirath happens to meet his mother, even he also notices her as a Bayen. Malinder feels disappointed in it and begins to reveal the secret of Bayen and his life journey.

Chandidasi’s conventional profession makes her feel proud once but now she hates the job because her social status as well as her personal freedom is being affected. She feels insulted and hurt when the villagers give an opinion as she has an evil eye which will cause ruin to the persons or objects that she perceives. Another reason, she could not spend time with her son was because of her work at unexpected times. Women have never been considered equal to men. Men have always looked down upon women as the weaker sex. The ruling of the male in the family can be considered as a patriarchy. All the decisions about women, children, and property are taken by the head of the family. Sometimes this authority creates a feeling of superiority to the male head of the family. The head considers him superior to women. This type of attitude creates problems for female existence. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as —a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (19). So she asks her husband to take her away from the place so that they can lead a peaceful and happy life. But he is indifferent and insensitive to her feelings and thoughts like a typical Indian man. 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....They say I have the evil eye. The little ones die of summer heat, winter's cold, and smallpox, don't they? And is it any fault of mine? Why can't you see it, Gangaputta, why do I think of throwing up the job again and again? When I guard the graves through the night, my breasts burst with milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by himself. I can't, can't stay

away from him. (82). As a woman, she thinks that she is not fit to the job. The dead infant she buries in the graveyard seems to be her own son's image as an illusion. But Mahindra says that nobody can keep the dead infants with themselves after they die. Thus to him, she does a great and useful job and he fails to empathise with his wife as a mother which shows his lack of attentiveness, care and responsibility as a husband.

After getting her mother's story, Bhagirath wanted to see his mother. But Chandidasi refused to meet her son. But, Bhagirath came forward with tears and said "She's not Bayen. She is my mother". Because she too feels that her evilness may affect her own son. So, she turned her from him. Meanwhile, Bhagirath watched her face in the shadows in the pond and also used to talk with her. So, Bhagirath used to go to the railway tracks to see his mother every evening. He witnessed only the crying sound of his mother. So, he asked the reason for his mother crying. She answered that she cried out only because of her loneliness and also because she was afraid of being in the darkness. But, Chandidasi advised him to go back home. But, on the same day, Chandidasi happens to meet some men in the village who are trying to place some bamboo sticks on the railway track to rob the train. Meanwhile, she tries to alert them. So, she waves her hands which represent them to stop the train. Finally, she stops the train. But, she was killed by the train. She made a great effort and also sacrificed her life to save others life. So, the authorities decided to present an award to Chandidasi for her bravery. Bhagirath reconciled his mother's originality and also her own identity. Finally, Chandidasi became a mother, wife, woman and also a human being. According to Charlotte Bronte "I am no bird, and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will". It made her lose her own identity of

Chandidasi. But, she fights for her identity among the villagers and also begins to search for her identity whether she must be a woman, daughter, wife, or mother. According to Naomi Wolf "Most urgently, women's identity must be premised upon our 'beauty' so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air" (85). The play describes how the ignorance and superstitious beliefs of people may lead the life of an innocent woman into misdeeds. The superstitious belief made Chandidasi as a scapegoat for the society. From beginning to end, Chandidasi attempted to find her identity among the villagers. The responsibility for the tragic life of Gangadasi woman must be in the hands of the society. So, people should have awareness of social responsibilities. It must be attained only through the way of providing equal education for all over the country.

She leads a life of living dead and finally, she has killed herself in order to save the lives of the passengers on the train. Her transformation from a mother to witch or mother to Bayen is again transformed to a state of divinity and Chandidasi can be rightly called a "holy mother" because of her selfless sacrifice. The sacrifice of the Chandidasi is recognized by the Guard and appreciates her bravery in saving the lives of people at the cost of her life. In the words of the Guard, GUARD. (hands his torch over to a colleague, and begins taking notes). She's been brave. A brave deed. The Railways are sure to award her a medal, posthumous of course, and cash reward too.... who's she? (91) Shashi, the brother-in-law of Chandidasi replies to the guard her Dome's woman. The husband of Bayen, Malindar, and everybody come forward at the end the play to give her identity which she could not receive as long as she is alive.

SHASHI. (looks around at everyone, clears his throat). She's a Dome woman, sir, one of us.

Bhagirath, in hurt wonder, looks at Shashi first, then at his father)

MALINDAR. (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 or the award.

MALINDAR. Sir, I...I'm (He breaks into weeping.)

BHAGIRATH. (steps forward.) Let me tell you. You can write it down.

GUARD. Who are you, boy?

BHAGIRATH. (gathers courage). She's my mother.

GUARD. Mother? (98)

When Bhagirath sees his mother lying dead, he confesses with pride and love for his mother in front of the Railway officer who wants to reward the bravery of the woman posthumously.

BHAGIRATH. Yes Sir. (The Guard takes it all down) My name Bhagirath Gangaputta... My father the revered Malindar Gangaputta...residence, Domoti, village Dahahti.... My mother (pauses for a while, then very distinctly)...my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi (suddenly breaks into loud weeping)... my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, sir, Not a Bayen. She was never a Bayen. My mother.

Mahasweta Devi divulges the greatness, bravery and courage of Chandidasi when she runs towards the moving train to avoid a major accident that is about to be caused by the robbers robbing the train. Thus the playwright evidences the nature of a typical Indian woman through Chandidasi in her play Bayen. In critical situations, women never think about themselves but rather around her and are even ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. Despite

belonging to a reputed community, Chandidasi faces various challenges in her life. She was denied not only her rights but also those which she deserved as a human being. She willingly sacrificed herself for the sake of society. Society rewarded her after her death. D.Murali Manohar states: An Indian woman has been either venerated as a goddess or rejected as a siren. The modern Indian woman has to compete against these two extreme images. She is striving to lead the life of a normal human being with normal desires (22). Only at the end of the play, the villagers were ready to accept her as a normal human being. Even it has been attempted only by her son, Bhagirath. Mahasweta Devi's play depicts the unspeakable truth of ladies' wretchedness and their capacity of opposition and perseverance. The play warns not to evade women from their society and families who too has a right to live in this community. The identity of a person is not something that can be neglected and suppressed. Moreover, a woman can never be transformed from her feminine subject hood to that of witchcraft. Throughout the world, women are victimized in every civilized or subaltern society. Thus gender discrimination is the root cause of all the adverse impacts like women's subordination, subjugation, and oppression and subsequently, it paves the way to social justice for women in the entire world. Though Chandidasi accepts her social identity, she is always in search of her own identity and quest for self-identity because her womanhood and motherhood are always insulted and tortured by society.

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