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Representing ‘Women’ at the Threshold of Gendered Identity in Mahasweta Devi’s *Bayen*

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Abstract

The objective of my paper is to look at identity and gender through Mahasweta Devi’s short story *Bayen*. The story deals with a woman named Chandidasi who is branded as a witch, a ‘Bayen’. The eponymous character is non-conforming, defiant entity whose body is a repulsive sight for the people of the dom community; Chandidasi is herself a dom- a gravedigger- a profession only reserved for the male members of the community. It is interesting to observe how the female body is marked by her gender, her caste, her class, her personal relationships and the work she does. Chandidasi is a representation of the deviant and defiant female body. She tries hard to establish herself in the world obsessed with sexed differences. The witch’s body is however constructed in a way that is neither strictly feminine nor masculine. Her physical habits and behaviours are likened to beastly creatures thus creating a complicated embodiment, that is also ‘dangerous’. In my paper, I chart the way in which the protagonist’s character goes on to establish an identity that transcends the physical body. The paper delves into the world of a community of lower castes where patriarchal norms are not absent. It interrogates the way in which Chandidasi, the figure of the female body, develops into a symbolic expression of protest and revolt. The paper also looks at Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and how the characters in the story ‘perform’ their gender roles.

Keywords- *Gender, Body, Sexuality, Representation, Women, Caste, Labour, Identity*

The female body has been a site for prompting debates, discussions, representations or misrepresentations throughout the history of cultural and social existences. The female body and its materiality is thus a point of contention in our daily lives and experiences. The space of the female body was considered more natural, more corporeal than men’s rationality. Such assumptions of female corporeality required feminists to discuss the body beyond its material

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existence in order to elucidate and confront constructions of sexed difference. Feminist theories talk about the body being shaped with significance by virtue of the historical framework in which it is understood and the historical discourses through which it is formed.

Judith Butler in 'Gender Trouble'² talks about sex (body) being a culturally and discursively produced element that dispels biologic subjectivity of a person. She raises questions about how the body can be perceived through not just its scientifically or naturally produced identity but discursively produced identity. Further discussions on the above topic should also reveal the premise that scientific knowledge, what we accept as obvious, is also subject to constant shifts and movements along with socio-cultural considerations. Having known these above facts how does one perceive within the conventional norms of gender the existence of the non-agreeable, deviant, non-conforming body and how is then the body heard or made visible. These questions when juxtaposed with the identities of caste, class marks the gendered body with complications. These complications can seldom be reconciled easily with discussions, debates or even theorizations.

This paper deals with all the above complications in dealing with the gendered identity in Mahasweta Devi's short story in Bengali *Bayen*.³ Identity itself is a slippery notion, rarely defined and shape-shifting its form through its expression in various disciplines.⁴ However the notion of identity is simplified and understood as 'misleadingly singular'.⁵ Identities are actually multitudinous and often related with a sense of the gendered self. In this context, thus, the crisis of identities becomes crises of gender identities (masculinities and/or femininities). The body, gender and identity hence form a close yet convoluted nexus that might challenge obvious everyday understandings. The setting for the story of *Bayen* is a West Bengal countryside, where religion, culture, social and political viewpoints are consolidated in identities of gender, class positions and caste-based labour. This can also be understood in terms of subaltern existences, as the actions and interactions that occur within the frame of the story are outside society's established and mainstream structure and the reader gets an insight into this otherwise unheard, invisible murky space.

Bayen is the story of Chandidasi, a low caste *dom* woman who is alienated from husband and child as she is branded a witch, a *bayen*. She is ostracized for being evil as she is thought to be feeding milk to the devil. *Bayen* is a name similar to 'chodail' or 'daayen' a woman who seems to have supernatural powers. *Bayen* is thus a designation for such a person and the term is widely used in West Bengal and Maharashtra to identify a witch. She is kept in a small hut near the far end of the village where the railway tracks and a dog keeps her company: "A red-clad figure – a dog on her trail –clanking a piece of tin across the paddy fields, moving towards a dead pond."⁶

This red clad figure is turned into a social pariah as even the sight of her is enough to bring about death of a person. She carries the social stigma in her as she passes her days in the shack across the field. Later, she willingly sacrifices herself to save several others lives.

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After this heroic deed her neighbours and her family no longer consider her an evil creature, the *bayen*.

The journey from Chandi to Chandidasi Gangadasi to a *bayen* and eventually back to the identity of Chandi is such tedious and painstaking process for the story's protagonist. She is miserable all through the various stages of this journey and thus, the end brings a great sense of relief for her.

Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* delineates the character of Chandi as a body that is marked by her gender, her caste, her class, her personal relationships and the work she does. The work she has undertaken that of a dom, a person who cremates dead bodies, is traditionally invested with an innate essence of non-bhadralok masculinity, characterising all that is fearless, dark, strong. It so becomes that when Chandi undertakes this masculine work, it bastardizes the profession of the dom rendering it weak, cheap and fruitless. She is actually fulfilling her ancestral duties and it is nothing but a great responsibility for her. She dislikes her job, but is bound to it because of her caste, and says, "Get hold of somebody else for this work, respected ones! [...] I am not fit for this anymore...."

Chandi's disfavour for her profession is also because the activity of her job limits her expression of traditional femininity. She would rather stay at home, do all the chores, nurse for her infant and take care of her husband, than guard corpses at night. Before marriage she is a young, vivacious courageous woman who is never afraid. When her father, the gravedigger, dies, Chandi herself volunteers to continue her father's work.

"I am Chandi, she announced, "daughter of the Gangaputta. My father is dead. Give me his rations instead."

"Will you do your father's work then?"

"Yes. I will bury the dead and guard the graves."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"I am not."⁷

The villager's responses reinstate the idea that fearlessness is essentially something that belongs to masculinity. Chandi's voice uttering "I am not" defies her socially allocated gender identity. In her speech act she asserts herself in the work of her caste when she declares that she will inherit her father's position and she will bury the dead and guard the graves. This moment in the story is wrought with double complications as both her role of caste and gender ruptures conventional and comfortable roles in society. It should not be also ignored that the interactions that are mentioned above does not include any upper-caste members. In fact for the most part of the story the dialogues, the troubles and the exchanges happen amongst a particular low-caste community of the village.

However even amidst the low-caste community the woman's body has to be controlled and tied up in accepted ways of femininity. If the straitjacket of womanhood is compromised in some way the same body is seen as revolting and hence threatening. As a

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consequence of this the very male profession of the gravedigger or dom is also threatened by the presence of the female body. Masculine valour which is the prerequisite for the daring profession of the dom cannot be absorbed in the body of the apparently 'fragile' female. Several cultural commentators are of the same opinion: that women are at the lowest rungs of the society. Spivak says: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."⁸ Bell hooks also reflects a similar notion as she observes that the black female is twice oppressed as she 'bears the brunt of sexist, racist and classist oppression'.⁹ In the traditional society of colonial India the body of the subaltern are to be conquered and consumed and kept under slavery by upper caste-class masters.¹⁰ Inside the microcosmic world of Chandi the absent upper-caste figures are replaced by the patriarchal actors of the community, that is, the neighbours and peers of the village. In Devi's story these characters are not so much heard but their oppressive, looming presence can be felt throughout. "The Dom community did not forget her. The Doms were keeping an eye on her, to her complete ignorance. Covertly or otherwise, a society can maintain its vigil if it wants to. There is nothing a society cannot do".¹¹ Even in the low-caste situation where brahmanical oppression cannot be seen, patriarchal hegemonic forces still operates and tries to imitate and uphold hierarchical sentiments.

The crisis of gender identity of Chandi is also linked with the personal relationships she shares with husband and son. Chandi goes 'soft' as soon as she becomes a mother. She is no longer the fearless woman she used to be: Malindar describes her as 'very soft' and that 'she cried often'. However it should also be remembered that since she has to suffer the 'double burden'¹² of work nursing her child, taking care of household work and looking after her husband. She is the only surviving member of the family that buries dead children and cannot give it up.

"I have not the heart to do it anymore, she said at last.

"I have not the heart to pick up the spade. But it is God's will. What can I do?

In wonder she shook her head and looked down at her limbs".

Indeed Chandi suffers doubly because of her role as gravedigger, mother and wife. It is exhausting for her to accomplish all roles simultaneously and diligently. As a woman she has to carry out all household chores after suckling her child and then fulfilling her caste assigned job. The body is thus replete with a load that she has no control of. If it is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny¹³ Chandi's fatigued body rejects it. Her destiny and her expression of identity are at a tussle with each other, where each of her identity revolts and confronts the other. In such a situation, Chandi repeatedly wants to cast off her caste-role. However it belies long standing traditions of ancestry and she believes that God has ordained it. After being dismissed as a bayen, Chandi yearns for the affection of her son. She cries in solitude however when asked if she is afraid to be alone, she retorts, "Why

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should a bayen be afraid to stay alone?" Since women as mothers are the primary caretakers of the infants and from the feminist perspective, perceiving the particularity of the mother must involve according the mother her own selfhood".¹⁴ Through Chodorow's words it can also be said that both the mother, Chandi and her son, Bhaghirath gains identity through each other. Though Chandi does not get ample chance to act as the caretaker of her son, they both extend the sense of self to each other inside the paradigms of the mother-son relationship. This sharing of the relationship will sustain, according to Chodorow, as long as women have exclusive maternal responsibilities.

While Chandi grapples with the issue of stigmatized selfhood, her husband Malindar also rejects her. It is intriguing that while Malindar supports her wife in the earlier stages, it is he who declares her a witch. As Malindar retells the story of Chandibayen to his son, Bhaghirath, he is full of sympathy for her. He even goes on to relate how his government job at the morgue has made him a subject of envy for his peers. As Malindar works for the government and has received some amount of education, the society considers him to be a caste-transgressor. It is not acceptable that a person belonging to the clan of doms would get an education and a sanctioned salaried job. Hence both Malindar and his wife have to suffer the taunts and criticisms of their society. Malindar threatens his community and tries to establish a sense of manhood that society does not acknowledge:

One day Chandi came back crying, carrying Bhaghirath in her arms. "They have stoned me, Gangaputta, they said I meant evil." "How dare they?" Malindar stopped fencing the yard and almost danced with rage. "Who dares stone the wife of Malindar Gangaputta?" he roared.¹⁵

The husband shows violent anger that exemplifies masculine protectionism. He is aggressive, short-tempered and wants to combat his opponents and prove his 'superior masculinity' by rescuing the woman. Later in the story when Chandi is being accused of being a witch by the villagers, Malindar allies himself with the same opponents. He cannot satisfy the role of the male saviour; however his sense of maleness is expressed through his fiery rage as he brands his once loving wife a witch in an almost ceremonial pleasure.

Malindar stepped forward and looked at Chandi with bloodshot eyes. He let a yell like a beast.[...] Malindar rushed to get the drum that belonged to his father-in-law and ran back to the graveyard. He shouted as he beat the drum, "I, Malindar Gangaputta, hereby declare that my wife is a bayen, a bayen!" Thus, Malindar ensures his seat at the height of patriarchal hierarchy.

Analysing at the level of the individual, we can say that every single body has a certain right to food, shelter, freedom to move and breathe protected from violence. However we also particularize which body ought to enjoy these rights. Here the individual body is identified as an individual matter, shaped by the norm and hence the premise that every single body has a right, does not hold. If we also single out some individual bodies as atypical then we are also ignoring the fact that the body is a relational body that is created through the

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dependency of it on other bodies through a network of support. As a consequence we also have to accept that the singled out individual body is not entirely a distinct entity.¹⁶ The placement of Chandi at the village fringes speaks of exclusion and singling out of the deviant body in a similar way. Chandi's body is dehumanised the moment she is marked as a witch. She is kept in isolation and has one saree that she wears. Moreover she is not given enough food as if the witch is well-fed she would gain more evil power. The carefully rationed food she receives consists of half a kilogram of rice, some pulses, oil and salt for a week which leaves gravely malnourished. Her banishment is so severe that she herself has to warn off people of her arrival:

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.¹⁷

In this process of isolation the body of Chandi is tamed and institutionalised under a hegemonic practice. The body that was based in her performative gender roles now through the socialisation process becomes the gendered body of the witch. Chandi's body, first of a grave digger and then of the witch comes into being as taught by societal discourses and occupies the identity of that body. Her subjecthood is ever transformative and performatively produced. Further, it can be observed that though the performativity of Chandi's body as a mother, a wife and even her caste-labourer is subtly produced, the identity of the witch is forcefully strapped on her. Her previous identities seem to be stripped off her:

A bayen for a mother! Is a bayen human being then? Hadn't he heard that a bayen raises dead children from the earth, hugs and nurses them? That whole trees dry up the instant a bayen looks at them? And Bagirath- he, a live boy, born of a bayen's womb? He could think no more.

However, Chandi's expression of agency is fulfilled in the end and is able to transcend every custom and ritual that was forced on her. Her gendered body is thus capable of change where she is no longer constrained to play a certain role. She breaks all shackles and gives away her life to save innocent people getting robbed. In that moment she transforms herself from the control of society, family and villagers and stops being a bayen. Her death brings about a self assertion that establishes her as the great, heroic Chandidasi who rescued people. She is no longer just a body marked by conventional feminine qualities. In hindsight, her heroic deed also does not mark her masculine; rather she becomes a courageous, self-sacrificing human being who is not contained in societal and cultural binaries. The story's title 'bayen' relates the fact that it is indeed not the story of a woman named Chandi, but of a witch whose subaltern identity is revitalized through her subaltern political act in the ending where she rewrites her fate. Thus it can be said that it is the very body of the dishevelled, unkempt bayen that makes a statement of political resistance. It is also a performative act that is actually a marked event in not just the life of the protagonist's

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but the living community of the dom as well. In her posthumous life she meets the upper class officials who confer a bravery award. In an almost bureaucratic fashion the bayen is pronounced a heroic woman. “Not a bayen. She was never a bayen”¹⁸ The excluded subjecthood thus is again brought into the inclusive folds of society.

Endnotes

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