



Culture as Power Play: Negotiating Gender, Caste and Social Exclusion in Mahasweta Devi's Bayen

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Abstract— This paper examines Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* through the lens of culture as a mechanism of power; exploring how gender, caste and social exclusion are produced and sustained through culturally sanctioned practices. Drawing on the concept that culture is neither neutral nor autonomous, but shaped by dominant power structures, the study argues that cultural norms function as instruments of social regulation, determining identities, roles and hierarchies within the community. In *Bayen*, the protagonist Chandidasi's transformation into a "Bayen" illustrates how patriarchal and caste-based ideologies construct and marginalize individual identity through social designation rather than inherent reality. The paper contends that power operates through cultural discourses that normalize exclusion while presenting it as tradition or collective morality. Institutions such as the family, community and the state reinforce these discourses by legitimizing particular beliefs and religious practices, thereby maintaining existing social hierarchies. At the same time, the text exposes moments of resistance that challenge these structures, revealing the tensions between imposed identity and individual agency. Informed by theories of power and discourse, the study demonstrates that identity is socially constructed through intersecting systems of caste, gender and cultural authority rather than existing as a fixed or natural category. Ultimately, *Bayen* critiques the cultural politics of exclusion and underscores Mahasweta Devi's broader concern with exposing the invisible mechanisms through which power governs social life and marginalizes vulnerable communities.



Keywords— Culture, Power, Exclusion, Discourses, Resistance, Marginalization

Introduction

Culture is not merely a repository of traditions and beliefs but a contested site where power is produced, negotiated and legitimized through social institutions and cultural practices. Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* powerfully exposes this cultural politics by demonstrating how patriarchal and caste-based ideologies employ ritual, superstition and discourse to construct and sustain systems of exclusion. Through the tragic transformation of Chandidasi, a lower caste woman and mother, into the socially stigmatized Bayen(witch), Devi reveals that social marginality is not an inherent condition, but a culturally manufactured identity shaped by dominant power structures. The narrative interrogates how motherhood, female agency, caste, occupation and bodily identity are

regulated through cultural norms that define purity, pollution and social legitimacy. The production of the witch figure illustrates the operation of cultural hegemony, where fear and superstition become ideological instruments for disciplining women and preserving patriarchal authority. Chandidasi's body emerges as a contested site upon which caste, gender and ritual intersect, reflecting broader mechanisms of social control that inscribe exclusion onto marginalized bodies. Yet *Bayen* also resists these oppressive cultural constructions by foregrounding the protagonist's humanity, maternal identity and moral agency, challenging the dominant discourses that work to silence and erase her. *Bayen*, represents culture as an arena of power, where gender, caste, ritual and identity are continuously negotiated, exposing the ideological foundations of social

exclusion while simultaneously articulating possibilities of resistance against cultural oppression.

Cultural Hegemony and the Politics of Exclusion

Culture in Bayen functions as an instrument of power through which dominant social groups regulate behaviour, maintain authority and legitimize inequality. The story demonstrates that culture is not a neutral collection of customs and beliefs, but a socially constructed system shaped by existing power structures. Michel Foucault's concept of the inseparability of power and discourse provides a significant framework of understanding Bayen. He argues that power operates through discourse by determining what can be spoken, believed and accepted as truth. In Bayen, cultural discourses surrounding ritual purity, caste, gender and superstition become mechanisms of social control. Customs and religious beliefs are treated as unquestionable truths, enabling the dominant community to exercise authority over marginalized individuals. The belief that a woman who buries dead children may transform into a witch exemplifies how irrational cultural narratives acquire legitimacy through repetition and collective acceptance. These discourses govern everyday life, defining acceptable social roles while silencing alternative perspectives and ensuring that power remains concentrated in the hands of those who control cultural meaning.

The narrative further reveals that culture becomes a means of exclusion and resistance rather than social protection. Chandidasi's condemnation arises not from any supernatural reality but from her occupation of an unconventional social role that challenges established gender and caste norms. Her transformation into the feared Bayen illustrates how dominant groups manipulate cultural beliefs to justify injustice and reinforce unequal power relations. Those who occupy positions of authority determine the language narratives, and symbolic meanings through which society understands deviance, while powerless individuals are rendered voiceless and subjugated. At the same time Bayen exposes the conflict between institutional power and those who refuse complete submission, revealing that cultural discourses are also sites of resistance. By exposing the irrationality underlying superstition and social ostracism, Mahasweta Devi critiques traditions that function not as safeguards of communal welfare but as ideological tools that preserve hierarchy and perpetuate the marginalization of vulnerable individuals.

Gendered dimensions of Cultural Oppression

In Mahasweta Devi's Bayen, patriarchy and gender politics operate through cultural practices that are shaped by changing power structures. As power relations shift across historical contexts-from colonialism to postcolonial governance and more recently the influence of globalization

and capitalist paradigms-culture is continually reconfigured to sustain dominant interests. Although the post-colonial state formally upholds secularism by proclaiming equality among all religious communities, institutional practices often continue to privilege dominant cultural and religious norms, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Within this framework, women become the primary targets of cultural regulation, as patriarchal ideology defines their social value through prescribed roles of wife, mother and caregiver. Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of power the story illustrates how cultural discourses normalize gendered expectations and discipline women who deviate from them. Chandidasi's designation as a Bayen is therefore not merely an act of superstition but a manifestation of patriarchal power that uses cultural belief to control female identity and social existence.

Chandidasi's exclusion from society demonstrates how patriarchal discourse deprives women of dignity, agency and belonging. Once branded a Bayen, she is stripped of her identity as a wife and mother, the very roles through which patriarchal society recognizes female worth. Her husband's inability and unwillingness to defend her signifies more than personal weakness; his silence represents the complicity of patriarchal institutions that prioritize communal norms over justice and humanity. As a result, Chandidasi loses her social status, maternal rights and personal identity, becoming a victim of intersecting forms of cultural and gender-based oppression. Mahasweta Devi thus exposes how patriarchal systems manipulate cultural beliefs to legitimize the exclusion of women while presenting such practices as unquestionable traditions. By revealing the human cost of these structures, Bayen critiques a social order in which women are systematically marginalized through the combined forces of patriarchy, culture and institutional power.

Caste, Stigma and Social Ostracism

Caste system operates as a powerful cultural mechanism that structures social relations and legitimize exclusion in Bayen. Culture operates within the community through customs, religious practices and inherited beliefs that have been shaped by historical power structures. Although the principle of secularism advocates equal treatment of all religious communities and the non-interference of the state in religious affairs, cultural practices are often reinforced through state institutions and public religious activities, allowing dominant ideologies to persist. Cultural norms therefore continue to reflect the influence of earlier historical periods, reproducing long-standing hierarchies based on caste, gender and ritual purity. Within the narrative, Chandidasi's identity as a member of the Dom community, traditionally associated with handling the dead, places her at

the margins of society, even before she is accused of becoming a Bayen. Her caste location determines her social value and limits her access to dignity and acceptance, demonstrating that caste is not merely a social category, but a cultural discourse through which power is exercised and maintained.

The story further reveals that caste and gender intersect to intensify Chandidasi's marginalization. Once she is labelled a Bayen, her already precarious social position is transformed into complete exclusion, as dominant caste ideology associates both her occupation and her gender with impurity and danger. The accusation functions as a mechanism of power that legitimizes discrimination while protecting the authority of dominant social groups. By constructing marginalized communities as impure and socially threatening, upper-caste interests preserve their caste privileged position and justify practices of exclusion. Chandidasi's suffering therefore reflects the intersection of caste oppression and patriarchal discrimination, illustrating how multiple systems of power operate simultaneously to silence and dehumanize vulnerable individuals. Through this portrayal Mahasweta Devi critiques a cultural order in which inherited caste hierarchies and gender norms continue to shape social identities, exposing the enduring violence embedded within structures that claim to preserve tradition and communal harmony.

Superstition as a mechanism of Cultural Violence

Set against the backdrop of rural India, Bayen portrays superstition as a dominant force, shaping both individual perceptions and collective social behaviour. The illiterate villagers firmly believe that Chandidasi possess supernatural powers capable of harming children despite the absence of any rational evidence. Ironically, she was once respected by the same community for performing the essential ritual of burying the dead. However, as fear and suspicion replace trust, she is transformed from a valued member of society into a perceived curse. Her natural maternal instincts, expressed through her concern for children's graves, and the involuntary flow of breast-milk are tragically misinterpreted as signs of witchcraft and malevolent intent. Rather than recognizing these as expressions of grief and motherhood, the villagers allow superstition to distort reality, ultimately branding her as a dangerous supernatural being.

The destructive consequences of superstition extend beyond social prejudice and culminate in collective violence and exclusion. Convinced that Chandidasi is a bayen capable of bringing misfortune, the villagers physically attack and stab her, with even her husband participating in the assault. Their unquestioning acceptance of irrational beliefs, transforms suspicion into an unquestioned social truth,

leaving Chandidasi isolated from her husband, separated from her son, and reduced to the status of a social outcast. In Bayen, superstition is not presented merely as ignorance, but as a cultural mechanism through which vulnerable individuals are marginalized and oppressed. The narrative demonstrates how irrational beliefs, reinforced by collective acceptance and existing power-structures enable society to justify discrimination, violence and the systematic suppression of those who are unable to defend themselves.

Power, Agency and Resistance

Through Chandidasi's life, Bayen explores the complex dynamics of power, silence and resistance within a deeply hierarchical society. Subjected to relentless humiliation, social ostracism and psychological torment, she becomes a victim of collective prejudice rooted in superstition and patriarchal authority. Yet, despite the violence inflicted upon her, Chandidasi refuses to surrender her humanity or moral integrity. Her silence should not be interpreted as submission, rather it represents a quiet form of resistance against an oppressive social order that denies her dignity and identity. She continues to embody compassion and empathy even when stripped of familiar bonds and social acceptance, demonstrating that moral courage can endure in the face of systematic dehumanization.

The ultimate act of risking her own life to prevent a train accident serves as the highest expression of Chandidasi's ethical strength and selflessness. By saving countless lives, she protects the very community that had condemned, isolated and persecuted her. Instead of responding to cruelty with vengeance, she rejects hostility and remains guided by an unwavering sense of human responsibility. Through this sacrifice, Bayen challenges the cultural labels that define individuals according to superstition, caste and social status, suggesting that true humanity transcends such artificial divisions. Chandidasi emerges as a powerful symbol of resistance against oppression, illustrating that marginalized women often embody extraordinary moral resilience. Her self-sacrifice elevates her above the narrow boundaries of superstition, religious prejudice and class hierarchy, affirming the triumph of compassion and ethical courage over social injustice.

CONCLUSION

Culture is portrayed by Mahasweta Devi, not as a fixed collection of tradition and values, but as a contested arena where power is continuously created, exercised and challenged. The narrative reveals that cultural meanings emerge through social practices shaped by deeply embedded structures of caste, patriarchy and social hierarchy, which regulate identity, language and interpersonal relationships. By depicting the politics of fear, superstition and ideological

dominance, the text demonstrates how the protagonist is constructed as the "Other", emphasizing that marginalization is a product of social and cultural processes rather than an inherent condition. Devi further exposes how dominant cultural discourses determine whose identities are recognized, whose voices are legitimized and who is pushed to the margins thereby perpetuating systems of exclusion and oppression. At the same time, Bayen disrupts hegemonic structures by foregrounding acts of resistance and revealing the ideological foundations of gendered and caste-based discrimination. Ultimately, the text underscores culture as both a mechanism of social control and a potential space for resistance, negotiation and transformation, establishing Bayen as a powerful critique of intertwined dynamics of gender, caste and social exclusion.

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