

M(O)ther in Mahaswata Devi's *Bayen/The Witch*

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines Mahaswata Devi's play, Bayen/ The Witch addressing the issues concerning women's subjectivity- denial of rights/agency to mothers in certain cultural situations in South Asia, especially in India. The paper argues that mothers, in such societies attain ascendancy and identity but only after self-effacement and denial of their own subjectivity. I argue that female agency is either negotiated through motherhood or through an absence of motherhood. In order to explore these questions, the paper draws mainly on Barbara Creed's theoretical concepts, also relying on Michelle Foucault and Julia Kristeva's portrayal of subjectivity. Bayen is a maternal figure, but one which is dehumanized, and excluded from human society. The protagonist, Chandidasi, a bayen, gets positioned as an ill-boding and ill-fated figure, as a signifier of death and destruction. Barbara Creed's notion of the monstrous- feminine illustrates the way femininity is feared and squelched in contemporary society. It is imperative to note how Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine intersects and relates with Julia Kristeva's notion of the Abject. Mahaswata Devi's play Bayen/The Witch addresses these concerns remarkably well.*

Keywords: Monstrous-feminine, demonizing, motherhood, abject, dehumanize, maternal, Barbara Creed

Female agency, in the subcontinent, is either negotiated through motherhood or through an absence of motherhood. The concept of motherhood with its different connotations has acquired more complexity as the feminist debates along this line of inquiry became more intense as well as contradictory. The figure of the mother without child in South Asian drama ranges from the harrowing circumstances of a woman who loses or relinquishes custody of a biological child (Bayen) to the traumatic emotional state of a woman who miscarries/ undergoes an abortion, *Barri/The Acquittal* by Ajoka Theatre and *Silence! The Court is in Session* by Vijay Tendulkar or one who is infertile (*Kala Meda Bhes/ Black is my Robe* by Ajoka Theatre).

In India, a mother represents the “generative, nurturing powers of life, itself celebrated in temples, and sculpture, poetry and literature” (Krishnaraj 1). A mother is celebrated in Indian cinema, popular culture, and Hindu mythology, but simultaneously, this pervasive respect and deification, according to feminists, essentialize women and restrict them in this prescribed role. As Veena Poonacha writes about the concept of motherhood in India, “The privileges of motherhood are determined by the conditions under which a woman gives birth (whether it is under sanctioned marriage), the social location of the mother in the family, and the desired sex of the child” (viii). Poonacha’s observation sums up the problems related to motherhood not only in India, but in the entire subcontinent as well. It is thus arguable that the position of the mother in Indian culture is “riddled with its history of psychic and social contradictions” (Hansen 433). Thus, the play interrogates the hermeneutics of power and how that power is exercised to suppress the subaltern, in this case, mothers.

In the Western context also, motherhood is problematic as Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s points out, “the concept of mother which has always been idealized by the dominant middle class rhetoric of the recent past, can also carry this barely concealed trace of derogation, disgust, and dirtiness” (432). Hansen further adds that “motherhood offers women, a site both of power and oppression, self-esteem and self-sacrifice, reverence and debasement” (433). This observation validates the point I intend to make in this paper about the ambiguous nature of women’s status as conventional mothers and non-mothers.

Mahaswata Devi is a well-known writer and a social activist who in her oeuvre has raised voice against class and racial segregation and injustices.

Devi, in all her works, illustrates that motherhood does not come to women easily, or when it does come, it is thwarted or aborted in one way or another. Devi focuses mainly on women belonging to under-privileged classes, especially in rural areas of India where they are either regarded as commodities, or in some situations, as outcasts or *persona non grata*. The play also highlights the exclusionary practices and superstitions regarding motherhood that are common in the underprivileged sections of Indian society.

Methodology

This paper qualitatively explores the social construct of motherhood within the domestic space, also a topography of subordination, utilizing Barbara Creed's notion of the monstrous feminine which intersects with Julia Kristeva's concept of the maternal body as a locus of abjection. Devi's play will examine motherhood as an ambiguous and contradictory concept in India, also illustrating women as scapegoats, and sites where patriarchal ruses of power are played on. It is thus arguable that the position of the mother in Indian culture is "riddled with its history of psychic and social contradictions" (Hansen 433). Hence, this paper unfolds the disjuncture between the ideology that elevates motherhood and the reality of women's lives where motherhood, instead of empowering women, disenfranchises them in certain situations. The paper also analyses *Bayen* keeping in view poetics of feminist theatre.

Bayen/ The Witch addresses the issues concerning women's subjectivity-denial of rights/agency to mothers in certain cultural situations. Maithreyi Krishnaraj rightly observes that "Feminist reappraisal of the matriarchate is a political strategy to reclaim female power. Can one recreate the matriclan that provides power and support?" (3) The play elucidates double marginalization of women in rural and remote areas of South Asia owing to superstitions and patriarchal structure that work as the collective unconscious, permeated in the very fabric of society. As Vanashree observes, branding women as witch or *daayan* or *chodail* has prevailed in Indian society as a common practice of patriarchy that also gets endorsed by the women of the community, but the fact that it is gendered cannot be ruled out as most of the accused and victims are women (224). Moreover, Vanashree notes that superstition assumes significance as "an important discourse of power" that extends penalizing power to the patriarchal or feudal establishment in the remote and rural areas, which further enervates the already suppressed sections of society, women and the

subaltern. To malign the victim, diverse tactics, like “gossip, malicious rumors, mythic or folklores or imaginary tales” are used (226-7).

Bayen allows comparison with Caryl Churchill’s play *Vinegar Tom* which also involves the scapegoating of poor women by the farmer Jack and his wife Margery. Churchill also like Devi, observed how ‘petty and every day the witches’ offences were’, and she wanted to write ‘a play about witches with no witches in it; a play about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation, prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves’ (qtd in *Feminist Theatre and Theory* 43).

In *Bayen*, according to the villagers’ superstitious beliefs, women who bury children, when possessed, have the ability to raise the dead babies from their graves; they kiss them or suckle them, and then transform into bayens. In this regard, Bayen is definitely a maternal figure, but one which is abject, dehumanized, and expelled from human society. Barbara Creed’s concept of the monstrous- feminine illustrates the way femininity is feared and abjected in contemporary society. Chandidasi’s husband supports the inhuman social system that vilifies his wife, unable to provide her the support that is required of him as the bulwark and fulcrum of her life. Chandidasi gets positioned as an irrational, ill-boding and ill-fated figure, as a signifier of death and destruction. It is necessary to note how Creed’s concept of the monstrous-feminine intersects and relates with Julia Kristeva’s notion of the Abject. Creed argues that Kristeva’s notion of the abject and the concept of the monstrous-feminine are intertwined and overlapped, and that, “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (Creed 1). Creed has analyzed the portrayal of the monstrous-feminine in the horror films, but her argument that abjection is central to the recurring image of the monstrous-feminine can also be related to the monstrous in Devi’s Bayen. For Creed, “It is the femininity itself that is monstrous”, and that women have been historically “constructed as ‘biological freaks’ whose bodies represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality” (6).

In the case of Chandidasi, her maternal body becomes problematic; her “breasts ache, at bursting point, with all the milk, and the suckling child at home” (Five Plays 86). She is accused because her sari was “dripping with milk,” when her child was away from her, and also because she was singing a lullaby in the absence of her child. This physical evidence is enough for the mob to validate her identity as a Bayen, and

excommunicate her. This process of naming and confronting the abject, according to Kristeva is 'sublimation', "I name the abject, in order to keep it under control (11). Also, by naming it and recognizing it thus, and because of its incomprehensible nature, we are overwhelmed by it, and need to expel it constantly and forcefully. In this regard, Chandidasi becomes one that must be repulsed; one who cannot be assimilated, and one who must exist across the border. According to Kristeva's notion, in order to become a subject, one needs to separate themselves from what they are not. Kristeva questions, "How can I be without border?" (4) She argues that we cannot exist without defining our boundaries, and the abject is what must be repulsed because it cannot be assimilated (3) Kristeva elaborates upon different structurations of the abject, one of them is related to the maternal body, and the prohibition placed on it. Chandidasi represents the maternal body that is considered defiled and an abomination.

This breaking away with the maternal figure, in the case of Chandidasi, can also be related to what Kristeva terms as 'primal repression,' which she contends is "...the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat" (13). Chandidasi is equated with the "threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder," (Kristeva 13) a sort of uncanny and threatening world which the primitive societies marked out in order to preclude it. Thus, designating Chandidasi as a bayen is an attempt by the villagers to exclude what threatens their identity, and also to 'release the hold of the maternal entity' (Kristeva 13). This factor explains why women face the threat of witchcraft accusations far more than men. As Deborah Willis argues in her book, *Malevolent Nurture* that village-level quarrels and accusations of witchcraft often arose out of conflicts between women. "The witch", Willis argues, is a "mother gone bad," and the general perception that the woman in question has transformed into a "perverse and destructive mother," provides legitimacy to the accusation (13-14). Also, Soma Chaudhuri notes that "the men who are the decision makers, use the conflicts between women to serve other interests. The women (the accused witch and those initiating the accusation against her) are thus scapegoats in the entire conspiracy by the men in the village" (1220).

Chandidasi is Othered and feared even by her own husband and son. She exists off-centre, along the margins of the small village, shunned by everyone, bereft of her humanity. Her identity shifts between human and

the non-human, subject and the object, some -Thing that is both loved and loathed simultaneously. The play depicts the emotional dynamics of a woman's self when deprived of the status of motherhood which in most South Asian societies is kind of a mandatory condition to maintain her status as wife. In *Bayen*, Chandidasi, the female protagonist who is a guard of children's graves by vocation, becomes an absent and unnatural figure as a mother. In this case, the traditional role of the mother gets subverted as Chandidasi's vocation subsumes her nurturing, nursing role as the mother. This illustrates this paradoxical situation that after becoming mothers, in some cases, women are doomed to otherness and subordination instead of ascendancy and power. The mother whose role is fundamental in a child's life, gets excluded all of a sudden from the child's life as her calling as the dome is essential and holds more significance. But Chandidasi is labelled as a Bayen not a witch, which is slightly different in nature, as Malinder, Chandidasi's husband, explains it to their son, Bhagirath: "They'd have burnt her to death if she had been a witch. But, son, a Bayen's not for killing. Kill the Bayen, and the children start dying" (Five Plays 87). The story of Chandidasi, and her tragic dehumanization by the villagers including her husband, can be attributed to the phallogocentric ideology because it confirms her position as the 'Other.' As Hélène Cixous argues in "Sorties", that dominance of phallogocentric ideology in social and linguistic terms others women and confirms their subservient status in society. "Cixous' plea for women to: 'write about women and bring women to writing... through their bodies,' (*The Laugh of the Medusa*) directs the reader's attention specifically on the female body and difference by means of its reproductive ability and the effects of postnatal trauma" (Mitchell 107). By allowing the reader access to what is essentially a maternal experience, Devi offers a text that emphasizes the significance of a woman's role within the family unit which in turn suggests that women also deserve the social status equal to male members in male dominated societies.

Devi critiques "regulating systems of authority" that determine 'normal' behavior while marginalizing and policing the abnormal, thus making the social attitudes toward gender, visible, highlighting at the same time, the coercive patriarchal ideology. The play aims to explore the "insidious power of alien images that are not only forced on women but at times embraced by them" (Basourakos 280). In other words, Devi examines how the witch image, a "discrediting and devaluing image of womanhood" (ibid. 280), functions to distort the potential of women.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault illustrates the way the genealogy of torture and discipline works and how it represents the display of power on the body of the victim or scapegoat/subject in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The way power relations work today is what Devi has demonstrated through *Bayen*, and Chandidasi's victimization validates Foucault's argument. The villagers torture Chandidasi, mark her; not only verbally but also by branding her with infamy, and leave her physically and psychologically scarred that cannot be effaced. She is treated like a condemned criminal, and is imprisoned and quarantined in a secluded and deserted place within the periphery of the village. When the curtain rises, she is introduced as "utterly exhausted and despondent" figure, "at the end of her tether, dragging her reluctant feet like some condemned ghost debarred entry into human society" (*Five Plays* 75).

The element of spectacle is significant as it depicts mob mentality, and according to Foucault, "public exhibitions of punishment serve as a socializing process, writing culture's codes and values on the minds and bodies of its subjects" (Adair 453). Devi depicts this in scene 3, when the mob arrives in the graveyard, Chandidasi sitting by the grave of a child, guarding it in the dead of night, but at the same time extremely tired, sleepy, and perturbed over not being able to nurse her suckling child. The mob arrives and she is accused of being a Bayen: Chandidasi: Who's there? Who are you?

Gourdas (savage): See for yourself, Malinder, you bastard. It's your wife, the Bayen, that's been killing our children. Why don't you ask her yourself? Who was she talking to? Whom was she fondling?...

The Mob: (awestruck, they point their fingers at her). You're a Bayen.

Chandidasi: (her eyes wandering from face to face, in sheer bafflement). I came to guard the grave. ... (*Five Plays* 87).

In spite of her pleadings, she is squelched by the villagers including her husband, Malinder, who begins to dance frantically, beating a drum with a wild frenzy, and declares that his wife has turned into a Bayen. Chandidasi is dragged away by the mob, cast away to a desolate and forlorn place, no longer allowed to communicate with any individual. Thus, the mother, whose breasts are oozing with milk, transforms into a Monster/Other.

In the Foucauldian sense, Chandidasi becomes subject of the ideology, whose body is inscribed, punished and displayed as "the dangerous and

pathological other.” She becomes a victim not only of patriarchal ideology but also of age-old superstitions and myths that have superimposed the collective unconscious of the people. This dehumanizing practice works on different levels where a nexus of patriarchal, social, and cultural ideologies operates, and the poor and disempowered women are marked like “deviants,” publicly punished, and “made to bear and transmit signs in a public spectacle that brands the victim with infamy” (Adair 454).

Chandidasi’s body becomes a sign of public devaluation and the fear of death; it also represents the marginality of her existence within the corroded social system. The social set up also demonstrates the way men become the sole bearers of order, and of law, abiding by the laws that are clearly constituted to degrade women.

The play also highlights the conflict between a woman’s vocation and her responsibilities as mother. Chandidasi’s vocation as a Dome to bury the dead children has been a continuation from generation to generation, and her ancestors were esteemed highly in the rank of Domes. After the birth of her son, Bhagirath, Chandidasi finds it physically not possible to raise her son while carrying out her duties as a Dome, because she has to guard the graves of the dead children during nights. Chandidasi attempts to renounce her profession but she is forced by the villagers to continue as there is no one to replace her. The situation places Chandidasi at a crossroad where she has to choose either her motherly instincts and raise her son as a normal mother or fulfil her duties entrusted to her by her ancestors. She struggles to make Malinder understand the “quandary” she is in, but in vain: “It hurts to do the job these days, the job handed down to me by my ancestors, my hands rebel, and yet I have to go on doing it” (Five Plays 82). Chandidasi’s predicament here can be juxtaposed with the situation of women who need to work or struggle to maintain a balance between their work and their duties as mothers. The play, in Mitchell’s words, presents “juxtaposing issues associated with motherhood, such as the effects of post-natal trauma and the challenges associated with the woman’s inability to fulfil her maternal potential” (Of Monsters and Men). However, Chandidasi succumbs to the pressure of her village folk and finally agrees to bury the dead body of the little girl named Tukni whom she cared for like a mother, but ironically, it is at Tukni’s grave while performing her duty that she is suspected and then branded as Bayen.

Chandidasi's figure assumes ambivalence; she frightens and yet fascinates simultaneously which is another aspect of the concept of abjection in Kristeva's view. Chandidasi's adolescent son, Bhagirath's fascination and fear of the mother that he has been separated since he was an infant is an instance of the encounter with the abject. In the last scene of the play, after Bahgirath confronts his mother for the second time, he can hear her approaching from a distance with the sound of the canister clanging and the lullaby she is singing: Bhagirath: (to himself). I'll not look on her face, I'll just see her face on the water. There can be no harm if I don't look on her face. I'll look on the shadow upon the water. The other day I didn't (Bayen, 1986, 99).

When Chandidasi realises that her son is speaking to her, she warns him: "It's forbidden to talk to us... I am a Bayen" (*Bayen* 99). Bhagirath replies aptly: "I'm talking to a shadow" (ibid. 99). Chandidasi has indeed become just a shadow of a human being, a dark side of womanhood, and a non-mother since the day she was separated from her suckling child. Chandidasi does indicate to her son the boundary that has been created between the mother and the son by the community that Bhagirath should not traverse. Yet, Baghirath's desire to be reunited with his mother demonstrates that there is a vacuum in his life for mother's love which needs to be filled. However, this scene strongly delineates Chandidasi's humanity and her role as a caring, nourishing mother.

The stage in the last scene is immersed in a grim red light while a train is heard rumbling and approaching from a distance. Chandidasi is shown moving towards the train tracks to speak to her husband but she detects some men spreading bamboo poles over the tracks, probably dacoits scheming to stop and plunder the train. She tries to warn the dacoits to remove the poles as it would cause a terrible disaster but they escape after they recognize the Bayen, scared for their lives. Chandidasi in her attempt to bring the fast moving train to halt, loses her life. This is the moment of recognition of her humanity and an affirmation of her motherhood when the villagers arrive at the site of the terrible collision, and realise what a sacrifice she has made in order to safeguard the lives of hundreds of people. Chandidasi's positionality as a bayen, in the end is raised to that of the Mother and her identity is affirmed in the maternal relationship to Bhagirath which was denied before. The villagers who had excluded Chandidasi from their society, now accept her as one of their own when the train guard announces a posthumous award for her heroic act: Guard: ... Who's she?

Shashi (a villager): (looks around at everyone, clears his throat). She's a Dome woman, sir, one of us. (Bhagirath in hurt wonder, looks at his Shashi first, then at his father.)...

Bhagirath: Let me tell you all. You can write it down.

Guard: Who are you boy?

Bhagirath: (gathers courage). She's my mother.

Guard: Mother?

Bhagirath: Yes, sir. ... my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, sir. Not a Bayen. She never was a Bayen, my mother (*Bayen* 103).

The last scene elevates Chandidasi's status from Bayen into a deity, but her apotheosis occurs at the cost of her life. Also, by laying down her life to save the train from the disastrous accident, Chandidasi not only reclaims her identity but agency as a subject as well. It can be inferred that subaltern women who have no agency or control over their lives when they are alive, take charge of their lives by choosing death and reaffirm their subjecthood.

Conclusion

Even the deification of the protagonist and her reinstatement to the position of motherhood in the end cannot absolve the villagers of their systemic belligerence against her. As regards the question whether Devi's portrayal of motherhood reifies the concept of the "eternal feminine" which has been perpetuated by patriarchies in all societies, remains problematic. Although Chandidasi's effacement in the end raises her status, the play does reinforce the archetypal concept of "woman" as Mother, as a self-abnegating entity.

The inquiry into whether this play falls under the rubric of feminist drama is a complex one because there is not just one specific definition that constitutes and characterizes that kind of theater practice. *Bayen* cannot be strictly regarded as a feminist drama, if we note groundbreaking theater practices that have been introduced by some British and American feminist playwrights. The setting of the play is unusual and unnatural, as is the thematic concern of the playwright, who has used episodic structure and songs that break up the narrative, creating a critical distance, a technique that Churchill employs in *Vinegar Tom*, which is in keeping with the feminist theater practice. However, the play is characterised by its thematic concerns that foregrounds a woman protagonist. Devi's *Bayen*, appropriates various anti-realist techniques, like the use of song and dance, non-linear, episodic structure which fluctuates between past

and present, creating a dream-like atmosphere on stage. Samik Bandyopadhyay notes the gradual transformation in Devi's dramaturgy during her second phase of playwriting, that is, "in 1976-77... she chose a slightly different form, with songs and rituals and evocations providing a historical field for action" (*Five Plays* xiii). *Bayen*, opens with Chandidasi singing a lullaby to her distanced son, Bhagirath: "Come, sleep, come to my bed of rags,/ My child god sleeps in my lap..." (*Five Plays* 83). This song can be heard repeatedly in the play, along with the rattle of her canister, which creates a hauntingly elegiac atmosphere, aptly representing the trauma of the grieved mother. The element of dance, which is also used as a flashback technique breaks the linear structure of the play, time moves back and forth unravelling all the circumstances that led to Chandidasi's transformation from a mother into a Non-mother.

Some feminists scathingly critique the constraints of realistic mode usually adopted by dramatists which in their view portrays women in stereotypical roles assigned to them in the socio-symbolic order. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan note: "Getting raped, going crazy, and, of course, dying-- this is what women appear to do most often in realistic theater" (5). This implies that women have only appeared within "death space," or "space of absence, negativity, unrepresentability, is where femininity most often takes place" (5). But it may be noted in this play that the female protagonist, in spite of occupying "death space" or, denoting "lack" as a childless mother, is portrayed in a positive light.

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