

Mahasweta Devi's "Bayen": A Critical Reading

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SUMMARY:

"Bayen" is a short story by Mahasweta Devi that tells the tragic tale of Chandidasi, a woman from the low-caste Dom community in rural West Bengal who is wrongfully branded a witch (a "bayen") and ostracized by her community.

The narrative unfolds through the following key stages:

Initial Identity and Fearlessness: In her youth, Chandi is a vivacious and brave woman who inherits her father's ancestral duty as a gravedigger for children. She takes pride in her work, guarding graves from jackals and scoffing at those who ask if she is afraid.

Transition to Motherhood: Chandi marries Malindar Gangaputta and they have a son named Bhagirath. Motherhood significantly changes her; she becomes "soft" and begins to weep frequently. She grows to loathe her profession, finding it increasingly painful to bury children now that she has her own.

The Witchcraft Accusation: Suspicion from the community mounts after a smallpox outbreak claims the life of her niece, Tukni. Superstitious villagers claim to have seen milk dripping from Chandi's breasts while she stood over the child's grave. One stormy night, she is caught at the graveyard trying to cover children's graves to protect them—an act of compassion that the villagers misinterpret as an attempt to "raise" dead children.

The Betrayal and Banishment: Under intense pressure from the community and his own growing fears, Malindar publicly denounces her, beating a drum and declaring his wife a bayen. Chandi is banished to a small hut near the railway tracks. She is forced to live in total isolation, wearing red and clanking a piece of tin to warn others that a "witch" is approaching, as even her gaze is believed to be deadly.

Bhagirath's Discovery: Years later, Bhagirath- who was raised by a stepmother and told his mother was dead-learns the truth about Chandi from Malindar. Though he is frightened by the superstitions surrounding bayens, he is deeply moved by the sound of his mother's singing and briefly encounters her, though she tells him to stay away for his own safety.

The Heroic Sacrifice: The story concludes when Chandi discovers robbers attempting to sabotage the railway tracks to loot a train. In a final act of agency and self-sacrifice, she runs toward the approaching train, flailing her arms and screaming to warn the driver. She is killed by the train, but her actions prevent a massive disaster.

Posthumous Redemption: After her death, the government announces a medal for her bravery. In the presence of the chagrined Dom community and government officials, Bhagirath steps forward to claim her, proudly naming her as his mother and declaring to everyone that "she was never a bayen".

PORTRAYAL OF CHANDIDASI:

The tragic portrayal of Chandidasi in Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* is a poignant critique of how patriarchy, caste, and superstition intersect to dehumanize a woman. Her tragedy is rooted in the "double burden" of her identity: she is a mother who must perform the "masculine" and macabre ancestral duty of a Dom gravedigger.

Initially, Chandi is a vivacious woman who fearlessly inherits her father's work burying children. However, the transition to motherhood makes her "soft," and she begins to loathe a profession that requires her to handle dead children while nursing her own son, Bhagirath. This emotional shift is misinterpreted by her superstitious community. When she is caught attempting to protect graves from a storm, the villagers brand her a "bayen" (witch), claiming she "raises" dead children to suckle them.

The tragedy deepens with the betrayal of her husband, Malindar. Though he initially shows "masculine protectionism," he eventually succumbs to social pressure and publicly denounces her as a witch to secure his own status within the patriarchal hierarchy. Chandi is then forced into absolute ostracization, living in a shack by the railway tracks, wearing red, and clanking a piece of tin to warn others that her "deadly" gaze is approaching. She is systematically dehumanized and malnourished, as the community believes a well-fed bayen gains more evil power.

Perhaps the most tragic element is Chandi's internalization of this stigma. To protect Bhagirath, she suppresses her maternal instincts and warns him away, accepting her identity as a "shadow" of a human being. Her tragedy concludes with a heroic sacrifice; she dies stopping a train from being sabotaged by robbers. This final act of agency forces a posthumous redemption, where the community finally acknowledges her humanity. Her son's concluding declaration-"she was never a bayen"-serves as a heartbreaking final note on the senselessness of her lifelong suffering.

CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY/ ISSUES OF GENDERED IDENTITY & MOTHERHOOD:

In Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen*, the central theme is a biting critique of patriarchy and the gendered construction of identity, specifically how a woman's body becomes a site of social control, superstition, and eventual revolt.

The Subversion of Masculine Labour

The tragedy begins with Chandidasi's inheritance of her father's role as a Dom gravedigger, a profession traditionally associated with "masculine" traits like fearlessness and strength. By successfully performing this "dark" and "fearless" work, Chandi ruptures conventional gender roles. However, the community views this as a threat; when a woman undertakes such masculine work, it is perceived by the patriarchal society as "bastardizing" the profession, rendering it "weak" or "cheap".

Motherhood and the "Double Burden"

Chandi's struggle is defined by a "double burden": the expectation to fulfill her caste-assigned "masculine" labour while simultaneously performing the traditional feminine roles of wife and

mother. The narrative shows how patriarchy pathologizes feminine empathy. When Chandi becomes "soft" and weeps over the graves of children after the birth of her own son, the community classifies this sympathetic emotion as a "weakness" or, more dangerously, as evidence of supernatural deviance. The physical manifestation of her motherhood—milk dripping from her breasts—is misinterpreted not as a biological reality, but as a "witch" feeding the dead, proving how the female body is routinely misrepresented to fit patriarchal fears.

Masculine Protectionism and Betrayal

The character of Malindar exemplifies the shifts in patriarchal control. Initially, he offers "masculine protectionism," reacting with aggressive rage to defend his wife's honor. However, as the community's pressure mounts, he chooses to align with the "patriarchal hierarchy" to secure his own social standing. By beating the drum and publicly declaring her a *bayen*, Malindar participates in her systematic dehumanization, stripping her of her identity as a wife and mother and replacing it with the "forcefully strapped on" identity of a witch.

The Internalization of Stigma and Final Revolt

Devi demonstrates how women often internalize patriarchal views; Chandi eventually accepts her status as a pariah, believing herself to be a *bayen* to protect her son from her "deadly" gaze. Her isolation is a form of social death, where her body is "tamed and institutionalized" through starvation and exclusion.

Ultimately, her final act of sacrifice—stopping the train—is a symbolic expression of protest and revolt. By choosing to die to save others, she reclaims her agency, transforming her "dishevelled, unkempt" body into a statement of political resistance. Her son's final declaration that "she was never a bayen" serves as a posthumous redemption, forcing the patriarchal community to confront the senselessness of its own superstitions.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE:

The title "Bayen" serves as a potent focal point for Mahasweta Devi's critique of how patriarchal and superstitious forces construct a woman's identity. In the context of rural West Bengal, a "bayen" is a designation for a witch—a woman believed to possess supernatural powers, such as the ability to "raise" dead children to nurse them or to suck the blood of the living with a single gaze.

The narrative follows the protagonist's tragic journey from Chandi, a vivacious woman, to Chandidasi Gangadasi, and finally to the dehumanized "bayen". The title suggests that the story is not merely a biography of a woman named Chandi, but an investigation into the social construction of a monster. Her identity as a bayen is "forcefully strapped on" by a community that fears her non-conforming body and her ancestral work as a gravedigger.

As a "bayen," Chandi suffers a form of social death and institutionalized isolation. She is forced to live in a shack by the railway tracks, wear red, and clank a piece of tin to warn others of her "deadly" approach. Devi uses the title to highlight the pathologization of motherhood; Chandi's maternal grief and the biological reality of milk dripping from her breasts are misinterpreted as evidence of witchcraft. Even her husband, Malindar, participates in this branding to secure his own place in the patriarchal hierarchy, publicly declaring, "my wife is a bayen!"

Ultimately, the title is subverted through Chandi's final act of agency. By sacrificing her life to prevent a train disaster, she transforms her "dishevelled, unkempt" body into a statement of political resistance. Her son's concluding cry-"She was never a bayen"-effectively deconstructs the title, forcing the community to confront the senselessness of the label that defined and destroyed her life.

USE OF MYTH/RURAL FOLKLORE:

In Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen*, myth is employed as a powerful sociopolitical tool to explore the dehumanization of women through superstition and patriarchal control. The central myth is that of the "Bayen" (witch), a figure from rural folklore believed to possess deadly supernatural powers, such as the ability to "raise" dead children from the earth to nurse them or to suck the blood of the living with a single gaze.

The narrative illustrates how patriarchy weaponizes myth to pathologize biological female experiences. For instance, when Chandi's breasts overflow with milk after her niece's death, the community interprets this not as a physiological reality of motherhood, but as mythical evidence of her being a Bayen feeding the dead. Furthermore, Chandi initially identifies herself through the ancestral myth of being a descendant of Kalu Dom, a legendary gravedigger. While this ancestry gives her pride, it also facilitates her branding as "deviant" when she performs the "masculine" labour of guarding graves-a role society eventually misinterprets through a supernatural lens.

Devi highlights the tragic internalization of myth, where Chandi eventually accepts her status as a pariah to protect her son from her supposed "deadly" gaze. However, the story concludes by deconstructing these myths. In her final heroic act, Chandi laments her lack of actual supernatural powers to stop the train, relying instead on her human agency. Her son's final declaration-"she was never a bayen"-shatters the mythical construct, exposing it as a senseless tool used to facilitate social death.