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BAYEN – A STUDY OF THE MARGINALIZED

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ABSTRACT

The play *Bayen* of Mahasweta Devi speaks about the subjugation of the women in the patriarchal society. Chandidasi is the care taker of the graves and she assumed this responsibility with great pride from her father Kaludome, after his death. She married to Malinder 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 exhibited extreme affection to the daughter of her Sister-in-law, who was buried in the graveyard. Out of affection she took the dead body of the child from the burial ground and expressing her affection, and this is noticed by the Shashi and the villagers and labeled her as a Bayen. And this blame is strengthened by the society and her husband Malinder too. Her extreme affectionate attitude towards children made her to be labeled 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, she wants to go to Malinder to complain him about advanced and daring steps of their son and even wants to prevent him from these advancements. While going to Malinder she happened to overhear the conversation of the robber's destructive plans of obstructing the train and causing harm to people. In order to save the people she goes to the direction to the approaching the train and gave up her life. Her sacrifice is recognized after her death and was honored.

Key words: marginalized, posthumously, patriarchal society, bayen, accuse .

The term 'marginalized' means 'to make a person or group feel less important or less powerful' according to the Oxford Dictionary. Thus this term is applicable to the group of people who are not only discriminated in the society, but also whose minimum rights are denied for the existence on this Earth by the Oppressors.

The story *Bayen* discloses the oppression of a woman. The element 'gender subalternity' is emphasized in the patriarchal society. People in the remote areas especially, where medical awareness is lacking, place firm belief on superstitions and being the staunch believers of the superstitions they do

not hesitate going to the extent of taking anyone's life. Mahasweta Devi criticizes the hypocritical society that prioritizes more superstition than the human being itself. Samik Bandyopadhyay states that "her mothers are too earthy and emotionally charged to bear overtones of any mystical-mythical or archetypal motherhood. They are invariably located within a network of relationships defining their personalities into absolute clarity." (2008, xii) The play *Bayen*, advocates about the minimum rights of women that are taken away by social forces. These social forces have separated mother from her son in the patriarchal 'society. Chadidasi

Gangadasi is separated from her family i.e. from her husband and a son by the superstitious society, after being labeled as a Bayen. In the words of villagers, Bayen is a woman who breastfeeds deceased children, raises them from the grave, has the power to curse others. Nevertheless, they believe that killing the Bayen brings bad fortune to them. Thus they have exiled her from the society to let her live in the shovel of the outskirts of the Village. Chandi's presence is considered ominous, as she is branded a witch. People are horrified and alarmed not to face her looks as they are evil. Her appearance may cause to 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." (Dictionary of the History of Ideas, 1973, 521)

In the play *Bayen*, Mahasweta Devi uses the dramatic device of a character in the present enacting a happening in the past, Malinder acting out his love affair with Chandi and the branding of Chandi as a Bayen. In the words of Samik Bandhyopadhyaya,

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. In the one scene in which the son confronts the witch-mother who herself fears the confrontation more than the son, Mahasweta Devi touches the larger space of the social forces that separate mother and son in male dominated system. In the final acknowledgement of the mother, there is thus the assertion of a value that is too often denied or ignored the natural commitment that binds mother and son together. (Introduction, xiii)

The play opens with the Bayen singing a lullaby from her hovel outside the village, where she is confined to live. 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. She draws in with her string with a canister tied to its end rattling and

changing along the floor. She wears a filthy red sari without the customary border, her hair disheveled, she wears no jewellery.

Chandidasi, the Bayen though hails from a reputed ancestry in their community of Kalu Dome, confronts many ordeals at several levels. Pathetically she is denied not only of the social rights but also deprived of those rights which deserve as a human being, after she labeled as a Bayen by the society. 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?" (p.75)

On the pretext of superstition she is exiled from the society. But ridiculously, she too gets convinced psychologically and starts believing herself as a Bayen. The following words support this point of view, where she instructs Malinder to let her presence ineffective.

BAYEN. (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. (Malinder tries 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 Malinder about the food that is provided inadequately. In her words;

BAYEN. What do they give me in their hamper? It's only half a kilo of rice, a fistful of lentil, fifty grimes of oil and pinch of salt, is that enough for a week? (77)

When Malinder insisted her to take money, she expressed her grief. "Will you take money? Money?" Bayen replies, "Who'll sell me anything?" (77). Terrible humiliation faced by the Bayen is revealed in these sentences. Chandidasi is labeled as a Bayen and discriminated in humiliating way. This discrimination, irrespective of caste, creed, gender etc., leads to the creation of the victims since; it dominates always the lower strata.

Women are victimized in every civilized or subaltern society everywhere in the world. Thus gender discrimination is the root cause for all the adverse impacts like women's subordination, subjugation and oppression and subsequently it

paves the way to social justice of women in the entire world. Thus this situation justifies the sentence that women are most marginalized creation of humanity.

Chandidasi has only one sari to wear and very little amount of provisions of basic need to survive. Her son Bhagirath startled to learn that his mother does not even have proper food and clothing. He asks his father, "My mother? Without clothes? Without food? Without oil in her hair?"(78). She is deprived of the minimum freedom to meet her husband and even her son. She has to carry along with her canister to inform people so that they get a stimulus to leave 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 to the extent.

The progress of the women is hampered and also their capacity is undermined in the social system that is structured conservatively. This conservative society functions like fetters to their feet when they are to take the flight in the new horizon of achievements.

She hails from the privileged ancestry of Kaludome. She accepted her ancestral job of child burial with great pride. She gets married to Malinder and has a son Bhagirath. Thus she has a blessed family life. But unfortunately she has fallen into clutches of the beliefs of superstitions, where she is labeled as a Bayen as she accused for the death of her son-in-law's daughter 'Tukni', whom she loves a lot. But miserably she blamed by her son-in-law Shashi for the death of Tukni, since she is found suffering from chicken-pox, "how is Tukni?" (84) And thus strike Tukni with the secret arrow of Bayen. Chandidasi now is reluctant to continue her job of cremating children in the burial ground she a suckling kid at home. But she is earnestly pleaded by Shashi her brother-in-law to perform the rites of cremation for the last time for Tukni sake. Accepting their request she goes and performs the rites and guarding the grave. Consequently she indulges in the thoughts of her son in a way talks to herself and thus allowing the villagers to label her as Bayen.

Several times Malinder, Chandidasi's husband took the side of his wife going against the society, but at last he too started blaming Chandi

when she became ready to cremate the dead body of Tukni, as she is pressurized by the society. She goes to grave of Tukni in the midnight to guard the grave, society charges her for being a 'Bayen' or witch who tends to eat or hurt the child's body. She makes the efforts in vain to convince the people with her explanations. She questions Malinder and asks him to take back his words but she helpless in front of the society. Malinder questions her, "Why your sari is dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling?"(87). It is a matter of general perception and common sense that for a child bearing woman sari gets wet with milk. But the elements of narrow mindedness and spirit authoritarianism of the male in the patriarchal society shuts the mind of the men and stimulates the situation in a wrong way.

MALINDER. (Shouting at the top of his voice, crying heartrendingly at the same time) I.... Malinder Gangaputta....strike my drum (beats the drum fanatically....to declare that my wife has turned into a Bayen, a Bayen! (87)

When she needs the support of her husband, he too is dyed with the dye of the patriarchal society. And she obliged to lead the solitude life. Thus she becomes the silent sufferer.

SHASHI. Tukni, my Tukni, ah! She has small pox, so I took her to the temple of shitala, and soaked her in the holy waters of the sacred water-hole there, smeared her all over with sacred mu, made her drink the sacred water, and then, after all that my little darling was dead even before the evening star was out. Bou! Why did you ask, 'How is Tukni and strike her with the secret arrow' (83-84)

As the people are not sophisticated they are not aware of utilizing the medical facilities. Children are to be vaccinated to have immunity to withstand when system is attacked by diseases. Children die because of ignorance especially ignorant in vaccinating their children.

When she is declared as a Bayen the people of the village would have killed her but they could not do so since they firmly believe it causes harm to kill Bayen. Any strange thing or event can be attributed to the 'witches' and they can be killed

with popular 'approval'... Majority of the victims is women and it is estimated that 600 women are killed annually on this charge." (Indian Express, 1991, 4). In the words of Malinder;

MALINDER. 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. (Frowns, speaks hastily). They set up a hovel for her beside the railway track, every Saturday they leave a hamper of food for her at her door step. Once a year they give her two saris and two gaamaccha (87)

The woman in the patriarchal society is suppressed to that extent, when she accepted the domination too, to be the part of the life. Bayen is separated and exiled from the society for no practical and genuine reason. Instead of opposing, she too, herself feels insecure and scared to talk to her own son Bhagirath. She avoids even to gaze at him directly. She wants to complain to Malinder about Bhagirath's approach to her, sneaking out of the house as she firmly believes talking to Bayen may bring bad luck upon him.

As she is on the way to complain Malinder against Bhagirath, she overhears the destructive plot of the robbers. They have piled up the bamboo sticks in order to obstruct the train and rob it. As soon as they learn the approach of the Bayen towards their direction, getting frightened, they took to heels. But Chandidasi endeavors seriously to prevent this disaster. She goes on screaming till the roar of the train drowns her voice and train's lights swallows her up, followed by sudden darkness. Pause. The flash light of the engine comes up to reveal Chandidasi lying dead with the villagers all around, all talking together in a low hum, till the voice of the Train Guard silences them.

The sacrifice of the Chandidasi is recognized by the Guard and appreciated her for her bravery in saving the life 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. And the husband of Bayen, Malindr everybody comes forward at the end the play to give her identity which she could not receive as long as she is alive.

The following extract from the text reveals this fact;

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 any one or the award.

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

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

GUARD. Who are you, boy?

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

GUARD. Mother?

BHAGIRATH. Yes Sir. (*The Guard takes it all down*) My name Bhagirath Gangaputta...

My father the revered Malindar Gangaputta...residence, Domoti, village Dahanti.... 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.

Thus Chandidasi endures patiently the label as the best testimony for the suppression and subjugation of women in the patriarchal society. Gita Aravamudan says, "As compared to men, women become the softest targets for the great upholders of the traditional values." (The Hindu, 1993, 10)Unfortunately, she could get due recognition as human being after her death, and she rewarded posthumously.

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