

Multiple Subalternity of Women as Witch: A Postcolonial Reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Bayen"

Dr. Biswajit Choudhury

Assistant Professor of English, South Malda College
Affiliated to University of Gour Banga
Malda, West Bengal, India

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.136](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.136)



Dr. Biswajit Choudhury

Article information

Article Received:14/01/2026
Article Accepted:12/02/2026
Published online:24/02/2026

Abstract

Witching-hunting is a camouflage. Women are subalternized as witch to maintain women in economic and social subjugation, to exploit them sexually and to wrest property from their families. In the play *Bayen*, Mahasweta Devi's heroine Chandidasi is a victim of multiple subalternity. She is socially excluded from the community. Social exclusion and subalternity are the two sides of the same coin. As a subaltern she speaks of her words but there is none to listen to her words. She could not create any discourse before the powerful patriarchal hegemony. This research article shows that women are easy targets in labeling them as a witch because of patriarchal hegemony and multiple subalternity which *adivasi* women face in postcolonial Indian society. The mechanism of witchcraft accusation and its resultant torture and social exclusion are the politics of neo-colonial feudal lords like Gourdas to rule over the *adivasi* belt in India. Such postcolonial intruders like Gourdas in the lives of *adivasi* create obstacles for the upliftment of *adivasi* for their narrow vested interest. Chandidasi is branded a witch by the master plan of Gourdas. This article also shows that Mahasweta Devi creates enabling circumstances through the setting of her play in which female subaltern ultimately speaks. It is only with her death that Chandidasi speaks or creates discourse. It is a great loss for our society. If she had been given chance to speak in her life, the society as a whole would have been benefitted. With her death, Chandidasi rises above her multiple subalternity; and patriarchal society accepts her as a superior human being capable of doing something great or noble which masculine gender would have never been able to execute.

Key words: subaltern, witch, patriarchy, discourse, social exclusion.

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* as a short story first appeared in 1971 with the title *Witch*. Later, it was translated, dramatized and published in an anthology of drama entitled *Five Plays* by Samik Bandhapadhyay with the active participation of Mahasweta Devi. In his acknowledgement, Samik Bandhapadhyay admits: "As a translator, I enjoyed the rare privilege of the author's active participation in the work. In fact, for both *Bayen* and *Water* Mahasweta Devi provided me with rough translations, a kind of first draft, for me to work upon". (Devi: Acknowledgements).

The play *Bayen* deals with the mechanism of witchcraft accusations, torture and exclusion of women in postcolonial Indian social milieu to continue the colonizer's policy of divide and rule by neo-colonial masters or feudal lords. Witch-hunting is a camouflage discovered by feudal lords to kill the innocent and credulous women and capture their immovable property. Labeling woman as witch, *bayen* or *daayen* has been a common practice in Indian patriarchy among tribal community. In the typology of witches, *bayen* is a type of witch who practices black magic skill to harm children.

Even in this 21st century, we have many reports of "witch-hunting" in daily newspapers from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Andhra Pradesh etc. Under the guise of witch-hunting, women are subalternized in different ways. Daily Newspapers report numerous forms of torture in the name of witch hunting such as beating, cutting off hair, parading naked through the village, burning alive, socially excluded, forced to eat human excrement, sometimes raped and even put to death. Women are easy targets in this respect because of patriarchal hegemony and "multiple subalternity" (Pankaj 9) that dalit or *adivasi* women face in postcolonial Indian society. Multiple subalternity indicates those subalterns who have various levels of subalternity. Multiple subalternity of a woman "arises out of her low social position, economic dependence, and gender (as a female)" (Pankaj 9).

Discussion

Mahasweta Devi penned down the play *Bayen* keeping in mind that manifold aspects of the subalternization of women in witch-hunting. Chandidasi Gangadasi belongs to a family of the *Doms*, hailed as "*harijans*" (men of God) by Mahatma Gandhi. Chandidasi is the progeny of the legendary Kalu Dom who gave Raja Harishchandra "shelter when he lost his kingdom and became a beggar". (Devi 102). When Harishchandra became king again, he gifted Kalu Dom "all the cremation grounds of the world" (Devi 103). Chandidasi has been assigned the ancestral obligation to bury the dead children and guard the graves during night. She was married to Malindar, a Govt. employee in the morgue. Chandasidas was very beautiful, romantic and sensitive. "There was no one as beautiful as she, no one with such grace" (Devi 102). She always did her job with utmost care and sensitivity.

After marriage and especially after the birth of her son Bhagirath, Chandidasi decided not to perform the job of gravedigger because being a mother the image of dead children reminded her of her own sucking son Bhagirath whom she had to leave at home to guard the burial ground at night. She expressed her desire to her husband, Malindar to leave the village and settle at city, "You'll find home in the city and take Bhagirath and me away". (Devi 103). On the other hand, everyone in the village was jealous of her beauty and bounty as a woman, as a wife of a government servant, as a mother of a healthy son and as a courageous, sensitive woman. Such prosperity and affluence was intolerable to their relatives as well as neighbors. Malindar expresses the psychology of envy thus:

Malindar: I alone learnt how to sign my name, and they were all envious. I landed a government job, more envy. I married a golden doll of a wife...still more envy. I built a new hut, had two *bighas* of land for share-cropping, how could they help being envious? Bastards, get as envious as you can....I will send my son to school. (Devi 107)

The result of envy brought disaster in their happy family life.

The unfortunate incident occurred when Pakhi's daughter Tukni had small pox. Pakhi was the cousin of Malindar and her husband was Shashi. Tukni, daughter of Pakhi and Shashi, died because no treatment was given to her. But the whole responsibility of Tukni's death was entrusted to Chandidasi because she "asked Pakhi, How's the child? And imagine what she had to say! She said Bayen, you witch!" (Devi 109). After Tukni's death, the whole community rose against Chandidasi to prove her a witch. They know the cause of Tukni's death, yet they intentionally accuse Chandidasi of striking "her (Tukni) with the secret arrow" (Devi 110).

In the whole planning and execution, Gourdas, an outsider and a representative of feudal lord, plays a crucial role. This is the Gourdas whom Chandidasi would see at the end of the play to obstruct the railroad with poles to rob the passengers at night. Mahasweta Devi with masterstroke presents the intruder Gourdas who is a neo-colonial feudal lord in decolonized India. Such postcolonial intruders like Gourdas in the lives of *adivasi* create obstacles for the upliftment of the *adivasi* for their narrow vested interests. Consequently, postcolonial subalternization continues with new force and form.

Gourdas (to Shashi): Didn't I tell you? Now you can see it?

Chandidasi: What are you hinting at, Gourdas? What have you seen?

Gourdas: I've nothing to say.

Chandidasi(*with mad rage*): So? It seems Shashi has an adviser now in Gourdas.

Gourdas! When a neighbour's house is on fire, would you pour kerosene over the fire instead of water? Is that what you'd do?....

Malindar(*Gripping Gourdas by the shoulder*): What are you trying to put into Shashi's head? (Devi 110-111)

Therefore, the real villain is Gourdas who corrupts not only the innocent Shashi but the whole community also. He indirectly accuses Chandidasi of having killed the little Tukni. When Chandidasi had refused to bury Tuki's dead body, Gourdas feigned repentance but secretly plotting the strategy to punish her, "Have mercy on us, mother, forgive us our transgression" (Devi111). Gourdas's cajoling and flattery deceived Chandidasi and she gave her consent to bury the dead body for the last time in her life.

Chandidasi : (*with queenly dignity*): Go, I'll come. And let the community know that this will be the last time that I'll do the job. (Devi 112)

She was misunderstood by the whole community for her daring revolt against custom. Her superior courage, dedication to her duty, her bewitching beauty stirred the very foundation of patriarchal authority of the subaltern community.

In order to prove her a *bayen*, Gourdas in collaboration with Shashi and some other neighbours visited the graveyard to keep a watch on her to confirm her sinister association with the dead and collusion with the evil spirits. According to the plan, they took Malindar with them and convinced him that his wife is possessed by evil spirits. The mechanism of Chandidasi's social exclusion has been dexteriously planned.

Being a victim of multiple subalternity, there was none to listen to Chandasi's plea for mercy. Though the subaltern speaks her words, she could not create any discourse before the powerful patriarchal hegemony. Mahasweta Devi equipped Chandidasi with the required qualities and "organic intellectual". Her exceptional qualities, too, fall short for creating any discourse. Patricia Waugh succinctly observed: "If women speak outside order, they will either not be heard or be heard as insane" (Waugh 54). Chandidasi's crying, pleading for mercy is silenced by the loud sounds of drum beating. The ceremony of punishment completes with the loud beating of drums which reminds us of the beatings of drums while sati burning was enacted. The voice of female subalterns is always suppressed

by creating louder voice by the accumulated power of patriarchy. Malindar surrenders to the power of group created by Gourdas because the dynamics of crowd power is that "Power is never the property of an individual, it belongs to a group and remains in existence only as long as the group remains together." (Arendt 44). The loving husband of Chandidasi had no other option but to surrender to the crowd which possessed power now, not Gourdas or Shashi.

In a patriarchal society, woman is generally supposed to be inferior to man intellectually as well as practically. So, Chandidasi must either obey the norms laid down by patriarchal ideology of her society or accept her subalternization as a lonely woman living in a hovel beside the railway track. If a woman speaks outside the patriarchal norms, there is none to listen to her. Naturally, Chandidasi's plea for mercy has fallen on headless on deaf ears.

The male members of low caste community are subalternized by upper caste. So, the same male members of low caste community attempt to capture some sense of power by controlling their women. Several researches have shown that witchcraft accusations emerge especially when men want to extent power over women. Therefore, the subaltern patriarchy as well as feudal exploitation is equally responsible in the fabrication of the superstitious dogmas attached to Chandidasi's social exclusion and branding as *bayen*. Malindar played the role of an authoritative husband who was coloured completely in the colour of patriarchy.

After completion of the declaration of witch, Chandidasi is socially excluded from the community. Social exclusion and subalternity are the two sides of the same coin. "Subalternity is a condition of subordinate relations – economic, social, political and cultural – and where the superior enjoys certain privileges and positions" (Pankaj 8). Chandidasi is an example of multiple subalternity, as has already been pointed out. Like the general features of social exclusion, Chandidasi is deprived of "a livelihood secure, permanent employment, earnings, property, credit, land, housing, minimum or prevailing consumption level, education, skill, democratic participation, public goods" etc. (Pankaj 16). The problem of social exclusion in postcolonial India is more of denial of freedom, equality and access to resources and opportunities. Unlike western societies, social exclusion in India is to a great extent structural, rigid and not easily amendable. "The rigidity of social exclusion is structured in the homo hierarchicus society, its social and cultural practices and beliefs and values" (Pankaj 17). In accordance with the fundamental features of Indian social exclusion, what is given to the *bayen* Chandidasi is really shocking and it moistens our eyes.

Bayen: They give me my ration on Saturday, with a little rice. Out of that I give you (*the imaginary dog Jhumra*) a little, the rest I eat myself. (*with a sad smile*). A bayen shouldn't eat too much. Yet hunger gnaws.... Just a little rice, The salt all mixed with dirt, worm in the lentil – why should I take it....I've no oil in my hair, it's all matted and I can't comb it. There's no kerosene at home to light a lamp....It's only half a kilo of rice, a fistful of lentil, fifty grams of oil and a pinch of salt. Is that enough for a week? (Devi 98-100).

Besides, she is given two *saris* and two *gamchhas* once a year. The community people bring these materials on every Saturday and put by the *Chhatim* tree on a hamper. She is forced to wear an iron string carrying a canister that makes clanging sounds as she moves. It is to warn people about her presence because there is poison in her touch and poison in the air she breathes. She is a walking evil or devil. She relentlessly grudges against the villains and the community who meted out injustice to her by branding her as *bayen*. The psychological impact of separating her from her suckling child Bhagirath sinks her into the world of illusion of cradling a child and having Jhumra (a dog) by her side as her companion. In reality, the dog is dead since long and Bhagirath is now a school going boy. She still fancies the little Bhagirath sleeping in her lap and she lulls him to sleep. Twelve years have passed

since she had been excluded. The play opens with her lullaby that she sings regularly throughout these twelve years.

Bayen (*sings off*):

Come, sleep, come to my bed of rags
 My child god sleeps in my lap,
 The elephant and horses at the palace gates,
 The dog Jhumra in the ash heap. (Devi-97)

Being a low caste courageous woman Chandidasi should have retaliated with equal force if she were in the domestic space, she was actually bound to surrender to the crowd power. The reaction of dalit women as victim of domestic violence is not homogenous. Kanchan Iliah in *Why I am not a Hindu* points out that wives among the low caste do not take beating lying down, they retaliate. Abuse for abuse is the socially visible form. The report of gender violence used by landlords, middle class, lower middle class people and policemen very frequently appear in newspapers. But in private spaces the low caste women are not under the obligation of the ideology of husband warship (*Pati Parameswar*) and if they face violence within the family they may fight back. Financial independence is the real cause of this retaliation of dalit /adavasi women. The middle class people should learn from them for the empowerment of women. In the words of International Monetary Fund's (IMF) chief Christine Lagarde, India's GDP can expand by a whopping 27% if the number of female workers increases to the same level as that of men (TOI, January 23,2018).

Though patriarchal ideology inflicted upon Chandidasi brutal oppression, repeated suppression, and mental condition of repression, she being a courageous and virtuous lady sacrificed her life for the welfare of society which branded her *bayen*. When she was on her way to complain Malindar against Bhagirath, she found that the same Gourdas again accompanied by some villagers was obstructing the railroad with bamboo poles to rob the passengers. Chandasi the *bayen* immediately drove them away and tried to stop the train from occurring any accident. She went on screaming till the roar of the train drowned her voice and the train's light swallowed her up, followed by sudden darkness. The flashlight of the engine came up to reveal Chandidasi lying dead. After her death, she was recognized as a noble lady by the same society-

Guard: She's been brave. A brave woman. A brave deed. The Railways are sure to award her a medal, posthumous of course, and a cash reward too.....who is she?

Shashi : She's a *dom* woman, sir one of us

Bhagirath : She's my mother my mother, late Chandidasi Gangadasi (*suddenly breaks into a louder weeping*) ... my mother sir , not a *Bayen*. She was never a bayen, my mother (*certain falls.*) (Devi 122)

It is in her death that Chandidasi rises above her multiple subalternity and patriarchal society accepts her as a superior human being capable of doing something great or noble which masculine gender would never be able to execute. With her death she proves that she is above the traditional hegemonic discourse of power and patriarchy.

Thus, the gruesome picture of the subalternization of woman, like Chandidasi who is declared a witch with certain vested interests, has been dexterously presented in this play by Mahasweta Devi. In the postcolonial Indian context, the main reasons behind such subalternization of women are "to maintain women in economic and social subjugation, to exploit them sexually and to wrest property from their families" (Roy 136). Research shows that usually ugly looking, widowed, unprotected, infertile poor old, low-caste women, having red eyes, feet aligned backwards and introvert in nature are attributed as witch. Sometimes, an individual having some psychiatric problem with the above

mentioned features are branded as witch because of the symptomatology, especially less interaction, over religiosity, trans, possession and dissociation etc. Dr. Kamlesh Kumar Sahu, Associate professor, Department of Psychiatry, Govt. Medical college and Hospital, Chandasigarh has wrote an excellent article entitled *Witch-hunting in Jharkhand : Does Mental Health Has Any Business on it ?* Dr.Sahu brings forward the available data of witch-hunting in Jharkhand which has thirty-two tribal groups comprising 26% of total population of the state. He shows the probable causes of witch-hunting and practice of witch craft in postcolonial India:

Low literacy rate, prevalent superstitions, economic instability or insecurity, poor health and communication facilities, diseases are widespread, often taking form of epidemic, ethno healing system revolves around supernatural beliefs and practices where witch craft sought as cause of the disease/ epidemic/ personal tragedy and natural disaster. (Sahu 86)

Center for Alternative Dalit Media (CADAM), New Delhi, reported in their empirical study on four states that belief in witchcraft is still prevalent among the socially and educationally backward and excluded communities of rural India. A vast majority (70%) of the households has a strong belief in the existence of witch and witch practices – the people of Bihar (75.5%), followed by Jharkhand (75%) and Odisha (55.3%) Moreover, it is shocking that the people of Giridih (98.2%) and Hazaribagh (99%) district of Jharkhand have firm believers of the existence of witch and witch practices.

Conclusion.

From the analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* it is found that women are easy targets in labeling them as a witch because of patriarchal hegemony and "multiple subalternity" that *adivasi* women face in postcolonial Indian society. The mechanism of witchcraft accusation and its resultant torture and social exclusion are the politics of neo-colonial feudal lords like Gourdas to rule over the *adivasi* belt in India. Such postcolonial intruders like Gourdas in the lives of *adivasi* create obstacles for the upliftment of *adivasi* for their narrow vested interest. Such feudal lords or intruders from city apply colonizer's policy of "Divide and Rule" and become the representative of those innocent subalterns who cannot speak their words in their own way. Chandidasi is branded a witch by the master plan of Gourdas. Her superior courage, dedication to her duty, her bewitching beauty, stirred the very foundation of patriarchal authority of community leaders like Gourdas who dexterously planned the mechanism of Chandidasi's social exclusion. After declaring her a witch, there was none to listen to Chandidasi's plea for mercy. Though Chandidasi as subaltern speaks a lot, she could not create any discourse before the powerful patriarchal hegemony. Her plea for mercy is silenced by the loud sounds of beating drums which reminds us of the beatings of drums while *sati* burning was enacted. The voice of female subalterns is always strangled by creating louder voice by accumulated power of patriarchy. Therefore, subaltern patriarchy and feudal exploitations are equally responsible for the subalternization and social exclusion of Chandidasi.

It is only with her death that Chandidasi speaks or creates discourse. It is a great loss for our society. If she had been given chance to speak in her life, the society as a whole would have been benefitted. With her death, Chandidasi rises above her multiple subalternity and patriarchal society accepts her as a superior human being capable of doing something great or noble which masculine gender would never be able to execute. With her death she proves that she is above the traditional hegemonic discourse of power and patriarchy. Thus, from the analysis it is found that Mahasweta Devi warns the postcolonial Indian intelligencia to shed off their long slumber before it is too late to give proper recognition of such tribal woman as Chandidasi. Patriarchal society should learn to respect such woman as Chandidasi, not after their death but during their life time so that they can wash off the dirt that clog the wheel of progress in tribal belts of India. Patriarchal social norms and customs should be de-constructed and re-constructed whenever situation demands.

Reference

- Arendt, H. (1970). *On violence*. Harvest Books.
- Devi, M. (2011). *Five plays*. Seagull Books.
- Illiah Shepherd, K. (2010). *Why I am not a Hindu*. Sage.
- Luckhurst, R. (2006). Mixing memory and desire: Psychoanalysis, psychology and trauma theory. In P. Waugh (Ed.), *Literary theory and criticism: An Oxford guide*. Oxford University Press.
- Nayar, P. K. (2011). *Postcolonial literature: An introduction*. Pearson.
- Pankaj, A. K., & Pandey, A. K. (Eds.). (2014). *Subalternity, exclusion and social change in India*. Foundation Books.
- Roy, P. (1998). *Sanctioned violence: Development and persecution of women as witches in South Bihar*. Development in Practice.
- Sahu, K. K. (2018). Witch hunting in Jharkhand: Does mental health have any business in it? *Open Journal of Psychiatry and Allied Sciences*.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- The Times of India. (2018, January 23).
- Waugh, P. (1984). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. Methuen.