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Reconsidering the Unheard Screech and The Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen*

Ms. Nusrat Chowdhary

Assistant Professor in English

Govt Degree College for Women,

Udhampur (J&K)

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to shape out the historical developments & new connotation of one of the most disputed & widely conversed concepts in post-colonial theory. The study embarks upon the present day implications of the subaltern notion. This study is intended to argue the position of women “the other” in the patriarchal society with the help of *Bayen* written by Mahasweta Devi, a prominent writer & social activist. The play *Bayen* (1976) is one of the best works through which she aims to portray the pangs of sufferings that a woman undergoes & how a woman is thrown at the margin of the society in a patriarchal system. The play demonstrates the transformation of a working class women into a public scapegoat & ultimately subaltern women with no bodily or social agony. This paper aims to discuss the very problem of “gender discrimination” which is prevalent in the male dominant society that further leads to the “question of self”. The Bengali writer & activist, Mahasweta Devi, through her plays aims to present the true picture of male dominant society & the status, the role played by woman that is nothing more than an instrument to suit the whims of the social milieu. Mahasweta Devi, through her play *Bayen* puts forth the false beliefs, ideologies associated with the traditional, superstitious & orthodox society, the torments that the oppressed (protagonist) has to undergo in the society. The play brings into picture the social evils, imperfections & flaws against women that are persistent in the society. The play even describes the marginalization of women, discrimination on the basis of gender, the different set norms for both the genders in the society & the behavioural aspects in a patriarchal society. Through the character of Chandidasi, the writer talks about the oppressed, infact Mahasweta Devi through her writings has tried to give voice to the voiceless, she has talked about how the oppressed are even devoid of their basic rights as a human being. Her writings call for a social change, giving due importance & equal status to the marginalized as well.

Keywords- *Patriarchal, Underprivileged, Subalternity, Victimized, Instigated, Vocation*

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Introduction

A woman is a woman because of the strict age old belief weaved around her by the patriarchal society from the very beginning of human race. There are various social flaws & malpractices flowing in the veins of patriarchal society which are a curse for the women. Mahasweta Devi describes the miserable plight of women through her prominent works. A woman is subjugated every now & then in a patriarchal society. Mahasweta Devi in her plays, does not write as a feminist, but as a human being who opens up the conditions & the trauma that a woman faces. Mahasweta Devi through her pen has prosecuted for the right of equality for the underprivileged subaltern & the oppressed section of society.

No doubt, women are born free, but all around they are found deep down in the clutches of patriarchal society, they are chained infact. Her status & position is only that of a homemaker & that of one who is subjugated even within the four walls. She cannot question, infact she is the one who is questioned, & is bound to answer as well. She is supposed to follow the dictates given to her. Since ancient times, man has acquired & occupied a superior status to a woman in the society. Simone de Beauvoir in the "The Second Sex" has highlighted the subaltern status & the victimized position of a woman in the society & she opines, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman". It means the identity of the woman is socially constructed in the patriarchal set up. A woman is not born as a woman, but it is the society that makes her so. Biology does not determine what makes a woman; a woman- a woman learns her role from man & from others in the society as well.

Mahasweta Devi is a prominent voice, prosecuting for the right of equality & justice of underprivileged subaltern & marginalized section of society. Mahasweta Devi through her works explicates the problems of the women & their pangs of suffering too. Her works exemplify the subordination of women at the hands of patriarchal society. The subaltern is a technical term for a certain kind of dispossessed person. It is a person, , who fits within the model of oppressor/oppressed as the being so marginalized as to not even have the "voice" of the oppressed. A subaltern is generally defined as "subordinated being incapable of taking decisions or leading an independent life". Mahasweta Devi through her writings describes the harsh realities of the human life. In an interview she says: "I am a woman, & I am writing. But I am not writing of women alone. What I am writing, in most of my books, it is about class exploitation, the underclass is exploited, men, women together. Of course, women get the worse part of it, but not always. Definitely I am interested in women's position, women's thought. But I am more interested in active work." (The Book Review, 33)

Woman as a Goddess; Is Nothing But a Myth

Women absorb what the society imposes on them & try to live accordingly. The very concept of woman as an angel or a goddess is nothing but a myth. The qualities of an idealized woman & her innocence has made her a mere tool to suit the needs & whims of the

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society. These qualities have infact confined woman inside the four walls of home & transformed them to speechless creatures who willingly carry on the burden of patriarchy. Patriarchy diminishes a woman's belief in her self-worth & has made her believe that her inferiority is pre-destined. The immediacy & horror of the plight of subaltern women is present in the works of Mahasweta Devi & particularly in her work *Bayen*. The play depicts the social milieu, the age old beliefs & superstitions & the very status of woman. The play further describes many aspects of gendered subalternity. The aim of this paper is to analyse & interpret the character of Chandidasi, the protagonist of this play, as a victim at the hands of patriarchal society.

In the play, the writer puts forth the problem of illiterate, orthodox & superstitious subaltern Indian society & the oppression & subjugation of women. The writer through this play & through the character of Chandidasi brings into light the miserable plight & the various evils & social flaws against women. In this play, the protagonist Chandidasi, a virtuous, wise & courageous lady of a reputed ancestry of her society is separated from her husband & son when she is accused of being a Bayen, a women who breast feeds dead children & has the ability to curse others. The play portrays how Chandidasi faces trauma after being accused of being a Bayen. Chandidasi is in a way searching her ownself consistently & at last her identity is restored by the society after her death, but it was too late; for when she was alive, she kept struggling & retaliating , as she was not a Bayen, but a woman. "There's really no such thing as the "voiceless"; there are only the deliberately silenced or preferably unheard." Arundati Roy

A Woman is Moulded and Shaped by Society: Gender Prejudice

It is really pathetic to observe that we live in a society where women are eulogized to the status of goddess but at the same her chastity is many a times questioned, she is forced, beaten & threatened as well. She is no longer secure. She has no identity of her own; it is the male dominant society that decides her fate & destiny as well. The position & status of a woman is fixed in a frame formed for her by the society. Her status & position is overshadowed & overpowered by the strong opinion weaved against her. In a patriarchal system the very existence of woman has collapsed at the cost of social norms & customs. She is forced to accept the unacceptable, her voice is suppressed & she is made to serve the society. They are considered as inferior beings & are always looked down in the society. Since ages, they have been crushed in the pool of male dominant society. A woman is not free & secure as a man. She is a victim to both physical & psychological affliction.

The identity of woman is always identified & explicated by the society rather than herself & the society is always lead by men folk. She is made to believe what society thinks of her & not what she thinks of her own. All over the world, especially in western society, there are three kinds of discrimination- class, race & gender, which Claudia termed as "triple

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oppression". But if we look in Eastern Indian aura there are multiple layers of discrimination –on the basis of caste, creed, religion, place, color, class etc prevalent in our society. No two individuals are alike. Every individual & thing is different from one another. In other words, where differences lead to discrimination & discrimination provides a platform for oppression & exploitation. Among these discriminations "gender discrimination" is universally prevalent in all cultures & societies. It does not matter, whatever be the class, creed, place, religion, whether it is subaltern or civilized society, women faces this discrimination equally & universally which further decides her fate. Moreover we are familiar with the fact that sex is biologically determined, while gender is socially constructed.

Further the society has created a particular way of behavior, a pattern of life & has even allotted particular duties to both the gender. The men & women are thus compelled to perform their allotted roles & duties in a fixed way. The voice of the "other" that is of the women, remains silent & absent in decision making, no matter how capable the lady is. In a patriarchal set up, the women is always dependent on men for freedom, honour, money & status that are before her marriage on her Father & after marriage on her husband. She is considered fragile, weak & timid as well.

The play describes Chandidasi as the one who suffers the utmost despite of belonging to a reputed ancestry, Chandidasi is deprived of her rights & also those which she deserved as a human being. The society separates her from the family but instead grants her food, clothes & other necessary things to live, but later the worth of charity is revealed by Chandidasi. She says: "It is only half a kilo of rice, a fistful of lentil, fifty grams of oil & a pinch of salt, is that enough for a week?" She has only one sari to wear & very little stuff to survive. She was not allowed to meet or interact with anybody not even with her husband & son. Even if she went somewhere she was supposed to carry a canister to inform people so that they get a stimulus to leave the place. Though Chandidasi was free & independent woman before her marriage & proudly performed her ancestral job of child burial, but after her marriage things changed in a bitter way. The dark shadow of her past never left her. She was deprived from the right of humanity as it was believed that "Once a Bayen, she's no longer a human".

Thus it shows that a woman has to fight first for her survival & only after that she can think about her identity or dignity. The irony of the fact lies that the fate of woman is always determined by the social structure which surrounds her. She is compelled to accept the constraints & restrictions of the conditions because of the fear of violent reprisal from the community, all of who collectively have control over her life. Her subaltern status denies her access to her child & thus restrains her to fulfil the role of a mother.

In a conservative society, woman is always victimized by the source of evils & so many myths are attached to her in a wrong way which undermines their capacity to prove

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themselves. Chandidasi is blamed for the death of her son-in-law's little child named "Tukni", whom she herself loved a lot. Her son-in-law, named Shashi, blamed that her daughter, who was suffering with chicken pox, died because Chandi inquired about her "how's Tukni"? Malinder no doubt takes her side most of the time against the society but later, when Chandi was forced to bury Tukni's dead body & she goes to the grave of Tukni in the midnight to guard the grave, the society blames her for being a "Bayen" who tends to eat or hurt the child's body. She gives them all explanations, but no one believes her, not even her husband. Instead he questions her, "Why is your sari dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling?" It should have been very easy for Malinder & anyone else to understand the reason of her being in such a condition. At the most difficult time of her life, where she needed the support of her husband & society as well she was humiliated, blamed as being a Bayen. Malinder at this time was totally dipped in the colour of patriarchy & blames her too. Her dream of having a happy life was scattered in the reflection of pseudo –social norms & customs. Initially Chandidasi opposes to it, but finding it useless to retaliate any further, accepts the tag given to her.

Victim of Social Inequality

Chandi, when goes to her husband describing her poor condition, Malinder covers his child's as well as his own eyes on seeing her because it was believed that if a Bayen is with open hair she can be harmful for anyone. But in fact, Chandi tells him that she has no oil to put in her hair to comb it. Further Bagirath tells his father that his second mother always says to him, "Bagirath come back straight from school & run whenever you hear the canister clanging. Otherwise she'll suck your life's blood. Being a male element of suspicion on women was always innate in his mind & when he was instigated/ provoked by the society, his beliefs perpetuated & he goes with the society against his wife and lastly without even hearing her explanation and considering on his part an unfair judgement given against her declares her as a Bayen, thus Chandidasi becomes a victim of social injustice. Such norms, orthodox & superstitious beliefs made her condition worse & complicated & further made life a curse for her.

Great Effort Intended for Uniqueness and for Identity

The question of identity is much attached with a woman because her identity is always identified explicated by the society rather than her ownself & society as we all know is lead by men folk. A woman is made to believe what society thinks of her rather than what

She actually is. The play depicts Chandi struggling for her own identity as a "self". But the irony of the fact is altogether different as her identity is always transformed according to social acceptance. Chandi identity was at last restored by her own son. Before marriage she was leading a free & independent life. She even continues her vocation of burying the child after marriage very proudly. Like Chandi when meets Malinder for the first time says, "It's

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me for myself". But after marriage she wears a new identity of a wife & mother, at this stage of life she finds it difficult to continue with her ancestral task of burying the children because of being a child bearing mother. Though various myths & legends idealizing & eulogizing women as idols of sacrifice, money, love are associated, but in fact women is a mere tool to suit the purpose of man or society. Chandidasi is declared as a bayen only because of her vocation, to bury the children, but when she refuses to do this work anymore, she was forced by the instrument of emotional exploitation. Her brother-in-law, Shashi, who already blamed her as a Bayen pretended to give all respect to her vocation & ancestors. He says: "If you don't burn them, their soul will remain hovering far from their destination". At the time of Kalu Dome the work of funeral was allotted to man & women being conceived as emotional & more attached to child was allotted the task of burying the children. Malinder, being a male & little literate, got the govt. job in a morgue & respected place in the society, but Chandidasi, besides being a descendent of Kalu Dome, got an image of Bayen.

Thus it is quite clear that the society has different set norms, for male & female. It is only after her death at the end of the play, when Bagirath, her son publicly decries her treatment that the villagers are willing to accept that she is not a Bayen. The affirmation of her motherhood posthumously removes her status of Bayen, but of course, at this point it is too late to have any significance. Radha Chakrabarthy remarks in her scholarly critique on Mahasweta Devi's mother: "Her (Chandi) traditional maternal qualities, such as love, care & protectiveness are play off against the grotesque, travesty of motherhood that the Bayen is supposed to represent". The social structure is indeed the only cause of women's oppression that we are in need to correct. Chandidasi in the play faces the "social-capital-punishment" implicated on her by the society. Chandidasi, whom society cursed as a bayen, was not an irrational, superstitious lady. She was a virtuous lady having wisdom, but living her life as a bayen she faces brutal oppression & repeated suppression by the society. Despite of her belonging to a reputed ancestry in the community of Kalu Dome, she faces severe challenges at several levels. She is deprived of her social rights. It is remarkable & worth noting that Chandi, after being declared as a bayen, faces oppression & undergoes trauma not by the upper strata of the society or class but in her own community & by her own people.

Conclusion

"The subaltern is very often, though not quite always, gendered female in this work...because women the world over are still structurally subordinated to men". Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, the woman's role model, writes, "duties are fixed in a society according to the requirements of the society". In a male dominant society she is compelled to forget her own identity. Her status is overshadowed by the strong opinion weaved against her by the orthodox society. In this conservatively structured patriarchal system, men folk has

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subjugated & oppressed the very identity & existence of women because all the social norms & customs have been created by men. In a patriarchal society, it is the society & man who creates the do's & don'ts & woman becomes a blind bearer of these norms & traditions in the absence of rationalism.

The need of the hour is to recreate the social system where woman also gets rationality & intellectuality as well as emotions & empathy & gets equally involved in the process of constructing the social norms, customs & traditions. In a patriarchal social structure, society has two perspectives for women. First she is a symbol of sacrifice, love, empathy, and is revered equivalent to that of a goddess as Gayatri Spivak says, "as the object of gaze from below" & secondly ... but not equal as human being....but now the question arises what the identity of a woman should be? Being a imminent part of the society an individual could not be separated from the society. The identity of woman should be ascribed as a social self where her self would be secured & preserved. Simon de Beauvoir rightly observes, "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity, they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways, but they do not succeed in living completely the life of a human being". (the second)

By presenting the plight of subalternity through an active engagement with an audience, there is hope that the plight of these women will create a considerable drive for social change, as often, those who view these texts are complicit in the subalternity of these women. The play conveys the exploitation & cruel disciplines associated with subalternity & are thus essential for any understanding of the plight of these disempowered individuals; the subaltern.

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