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Fear Psychosis & Witch-Cults

Analysing the Plight of the Tribal Woman and her Cultural Import under Colonial Rule in Mahasweta Devi's "Bayen"

Rajeshwari Guha

Abstract

Being a woman is difficult, especially in a lower-caste, tribal community that fervently holds onto its superstitions and unscientific spiritual beliefs in an attempt to have a semblance of its organic identity. Mahasweta Devi, in *Bayen*, looks at sectarian violence and its repercussions on women from a lens that is often neglected in pre and postcolonial discourse, that is, oppression within and by the oppressed. The narrative unveils the community's desperate attempt to maintain social equilibrium through scapegoating and ritualistic purification, epitomizing the lingering effects of colonialism and the failure of decolonization to address the plight of the marginalized. This paper then attempts to highlight the plight of the tribal woman and the creation of the taboo of witch cults in such societies through various social commentaries and essays by the writer. Using Dev Nathan's 'states of pollution', a hypothesis will be made regarding the ethical diversions and intentions behind such practices while looking at G. Aloysius et al.'s bodily conception of social othering, especially, of subaltern women. The paper concludes with its incisive underscoring of the urgent need to amplify the

Keywords

- caste
- tribal women
- Bayen
- colonialism
- subaltern women

voices of the subaltern, particularly women from marginalized communities, whose struggles remain obscured and overlooked. Devi's narrative, thus, serves as a poignant call to action, challenging readers to confront the complexities of caste, gender, and power in postcolonial India and beyond.

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* revolves around Chandidasi Gangadasi, the daughter of the Kalu Dom lineage, who was given the task of burying the dead and guarding the ghats. The story's larger milieu surrounds the Dom community among the Santhal tribe (in West Bengal), considered Untouchables due to their lower caste and ancestrally appointed 'duties' (or the work they are supposed to do) by the Manusmriti. Devi, here, attempts to create a rather magnificent, mythical backdrop against which Chandidasi is described, and it is perhaps a way of creating a jarring contrast to her condition after she is communally ostracised. Kalu Dom is considered to have given shelter to King Harishchandra after the fall of his empire, who gifted him the ownership of "all the burning ghats of the world" (Devi 33) upon regaining his kingdom. Thus, we see a mythologising of caste practices, a religious attempt to justify social hierarchy, and the obligation of a certain group to carry on their so-called 'assigned' work.

This duty falls on Chandidasi after her father passes away; she is an only child, "a fair girl with light eyes and reddish hair" (Devi 32), with an indomitable will, a fearless attitude, and a blazing personality. She buried dead children (as was the custom in the community: children under five years of age could not be cremated) and protected the bodies from predators. But motherhood changes things for her: "her breasts ached with milk if she stayed too long in the graveyard" (Devi 34); she is no longer fearless, now constantly fearing for her son Bhagirath and the other children of the community. Despite her rather caring nature, she is the centre of gossip and jealousy: her husband Malinder works a sub-divisional job at the municipality and receives profits from selling bones to would-be doctors, and this gives him enough financial security with which he "gave her striped saris to wear and silver jewellery. I [he] fed her, I [he] rubbed oil into her hair, her body…" (Devi 28) Such a luxurious way of living did not suit the Dom woman, keeper of dead children. Moreover, her haughty temperament in the first instance, when she faces insults from her community when she asks to quit her job, infuriates those who occupy the higher positions in the tribal hierarchy. How dare a woman of her status disobey the service she is bound to provide to her village, which has been in her bloodline for years?

Chandi quite arrogantly ignores such insults; however, the dilemma between the gift of motherhood and the obligation of carrying on her forefather's profession soon catches up to her. She begins to hallucinate and hears "dead children crying in their graves" (Devi 37), and subsequently, she finds herself in the cemetery, covering the children's burial with thorn thickets to keep the wild animals away. Upon finding this, the village community calls her a 'bayen' or a child-predating witch, and her husband, intoxicated and in rage, agrees to such a label. Thus, a woman is sentenced to a life of isolation and agony on the whims of a community confused by its fragmented, powerless condition and that of a husband who

gives in to the tribal customs and fails to protect his woman. Finally, Chandi becomes a hero, a deified woman by the outside colonial force: the British administration of Indian railways, who confer an award of bravery upon her for successfully preventing a railway accident by sacrificing her own life.

Bayen, a text written in postcolonial India—at a time when people were blinded by their new freedom—made a revolutionary attempt to expose the deep-seated gendered superstition that exists in rural societies, where the wind of liberation has not made much of a difference, socially or economically. Highlighting the complexity of the subaltern experience, this paper will illustrate the layered nature of violence perpetrated within one's own community: a marginalised few who already face oppression from the outside.

Review of Literary Scholarship

This paper attempts to underscore the layered, systematic oppression faced by subaltern women in their own rural societies that are riddled with rampant caste practices. For this purpose, the research uses Dev Nathan's three states of 'pollution' in tribal societies to explore the subversive intent behind such practices. G. Aloysius, Jayshree P. Mangubhai, and Joel G. Lee's take on the woman's body also features in the discussion for delving into its main purpose of exploring the other with the small 'o' under the Other, the subaltern woman. In its denouement, there is recourse taken to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Outside in the Teaching Machine for an incisive call-to-action for active efforts in providing a voice (or the means to a voice) to the subaltern, women from marginalised communities, in this case.

Witch cults and Scapegoating of Women

Women are historically exhausted– of being forced to be conformers or being demonised if they go against the grain, ritualistically ostracised for menstruating yet celebrated for birthing a child, looked down upon if they stand up for themselves yet called heroes if they stand up for their men. Mahasweta Devi's short story *Bayen* is an impervious take on the duality of communal violence and the plight of the women who stand face-to-face with it. Devi is a writer of the lesser-known, the obscured; her writings have sociological, archival purposes and are not simply a devotion to literary aesthetics– a much-needed kind in the canon of Indian literature. Devi, in *Bayen*, looks at sectarian violence and its repercussions on women from a lens often neglected in pre and postcolonial discourse, that is, oppression within and by the oppressed.

The witch taboo in *Bayen* is an effective reflection of the intersection of patriarchy, superstition and malevolent caste practices, wherein, a tabooed practice is used to silence women who deviate from socially accepted norms. It is simply a tool to enforce conformity within a patriarchal society that does not want its women to become too powerful. In a way, the Santhal community projects its fears and anxieties of death, childbirth, and impurity upon Chandi, perhaps, as a psychological attempt to purge themselves of the negative 'affect'. Like most caste practices, Chandi's treatment at the hands of her community is ironic since her assigned work, the burial of the dead, is an essential element of community life, and yet she is also feared and despised because of it. Additionally,

Chandi Dasi's power as a nurturer and protector (her role in childbirth and caring for children) is reversed when she is labelled a 'bayen'. The label turns her from a life-giver into a symbol of death and destruction, reinforcing the patriarchal belief that women can either be maternal figures or destructive forces.

Moreover, the story highlights how women's power, particularly in roles associated with life and death, can be perceived as a threat to male-dominated structures. Chandi Dasi's control over death (through her occupation) and life (through childbirth) positions her in a powerful but dangerous role, one that the patriarchy seeks to control by labelling her a witch. The community's use of the witch label thus serves to neutralize female power and reinforce patriarchal control. As hinted at earlier, Chandi is a very convenient scapegoat for the community to explain their own problems – allowing them to avoid confronting the harsh realities of life, such as the vulnerability of infants and the uncontrollable aspects of death. By blaming Chandi Dasi, they create a simple explanation for complex issues, alleviating their guilt and fear. The witch label thus serves as a psychological release valve for the community, a way to avoid deeper introspection or responsibility for societal ills. For instance, when children die in the village, Chandi Dasi is accused of being the cause, despite having no control over these tragedies. This projection of blame onto her shows how deeply the community relies on superstitious beliefs to explain misfortune and tragedy, rather than addressing systemic issues like poverty, malnutrition, or inadequate healthcare.

Community 'Pollution' and its Three States

The Sonadanga Palasi village, then, finds the perfect scapegoat to maintain the Dom community's natural equilibrium, to purge themselves (apparently) of the suspicion shown in their tribal faith and cultish beliefs now that colonisation has ushered in the comparatively scientific modes of Western education. Dev Nathan writes about the three 'states' of 'pollution' in tribal societies, which they undertake to purify via ritualistic practices. Broadly speaking, the three states are intrinsic, occupational, and situational pollution and these are based on the states of menstruation/ pregnancy (situational), birth/ caste (intrinsic), and death (occupational). Chandi already fulfills the first two: she is a fertile, menstruating woman, and she has borne a child (note how Devi highlights her breasts full of milk multiple times in the text, which is both celebrated and sexualised in society). Meanwhile, she is a "pollutant" of the third kind as well vis-à-vis her profession as a gravetender. It stands to reason, then, that Chandi is very well suited to be used as a scapegoat, a way for the community to purify itself of its stigma of untouchability and other casteist afflictions (Bose 137).

Chandi's caste dictates that she must deal with the disposal of the dead, a task viewed as highly polluting by the upper castes, a 'permanent state of pollution.' This intrinsic pollution frames her as someone who is already "outside" the social body of the village, making it easier for the community to alienate her through the witch accusation. Meanwhile, Chandi Dasi's role as a grave-digger exacerbates her intrinsic caste pollution because her work constantly brings her into contact with death, a key source of impurity. While her work is essential to the community, it also reinforces her exclusion. Moreover, the transformation of Chandi Dasi from a nurturing mother to a feared 'bayen' reflects how situational pollution can be weaponized against women. Her role as a mother is subverted to justify her

exclusion from the community. The 'bayen' myth in the village transforms her identity from one of life-giving to life-taking, illustrating the fluidity of situational pollution in the patriarchal order.

It must also be noted how the woman's body and her bodily secretions are often viewed with suspicion and disgust; her menstruating blood or breast milk has been socially vilified, having been given negative cultural implications (Ray 7). The woman's body is then effectively buttressed by Brahmanical and patriarchal discourses, where it is considered to be a common prejudice, one that makes sense, one that is necessary to perpetrate violence. In *Dalit Women Speak Out*, G. Aloysius, Lee, and Mangubhai observe:

> "Another linked assumption is of women's inherently inauspicious character, as manifested in accusations of them having caused misfortunes and deaths. The significance of these accusations is that, first of all, women often have done nothing to provoke them, and secondly, by and large, the accusations stigmatize women for life and lead to constant violence." (331)

Colonial Power, the Railways, and the Award of Bravery

It is quite curious how the greater subjugation faced by the Santhals manifests into a smaller microcosmic reflection within the community itself. Perhaps in the inability to exercise a sense of authority, the patriarchy prevalent in the community rears its head and subsumes the voice of the dominant class and, in turn, oppresses the ones occupying the peripheral, less-privileged zones of their society. After colonisation, when the differences were being largely smoothened out due to the wave of liberal ideas and repulsion towards superstition, certain communities held onto their practices even tighter. Mahasweta Devi writes in an article on witchcraft in Bengal:

> "The tribals are losing whatever they had due to overwhelming socio-economic changes and all-devouring political pressures…it is natural for them to think that the witch-cult is something that truly belongs to them, something of their own. Why should they have to lose everything? ... At the very sound of the word 'witch', the tribals forget all political differences and act in a frenzy, even victimizing one of their own." (Devi 167-68)

Similar to how the tribals have lost their dignified identity in the larger social milieu of the country, the tribal community of *Bayen* takes away the identity of the best of their lot – a fiery woman capable of bringing change and who, in taking pride in her own family, threatens to transgress social norms (of attempting to transcend their lower caste position of Dom). The male-dominated community finds a twisted pleasure in flexing its social muscle as well as reestablishing its fledgling authority by destroying an innocent woman's life (Bose 136), rendering her completely powerless, and taking her away from her family and happiness, and essentially, labelling her as an Untouchable. Chandi is forced to live in a destitute hut near the train tracks; she is given contaminated and limited ration (not enough

to sustain a person) and is ostracised from all social interactions. Upon a close reading of the text, one finds echoes of the practices used by upper castes to bring the lower caste workers under the yoke of their authority.

> "A bayen has to warn people of her approach when she moves. She has but to cast her eyes on a young man or boy, and she sucks the blood out of him. So a bayen has to live alone. When she walks, everyone – young and old – moves out of her sight." (Devi 26)

Devi's Bayen is an incisive exploration of the intersection of politics, superstition, and community frustration; however, the story is written from the lens of the gendered subaltern, an important effort to underline the double-displacement women face in their communities. Ironically, though, the males of the lower caste community here put themselves in a self-created bubble of fear: in their condemnation of Chandi as a 'bayen', they condemn themselves to a life of living in fear of her, of the possibility of losing their children to her, of the possibility of being cursed until she decides to kill herself. But despite being brutally treated by her community, she does not die in vain; rather, she dies trying to save lives in an enormous train crash, and in that act, she gains back her identity within her community. When the Railway Department announces that Chandi is to be awarded a medal for her bravery and sacrifice, Bhagirath, her son, finally gains the courage to identify her as his mother and does so quite proudly, never really having fully believed in the baseless accusations of the community. The community, too, calls Chandi one of their own– what she lost in life, she gains back in death:

"Everyone was silent…Somebody whispered, "Yes, sir, she was one of us."
The announcement astonished Bhagirath so much that he looked from one face to another. So they were recognising her at last?

…

"(Bhagirath broke into loud sobs)...my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, sir. Not a bayen. She was never a bayen, my mother." (Devi 41)

The railway, a key infrastructure project of the British Empire, symbolizes the arrival of colonial modernity into the rural Indian landscape. However, for local communities, particularly marginalized castes like Chandi Dasi's, the railway brings both opportunity and oppression. Chandi's livelihood, as a grave digger, is directly tied to the railway, as she buries those who die along its tracks. This reflects how colonial modernity draws marginalized communities into its fold, often placing them in dangerous or degrading jobs that reinforce their marginalization. It stands to reason, then, that the railway symbolizes how colonial development serves both as a transformative force and a mechanism of exploitation, particularly for the Dalit community. Moreover, the recurring theme of death along the railway tracks highlights the human cost of colonial progress. The railway is not just a means of transport or economic growth; it is also a site of death and violence for the marginalized, whose bodies are left to be buried by someone like Chandi Dasi. The story's depiction of Chandi Dasi's work draws attention to how colonial infrastructure is built on

the labour and suffering of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Yet it is through this same oppressive, colonial system that Chandi gets her recognition, albeit posthumously, redirecting the readers' attention to a subaltern woman's dual subjugation – one by the State and the other, by her own community.

In the words of Samik Bandhyopadhyay, "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 on the larger space of the social forces that separate mother and son in a 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." (Bandhyopadhyay 13) This acknowledgement is what Chandi longed for in her life, to get to be the mother to her son; in her death, she snatches back her motherhood but denies her community their salvation by asking her for forgiveness.

The more caste-oriented nuance of *Bayen* finds its echo in the fact that despite the lack of knowledge regarding life and the overarching policies used by the dominant class to subjugate the Santhals and their Dom community, Devi shows a ray of hope, a budding leaf in Bhagirath's awareness of the Untouchability Act of 1955, which negated the existence of untouchability as a concept and made its practice illegal in India. Furthermore, Bhagirath is aware of the Constitution and some of its tenets, which is a stark improvement compared to people coming from lower castes in (pre)colonial India. However, he still faces subtle discrimination in school; he and his friends are told to sit a bit apart even though mostly the "very poor and needy" come to the school, after all, "there are schools, and then there are *schools*." (Devi 31) There is no doubt that tribal societies started to change largely after the nineteenth century, with the entire colonisation process and the freedom struggle thereof. "Social conflict often attended social change in modern times as it had in previous centuries. Struggles for status and challenges to old patterns of caste ranking are clearly visible." (Ludden 258)

Bhagirath soon learns that his mother is not just a victim of the class conflict that exists within the Santhals and their presupposed authority over the Dom community, but also baseless accusations of witchcraft – a plain, unostentatious power game to feel the pleasure of subjugating others that they have been denied. Moreover, the fact that Chandi's assimilation back into society is brought about by the Railway Department's announcement of conferring an award upon her– a branch of the government that is often considered to be the mouthpiece of the dominant classes of society (and rightfully so) that has historically subjugated the tribal community – is food for thought, a light shed by Devi's ingenious artistic talents. All that the community needed was a jarring jolt from someone in a position of authority, in front of whom their vicious cycle of ritual purgation of modernity using a woman as a scapegoat looks meagre and laughable. This is an ironic and regretful thing, though: why does the Santhal community in the story need an outsider to bring them back to reality, to their act of sacrificing one of their own? The very same authoritative representatives that have ignored their cultural differences and put them in a peripheral

position in society?

Mahasweta Devi, being a social activist, makes an astute critique of the 'Other' in an already 'othered' space, where the lower caste perpetrates social violence within their own community, to their own kin, especially their women. She strongly agrees with the fact that decolonisation has not quite reached the poor, who continue to look at women as commodities, as merchandise to be used, tossed around, and exploited at will. In *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Spivak talking about Devi, says:

> "...the political goals of the new nation are supposedly determined by a regulative logic derived from the old colony, with its interest reversed: secularism, democracy, socialism, national identity, and capitalist development. Whatever the fate of this supposition, it must be admitted that there is always a space in a new nation that cannot share in the energy of this reversal. This space had no established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism. Paradoxically, this space is also outside of organized labor, below the attempted reversals of capital logic. Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of the subproletariat or the subaltern. Mahasweta's fiction focuses on it as the space of the displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal." (Spivak 77-78)

Devi's *Bayen* exposes and judges exactly this space of difference. Although Chandi's experience is a local one, one cannot deny the universality of its significance, its raw social, emotional and political import. Thus, these experiences can easily become globalised since subjugation in the intersection of caste, religion, sexuality, violence, and superstition is widespread across the nation before and after colonisation. Such problems, especially those addressing the womenfolk of the underprivileged communities, need to be voiced since they have been obscured in perpetuity. Of course, there is the obvious problem in giving a 'voice' to the subaltern, and Devi is aware of that. Spivak, having herself written her pedagogical piece, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, writes that boiling down the subaltern into a 'singularity' is nearly impossible – a vital admittance on her part.

Such narrow spaces manifest the temporalities of split and difference (the cultural, social, and political) where the re-writing of the nation should properly begin. Devi's text *Bayen* evokes questions and appropriate thoughts in the minds of her readers, which are perhaps necessary to develop not only the ethical relations we need to establish with the 'Other' (pitted against the community in question) but also to create counter-discourses to smoothen out yet celebrate differences and bring into light the proper, effective, and not just an 'ideal' idea of the postcolonial nation-space (Ray 11).

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About the Author

Rajeshwari Guha is a postgraduate student in the Centre for English Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She received her Bachelor's (Honours) degree in English Literature from St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, and is a former Research Intern at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include multiple modernisms, cinema, queer studies, gender and sexuality, and avant-garde literature.