

Mahasweta Devi's *Banyen*: A Deep Insight into Mother Existence

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Mahasweta Devi's fiction problematizes the socio-cultural construct of manhood in India. The ideology of motherhood in India has been pervasive and it takes on much larger dimensions, where it translates into the determining factor of a woman's position in society. According to Kosambi, "Mother worship is usually an amalgamation of Vedic principles with pre-Aryan tribal cults of the mother-goddess, sometime going back to matriarchal forms of society" (Bagchi 67). In our country the goddess is worshipped as the Great Mother in a tradition that dates back to the Bronze Age. Dressed and re-dressed, clothes in space, skulls or sari the Great Mother lives in both the Great and the little traditions. Manoshi Mitra in her article "Shakti" has given a comprehensive catalogue of the many names and many forms in which 'Shakti' is worshipped even today. Some of her names are Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, Shakti, the goddess of power, Kali, the goddess of destruction. All of them combine aspects of fertility and nurturance with that of a dynamic virgin warrior. Each Mother Goddess has her own weapon and mounts. She is the protector who vanquishes evil. Even today, in India, as 5,000 years ago, every village has "Sapta Matrikas and the majority of gramdevtas are female" (Krishnaraj 6).

The portrait of mother as 'nation' is also common all over the world. In the process of nation building and instilling pride in one's nation the poets and writers have often sung about mother's duty to bring their mothering qualities to uphold the nation. As Ketu Katrak observes: "Gandhi exhorted women as mothers to bring their self-sacrificing qualities for the

national movement. He extended the metaphor of Mother India in nationalist discourse to mobilize the active support of women in public demonstrations of passive resistance against the British..." (397). According to Radha Chakravarty, in the narratives of nationalism women as mother, to serve a particular political agenda, without any real concern for the needs of actual women in different sectors of society is created through socio-cultural construct (Rethinking Subjectivity 34). Bagchi also points out how the image of the mother, associated with the concepts of motherland. Mother tongue that came to represent the nationalist aspiration in colonial Bengal, simultaneously "took away real power from women and created a myth about her strength and power" (65). The authority of motherhood has been respected and feared in India. Motherhood is deified, but paradoxically, the myth of mother's 'quasi-divine status' is premised upon her for voluntary self-sacrifice. Motherhood though is perceived as a central fact of female existence but paradoxically it has become an instrument of subordination. It is used as alibi to exclude a woman from power, authority, decisions and from a participatory role in public life. According to Jasbir Jain, "Motherhood is one of the cultural impositions which deny women personhood..." (122). Mahasweta's stories indict the use of the maternal idea to subjugate women in a patriarchal society. The stories present a large range of responses to the discourse of motherhood, subtly exposing in certain underprivileged sections of Indian society hidden behind the traditional envisioning of the role of the

mother. She punctures the constructs of an 'ideal' woman and an 'ideal' mother by revising and re-defining the socio-religious discourses that valorize the self-sacrificing image of woman and deny them the right to articulate their individual needs and desires. In her story like "Bayen" motherhood functions as a way of addressing larger issues pertaining to societal double standards with their economic and political underpinnings and at the same time they also describe the strategies often evolved by women to survive and overcome the oppression hurled upon them by the society. Another peculiar feature of Mahasweta's mother protagonist is that despite all oppression they are infused with womanly virtues of love, care and sacrifice. About her mother figures Samik Bandhyopadhyay writes:

Mahasweta's mothers are too earthly and emotionally charged to bear overtones of any mystical-mythical or archetypal motherhood. They are in variably located within in a network of relationships defining their personalities into absolute clarity (Five Plays ix).

Mahasweta Devi's "Bayen" is the story of a mother branded as a witch and separated from her son critiques the uses of the maternal idea to subjugated woman in an orthodox patriarchal society. The main protagonist Chandi is a figure of sacrifice and self-denial, a scapegoat who has to bear the burden of collective guilt and superstition. She is a Gangaputra, a professional gravedigger. Her work is to bury the dead children and guard the grave at night, as she is the progeny of the illustrious Kalu Dome, who is said to have sheltered King Harish Chandra when he lost his Kingdom and was assigned the task to look after "all the burning ghats of the world" (33). When he regained the power Chandi feels proud about her lineage. She lives a happy and contented material life with Malinder, also a member of the Dom community, and her son Bhagirath. Gradually the distinctiveness of her family arouses the envy of the rest of the Dom

community. Rumors begin to circulate that Chandi is a bayen, a supernatural creatures who raises dead children from their graves in order to nurture and suckle them. When asked why her sari is dripping with milk and for who the lullaby is, she is pleads innocence:

No, no I am not a bayen! I have son of my own. My breasts are heavy with milk for him. I am not a bayen. Why, Ganganputta, why don't you tell them, you know beat (37).

Malinder rather than defending her, under social pressure declares her to be a bayen. Beating the drum he starts shouting, "I Malinder Gangaputta, hereby declare that my wife is a bayen, a bayen!" (38).

Eventually Chandi is expelled from her community and forbidden to set her eyes on any child, including her own. She is turned into a pariah and is forced to live alone in a hut by the railway track sustaining her by the meager supply of food and clothing provided by her community members. Chandi's expulsion typifies the rejection and exploitation of women who threaten the stability of existing social codes by their distinctiveness and individuality, by a patriarchal society. As Kalu Dom's descendent and fearless gravedigger, she is empowered and had access to freedom and power that generate subconscious fear and insecurity in the minds of the Dom community. The patriarchal community, of which she is a part, feels threatened from a woman and alleged her to possess some supernatural powers and charm. Hence, in order to nullify her powers and position they ostracize her. In fact in a male-dominated society a woman must either conform to the existing social norms or become mad and marginalized. As Patricia Waugh justly points out: "If women speak outside [the symbolic] order they will either not to be heard or be heard as insane..." (Satyanarayan 97).

Chandi thus becomes helpless and all forces seem to have intrigued against her to deprive her of the status of a human being. Surprisingly, Chandi who bravely moves

among the graves, driving the jackals away from the dead souls, fails to protect herself from being victimized by the people whose humanity has been made over to superstition. Moreover, her expulsion also brings about her separation from her son Bhagirath. Condemned to lead a solitary life, she is deprived of the right to motherhood and her son Bhagirath is forbidden to enjoy the motherly affection. At first aghast and disbelieving, Chandi herself eventually internalizes her imputed identity as a bayen and lives on the margin, accepting her painful role as pariah. When once her son Bhagirath goes to meet her she fearfully tells him, “Don’t talk to me. I am a bayen. Even my shadow is evil...” (39). Half crazed by years of solitude and anguish, she loses the power to think logically:

It had been a long time since she had thought about anything. Nothing was left in her mind but the rustle of leaves, the whistling of winds and the rattling of the trains-sounds that had muddled up all her thought (40).

Gradually, her physical appearance, too acquires a wild, fearsome aspect that strikes terror into the hearts of those who set eyes on this red clad figure with swirling unkempt hair. Further, the story highlights the fact that even though Chandi acquires the outward semblance of a bayen, she never quite sheds the traditional ‘motherly’ attributes of responsibility, love and protectiveness. However much she is separated from humanity, she is not devoid of human qualities. Since beginning she displays feeling of love not only for her son but also for the children whose bodies she buries. She plants thorny bushes around children’s graves to protect their bodies from the ravaging attacks of wolves and jackals. Often, she keeps a nightly vigil to ensure that no harm comes to the bodies of these children, for whose safety she feels somehow responsible.

Her extraordinary sense of responsibility and love is revealed toward the end when she sacrifices her life to protect those, who have victimized her.

She attempts to stop the train before it is ambushed. This act of martyrdom pulls down all the superstitions, prejudices woven around her as *Bayen*. Her alienation which produced an air of unreality and hence unconcern collapses under the weight of her supreme human sacrifice. Chandi’s sacrifice while revealing her undying springs of human love provides a new meaning to her otherwise condemned life. According to Spivak, “When the subaltern ‘Speaks’ in order to be heard and get into the structure of responsible, he or she is on his way to becoming an organic intellectual...” (IM xxi). In this respect Radha Chakravarty opines that Chandi, however, transcends her situation through action rather than speech. She writes, “Defying the superstition that relegates her to the margin as a bayen, Chandi intervenes to save the members of her community. Through action, rather than speech, she claims her role in history, from which she has been hitherto excluded” (Rethinking Subjectivity 101). Chandi’s final act of heroism elevates her above the common mass of humanity.

In the end Chandi is recognized by the mainstream. Her name spread far and wide and the Railway Department honour her for her ‘real brave deed’. While receiving the award for her son Bhagirath comes forward and reclaims her as his mother who, in spite of all aspersions, was ‘never a bayen’. He acknowledges before the officer in charge, “She was my mother.... “My mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi Chandidasi, Sir. Not a bayen. She was never a bayen, my mother”” (41). Thus, in this story Mahasweta has made use of the maternal figure in an ambivalent way. The figure of Chandi as Bhagirath’s mother represents traditional mother with all motherly attributes— love, nurturing, protective aspect and as witch—mother represents a grotesque travesty of maternity in the bayen, whose very gaze spells death to all children who encounter her. Mothering (as a willingness to love nurture and protect) become Chandi’s profession

as well as the source of her tragedy and mode of her exaltation.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi in her narratives of motherhood dislocates the sublimation of motherhood by reiterating the fact that the reification of woman into the role of divine mother necessitates a suppression of her own physical and emotional desires. Rather than enjoying the bliss of motherhood, the mother- Chandi has to bear the pain and humiliations inflicted on her in an indifferent, harsh, cold and male-dominated atmosphere and are denied the right to articulate her individual needs and desires.

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