

WOMAN AS A CONSTRUCT OF SOCIETY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S BAYEN

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Abstract

A woman is a woman because of the strict conventional belief weaved around her by the male-dominated patriarchal society from the very beginning of human race. A woman is generally defined as 'subordinated being incapable of taking decisions' or leading an independent life. Even in twenty first century, the western society declares women as subordinated creature and nourishes this mythology and psychology about her still. There are various social flaws and evils flowing in the veins of patriarchy which is curse for the women as well as jolt on humanity but in my research paper I would discuss mainly two dimensions of them to illustrate and analyze the place of women in this power social system with the help of 'Bayen' written by Mahaweta Devi. Firstly, I would discuss the tendency of 'gender discrimination' which is prevalent in patriarchal social structure that leads to discuss on the 'question of self' as a feminist psycho-analytical perspective and try to find out that what is the soul causes of these flaws, evils and oppression and how it could be resolved.

Keywords:- patriarchy ,gender, gender -Discriminations, self, Inentity identity oppression , superstition ,

Mahasweta Devi, born in Dhaka in 1926, is a prominent voice on the international sphere who is prosecuting for the right of equality of unprivileged subaltern and oppressed section of society by expressing their miserable condition through her pen. The play *Bayen* (1976) is one of the best creation of her writings which is set in the circumstances that is based on patriarchal social structure and one of the best example of how a woman is thrown at the margin of society by the male dominated social system. My endeavour is to analyze the character of Chandidasi, protagonist of this play, as a victim of patriarchal social structure. A thought analysis of the play gives a glimpse of all misery of a woman created by patriarchal hindrances and the place of women in this social structure. In this play Mahasweta Devi portrays problems of the orthodox, superstitious, uneducated subaltern Indian society and marginalization of women in this social sphere as well as unravels several physical and mental torments that an individual undergoes due to orthodox values and superstition. Through this play Mahasweta

Devi brings into light the various evils and social flaws against women persistent on the one or other level in our society which criminated our society internally because it often act against our own members and does serve irritable injustice which becomes ‘calamity’ for the victim and ‘a shame’ for the convict as well. In this play it is shown that Chandidasi - a virtuous, wise and courageous lady of a reputed ancestry of her society, becomes victim of patriarchy and termed as a ‘Bayen’ only because of her vocation which she herself wanted to quit since a long time ago and because of this she faces trauma a lot but she is in a way of searching her own identity consistently and at last her identity is restored by the society after her death.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION: SOCIETY CONSTRUCTING WOMEN

Every individual and thing is different with one another in a specific perspective in this universe .So discrimination is not unjust if it would be the basis of stratification of person and things but when it is unjust –when it discriminate people on the basis of cast, class, creed, religion, color and gender and give a vertical division of society, and distinguish individuals’ ups and downs on the ladder of hierarchy based patriarchal social system where lower is always dominated by uppers. In other words, where differences lead to discrimination and discrimination provides a platform of oppression and exploitation. Here discrimination is morally wrong and socially unacceptable because it leads to social injustice.

In all over the world, especially in western society, there are basically three kinds of discrimination –class, race and gender, which is reflected in society as oppression and exploitation which Claudia termed as “triple oppression” but in eastern/ Indian cultural aura there are multiple layers of discrimination –on the basis of cast, class, creed, religion, place etc, prevalent in our society. Among these discriminations one is termed as ‘gender discrimination’ which is prevalent universally in all culture and society that is attached with women .There is no matter what the class, creed, place, religion is , may it be subaltem or civilized society, women faces this discrimination equally and universally that decides her fate. Since gender discrimination is the soul cause of women’s subordination, subjection and oppression which leads to social injustice of women around the world therefore women is most marginalized creation of humanity.

The term ‘gender’ grammatically exists in most languages (German, Latin and ancient Greek) to divide up the objects in three class: masculine, feminine, and neuter but in feministic perspective “gender designates the aspects of masculinity and femininity that are socioculturally determined, in contrast to sex, which is biologically determined.”(Penguin Dictionary of philosophy, p.244). In other words, “sex is considered a fact-one is born with either male or female genitalia. Gender is considered as social construction-it grants meaning to the fact of sex.”(Gender, p.10) Thus it is clear that where sex is biologically determined, gender is socially constructed. In the same way the term male and female is biologically defined but the concept of man and woman is socially constructed. In our power social system society has created a particular way of behaviors, a pattern of life for men and women and framed their life in a gender concept in such a way that they are bound to perform their social role in a fixed way according to social norms and customs, (may be that norm and customs just/unjust, ethical/unethical) and thus sketches a gender circle around them which decide their fate, identity and place in society. The voice of “others”-that is the women, remains silent and absent in decision making however capable the lady may be. In this social system women is always dependent on men for freedom, honor, money and status/prestige.

In the play *Bayen*, Chandidasi in spite of belonging to a reputed ancestry in their community of Kalu Dome, faces challenges at several levels. She was not only deprived of her social rights, but also those which she deserved being a human. It is remarkable that Chandi, after declaring as a Bayen, faces these problems not by upper society or class but in her own community and by her own people. As the society in which the lady resides is unable to identify the differences between life and living. They grant her food, clothes and other needful accessories for live but the worth of this charity is disclosed by Chandidasi herself. She says: “It’s only half a kilo of rice, a fistful of lentil, fifty grammas of oil and a pinch of salt ,is that enough for a week?”(77)

She has only one sari to wear and very little amount of things of basic need to survive. Her son, Bhagirath, exclaimed that his mother has not even proper food and cloth .He asked Malindar “My mother? Without clothes? without food?”(78) due to this condition she become poor, dishonored freedom less and thus loses her status and dignity and even right to live. She was prohibited to meet or interact with anybody even she was not allowed to talk or look at her own husband and child. If she goes somewhere she has to carry a canister to inform people so that they get a stimulus to leave that place. When Malindar offers her some money to fulfill her necessities she expresses her miserable situation. She says to Malindar “who’ll sell me anything...?”(77) It shows that she was deprived from the right of humanity because it was believed that if a woman becomes Bayen she is not a human at all. Malindar himself says to his child “Once a Bayen she’s no longer human.” In this condition when she has not enough to eat where would be the will to find her social identity? Thus a woman has to fight first for her survival after that she has to think about her identity or dignity. So here fate of a woman is always determined by social structure.

In our conservatively structured social system women is always victimized by the source of evils and so many myths are attached with a woman in a wrong way which not only hinder their progress but undermine their capacity also. It is like a chain in their feet when they are ready to scale new heights in the horizon of achievements. Though Chandidasi was free and independent woman before her marriage and proudly accepted her ancestral job of child burial but after her marriage the dark shadow of her past never left her. She is trapped in the long parched cult of terming ladies as Bayen for she was 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 asked about her “how’s Tukni”(84) and thus struck Tukni with the secret arrow of bayen. Though her husband, Malindar, take her side most of the time against the society but, at last, when Chandi became ready to bury Tukni’s dead body under the pressure of society and 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 gives her all explanations but no one believes on her even her most loving husband questions her “why is your sari is dripping with milk? whom were you suckling?”(87) was it not easy to understand for Malindar or anyone else that being a child bearing woman her sari was wet with milk for her own child, Bhagirath? was this not dominance of patriarchal anarchy that Malindar was not a bit able or desired to understand the reason of being in such a condition? How the dominant manly thoughts not overcome him while supporting the society rather than his wife in a wrong way? At the most difficult time of Chandi’s life, where she was put to a cruel test by society, when she was strongly needed support of her life partner, Malindar played a role of authoritative husband who was colored completely in the color of patriarchy. Being a male element of suspicion on women is always innate in his

mind when he was pushed by the society, his believes perpetuated and he goes with society against his wife and lastly without hearing her explanation and considering on her part an unfair judgment is given against her and she was declared “Bayen” by her own husband and thus became a victim of social injustice. After being declared as bayen when Chandi goes to Malindar for saying about her poor condition Malindar covers his child’s as well as his own eyes on seeing Chandi because it was believed that if a Bayen open her hair she is harmful for anyone but in fact Chandi tells that she has no oil to put in her hair to comb it. At another place Bhagirath asked Malindar “Isn’t the living man who speaks to the Bayen doomed to die?”(78)Bhagirath tells his father that his second mother always says to him “Bhagirath, come back straight from school, and run whenever you hear the canister clanging. Otherwise she’ll suck your life-blood.”(78) Such norms, orthodox and superstitious belief was prevalent in that society which made the women’s condition more complicated and worse. Hear Chandi’s case highlights the problem of inhuman norms and demonic activities which makes life a curse for a woman.

Chandidasi , whom society cursed as Bayen, was not an irrational, superstitious lady but she was a virtuous lady having rationality and wisdom bearing her life as Bayen she faces a brutal oppression and repeated suppression of society and conceiving a mental condition of repression yet because of being a virtuous and courageous entity she sacrifices her life for saving others life and welfare of that society which provided to her brutal punishment of being a woman.

Though various myths and legends idealizing women as idol of sacrifices, money, love, etc. but in fact a woman is made up in a way to suit the purpose of man or the society. In the case of Chandi only because of her vocation, to bury the children, society blamed her as a Bayen but when she rejects to do this work anymore, she was forced to do the same by using the instrument of emotional exploitation. Her brother-in-law, Shashi, who already blamed her as a Bayen, pretended to give respect to her vocation and ancestors. He reminds Chandi about her ancestral holy vocation and insists to her to continue the work. He says-“If you do not bury them ,their soul remains hovering far from their destination.” Further he says “You’re a progeny of the illustrious Kalu Dome...you are the destination, you embody the mother Ganga...”(84) Here is not clear that in the perspective of society her vocation was dignified or not. Also the work of Chandidasi and Malindar was probably similar but the place and prestige of both in society was different. Till the time of Kalu Dome the work of funeral of dead body was allotted to man and being preconceived that women is emotional and more nearer to child, she was allotted to bury children. Malindar, being a male and a little literate, got the government job in morgue and respected place in society but Chandidasi, besides being descendent of Kalu Dom, got an image of Bayen because of her vocation to bury children and she was dragged in a terrible situation.

Thus it is clear that social structure is the soul cause of women’s oppression that we are in need to correct. If a woman show to courage to reject the orthodox and superstition or try to challenge the society and by breaking pseudo-norms of society. It not only boycotts her but punishes her by devoid of her right and honor and sacrifices her on the vedika of social customs and superstitious, either create propaganda to justify their injustice in the veil of religion, custom and tradition and punished her strictly and create a circumstances of social alienation that we may call ‘Social-capital-punishment’ and pretending it as a cause of maintenance of social order and welfare of society or sometimes rewarded her by giving her alankaran of ‘Sati ’and ‘Devi’. In this play when Chandi sacrifices herself for the sake of society she was rewarded as a noble lady by the society after her death.

Thus questions are still though unanswered since long ages and they mockingly point out the historical injustice against women in our society and portraits a picture of gender discrimination that is prevalent in our society. Here instances of Chandi illustrate how these cults are kept alive in our society. Radha Chakrabarthy 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" (Chakravorthy, 102).

THE QUEST FOR SELF: PSYCHO-FEMINIST ANALYSES OF BAYEN

The question of self-identity is much attach with a woman because her identity is always identified explicated by the society rather than herself and that society always leads by men. She is made to believe what she is. In this play Chandi could be seen struggling her own identity as a self .her identity is always transformed according to social acceptance and at last restored by her own Son. Before her marriage she was leading a life as free and independent women. She continues her ancestral vocation to burying the child. Proudly. When Chandi meet Malindar on her first meeting she putting herself as a 'self 'in front of him. Introducing herself to Malindar she says- "It's me for myself." (80) But after marriage she wore a new identity of a wife and mother and she try her best to fulfill it bet her former identity, of burying the child, is being clashed with her later and new identity, of being a mother. Hear she faces a moral dilemma between ancestral accountability and mother's responsibility. On the one hand she wants to continue her ancestral job on the other hand because of being a child bearing mother due to child love and mother 'instinct it seems tuff for her to continue her vocation. When she goes to look after children's dead body she always thinks about her own child, Bhagirath. Besides it people started blaming her Bayen only because of her job. So she deliberately goes to against her inner haunt to wish to get rid of her job. She knows that there was no respect of her work. She says - "Go. I'll come. And let the community know that this will be the last time that I'll do this job." (85) But at the same time she is I a dilemma regarding possible harm to reputation of her noble asserters, who has earn a good name , and she was responsible to carrying the tradition of her forefathers. Whenever she thinks about to quit her job she hears her father's voice forbidding her to do it. This mental torment contributed in turning in her in a worst stage and absurd mental condition. This is not only the case of Chandidasi but there are numbers of Chandidasi in such a society facing the same problem. Because of her absurd mental condition created by social oppression and torment she got a condition of mental absurdity and imbalance , and due to this society boycotted her declaring as a Bayen thus she got a new identity by the society. first she opposes of this thought that she has an evil soul but later she found groundless to protest against the ruthless rules and norms of conservatively structured social system and she accepts herself as a Bayen. She says- "It's forbidden to talk to us ...I'm a Bayen." (88) Even she does call her child with his name. she always call her "Gangaputta's son ". She hides her face from her son and husband to prevent any possible harm to them that means she gives up all excuses and explanation and accepted herself as Bayen. Thus her womanhood and motherhood is always insulted and tortured by the society. Though she has always accepted her social identity but she is not satisfied with that she is in a way of searching her own identity consistently and there were a clash in her mind between constructed social identity and quest of her self- identity. Bearing these mental torment she has almost reached to a condition of mental absurdity so to protect her self- Identity and to save her dignity she has created an imaginary world where she always remembers her past when she has her dignity and all her rights. She imagines her child was in

her arms for whom she songs lullaby always, her dog was alive as her companion (who has died long before). She fears to darkness so started to talk to herself. She was left alone in the crowd. Her present was so horrible that she always thinks about happy memories of the past for bliss of motherhood, that she enjoy earlier now all totally turned into upsides down. Her world of pleasure was forcibly turned into graveyard of whispering world. She confess herself “When I had not became a Bayen, I had everybody.” her dream of having a happy life was scattered in the reflection of pseudo- social norms and customs and her self- identity was dismissed by the society that leads her into the condition of mental absurdity. So she chooses to live a lonely life though it was tuff for her to live yet she does not try to go close or meet to her husband or child. She look them at distance. when her meet her and express his desire to meet her she runs away from there .But at last Chandi, bearing multiple oppression and torment of society, being a virtuous and courageous lady she sacrifices herself for the sake of society and then at last her identity is restored by her own son, Bhagirath. He identified to Chandi as his mother, as a wife of Malindar Gangaputta and he rejects that her mother was a Bayen. Introducing Chandidasi to Railway Gauard he says “ She`s my mother.”(91) further he says-“ My mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, sir. Not a Bayen. She was never a Bayen , my mother.” And after her death society also accepted her as a noble lady and rewarded her by giving her dignity and honor back.

After reading the play is forced to think that how a woman is for society, what is her place in this patriarchal power system? The question is, is she not reduced to a mute identity? Who is always scared of being to reduced in a non-entity if tried to raise the mute role. Mahasweta Devi through Chandidasi shows the mirror to society which has deliberately turned lives of a number of Chandidasis into the milieu life of Bayen with number of actual facts of their own .At the end it is Chandidasi who gives her life to save lives of others and in this fatal way she attacks on masculinity torn away the false norms of Bayen which the society has to force her to wear. All realized that Chandidasi was a noble lady but it was too late. Mahasweta warns the society to come out of the habit of being too late in regarding to teal virtue and strength of women. In a interview with Gabrielle Collu Mahasweta Devi says herself “Generally, I found women are stronger” .She warns that women, reduced to mute identity may break the silence of shock and bring look the society to the flour of reality , but it is better to society may realize itself and learn to respect Chandidasis.

Conclusion-

A woman is fixed in a frame formed for her by the society. In this power social system she has been forgotten her own identity. A women is overshadowed by the strong opinion weaved against her. In this conservatively structured social system society patriarchy has collapse the existence of a woman`s self identity on the cost of social norms and customs because all the social norms and customs has been created by male .In other words,- society is always deals by man or male and other section of society- that is women, is blind bearer of these norms and tradition in the absence of rational insight. Here we are in a urgent need to create social system in a new way women also get rationality and intellectuality as well as emotion and empathy and would participate in process of constructing the social norms , customs and tradition and these norms and customs would be de-constructed and re-constructed whenever it would be necessary as per social requirement.

In our Male dominated social structure, society has two perspective for women. First, the simble of sacrifice, love, empathy, reverence to equalent of a goddess as Gayatri chakrawarti

spiwak says “ as the object of gaze from below” and secondly,... but not equal as a human being. now the question is that how the identity of a woman should be? Being a imminent part of the society an individual could not be separated from the society but the question of self could not be remained in dark. The identity of a woman should be ascribed as a Social -self where she would be imminent part of society as well as her self would be secured because self is not self in itself but the question of self could be described in the references of others so we could not think about self separated from the society but as a part of it where the existence of self could be preserved. Simone 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 Sex, p.30)

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