

CONTESTED IDENTITIES , WOMEN IN LIFE AND IN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S "BAYEN", PONMAGHAL VANDHAL AND EERAM

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Abstract

The unique aspect of human nature is one's Identity. Though identities are a natural phenomenon pertaining to one's behaviour and characteristics in relation to others and their own self it is often a space which is contested. Alarmingly when it comes to identity of a woman in our society it is most often Imagined and constructed as opposed to ones true self. A woman's real identity is effaced and instead either manipulated or eclipsed or misrepresented. Identities are constructed through stereotypes presented in literature, movies, culture, religion, and other social structures. A social construct of a woman's identity is most often built on ethical standards which the society has intrinsically designed with its patriarchal codes. Such a view is absolutely corrupted. In spite of all the feminist polemics in every field, women still face infinite difficulties based on labelling and discrimination when their own identities are imagined and constructed. This paper attempts to analyze three literary pieces one is Mahasweta Devi's Bayen and two is Ponmaghal Vandhal a Tamil movie and three is Eeram yet another Tamil movie all of which grounds on issues of imagined identities and stigmatization followed by lynching/suicide/death.

Key Words: Contested Identities, Stereotypes, Patriarchal Codes, Feminist Polemics and Stigmatization.

The unique aspect of human nature is one's Identity. Though identities are a natural phenomenon pertaining to one's behaviour and characteristics in relation to others and their own self it is often a space which is contested. Alarmingly when it comes to identity of a woman in our society it is most often Imagined and constructed as opposed to ones true self. A woman's real identity is effaced and instead either manipulated or eclipsed or misrepresented. The validity of representation is always questionable both in life and in literature. Identity construction involves politics as stereotypes of misrepresented identities are kept alive through patriarchal ideologies, recorded as narratives/literature and practiced through institutionalized structures in the society. Not all woman's identity is contested. Any woman who breaks the stereotypes and tries to carve a niche of her own becomes vulnerable to misrepresentation and stigmatization. There exists a persistent obsession with the identity

of women in our society. Innumerable women writers over the decades have grappled with issues of misrepresentation and identity. Surprisingly after all these endless efforts over the years fight against misrepresentation, labelling and stigmatization is persistent. be it home, workspace and society women are still fighting untold battles against such biases. Pathetically women still become part of the mechanics of such patriarchal ideologies unknowingly. They don't perceive the fact as held by distinguished feminist Maya Angelo that "each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all woman. A major section of women are still not aware of their contribution to the existant patriarchal dynamics in which they are involved in. And totally unaware of their contribution to it. Women are women's worst enemies. We need to unlearn many things that society has imparted on us over the decades. Feminist intervention today is not just against men but against the clutches of patriarchy that embodies both men and women.

Identities are constructed through stereotypes presented in literature, movies, culture, religion, and other social structures. A social construct of a woman's identity is most often built on ethical standards which the society has intrinsically designed with its patriarchal codes. Such a view is absolutely corrupted. In spite of all the feminist polemics in every field, women still face infinite difficulties based on labelling and discrimination when their own identities are imagined and constructed. For misrepresentation distorts the 'real'. In such a scenario some women are strong enough to resist and survive while many women in Indian context become profoundly estranged and exclude themselves from society. They experience alieanation, stress due to continual denial of agency and autonomy and above all social pressure which leads to depression. This paper attempts to analyze three literary pieces one is Mahasweta Devi's Bayen and two is Ponmaghal Vandhal a Tamil movie and three is Eeram yet another Tamil movie all of which grounds on issues of imagined identities and stigmatization followed by lynching/suicide/death. Indian women are subjected to acute stigmatization and labelling which even ends fatal. All the above literary pieces explicate and expose the myriad ways in which women are traumatized and alieanated to an intense degree.

This kind of psychological trauma leading to alienation and death in women is a recurrent factor among Indian women. However such judgements are often offensive, hurtful and disrespectful. Patriarchy is synonymous with imperialism. In both the victim loses agency. In the words of Spivak: "Between Patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and

object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development(61, Spivak)

Violence against women is an age old phenomenon which continues till date. Violence is inflicted to women through varied ways 1. by government machinery 2. by members of other community 3. By members of own community. The third and the last strategy includes women who are part of the patriarchal dynamics and hence includes women against women. There have been several socio-religious reform movements from the nineteenth century. The fight for equality has its origin way back to 1920's with women's organisations and movements like *The Aghorekamini Nari Samiti*, *Aligarh Zenana Madrassa* and the *Mahila Parishad*. The role of women's movements and organizations were a fight against poverty, development issues, women's education, voting rights social empowerment and so on. Even women's education was emphasized only in order to educate their offsprings. As Bell Hooks reiterates:"

"Our females must be qualified, because they are to be the mothers of our children. As mothers are the first nurse and instructors of our children: from them children consequently, get their first impression, which being always the most lasting should be the more correct. Raise the mothers above the level of degradation, and the offspring is elevated with them"(125, Aint I a woman). Education is a weapon to our women. It broadens their thinking and enables women to act independently and rationally. As goes the saying that girls with great dreams become women with vision.

Indian cinemas are not alien to dealing with women's issues. Innumerable violence like molestation, abduction, dowry and domestic violence have been recurrent themes in Indian cinemas. The problem is sometimes movies tend to normalize violence like rape and domestic violence. Most soap operas trending the various television channels too revolve around domestic spaces that features a stringent mother in law and daughter in laws. Where one is docile an embodiment of patience and virtue and the other is an educated independent woman bossy and unruly. Finally the virtuous docile daughter in law wins the hearts of all the family members because of her sacrifice and patience after battling all the storms. These kinds of stereotypes still are a part of all these institutionalized structures in the twenty first century. Hence unlearning becomes mandatory as all these biases have been genetically and psychologically encoded in our minds. Many movies and soap operas have handled rape as a common instance. Though legal aids and justice is brought to light through legal forums such as POSCO, there are still instances of child rape and murder throughout the country.

Mainstream people particularly the netizens grow indigestible with every news of rape and murder of children but only to grow diminished with intensity since one horrible incident is replaced by the other the next day. Still there are a handful of movies by socially conscious makers that have marked milestones in Tamil Cinemas and Indian cinemas at large.

One contemporary movie with a strong message on child rape and adulterated justices is *Ponmaghal Vandhal* by debutant director J.J.Fredrick. A case is excavated, resurrected after fifteen years. The movie revolves around the protagonist Jyoti who is confirmed an assassin and labelled psycho. Allegations are that psycho Jyoti is a serial child kidnapper and killer who is also charged of killing two youngsters Rohith and Diwakar. Jyoti's guardian "petition Pothuraj" defends jyoti to be innocent unearthing the case back to mainstream attention through the lawyer Ms.Venbha. At the backdrop Fredrick anchors the sensitive issue of child sexual abuse and murder a predominant issue in the current situation. Fredrick focuses on the the many repercussions inflicted on the victim and their family after rape, both physical and psychological particularly the kind of stigma associated with the victim. He grapples with yet another predominant social issue that is distorted identities or the tampering of female subjectivity. Society always identifies women as the core propagator of any offense. The movie deliberates the lack of grit in women to stand for justice in society . This is the space offered to offenders to hide and manipulate. As long as women are not open minded and discuss violence of this kind without considering it as a stigma offenses of this kind is repetitive.

Tamil cinema as such is shrouded with many movies with strong social messages in recent times and this movie *Ponmaghal Vandhal* makes its own mark amidst its contemporary court room dramas like *Ner Konda Parvai* and *Manidhanall* of which voices the subaltern agony. One of the many central issues is "imagined" and "constructed identity in women. These kinds of identities have power politics as its base. Labelling and stigmatizing women are part of patriarchal power relations. As reiterated in the beginning of the paper it has power relations as its tool. Identity distortion destroys the real. A socially acclaimed honourable buisness man *Varadharajan* destroys the real identity of a victim to save his dignity. A powerful mans dignity is protected , veiled at the cost of an innocent womans dignity. Inorder to save his canny sons monstrous deeds he destroys evidence. Powerful dialogues in the movie enables audience to think and to answer themselves. The court room scenes starts as usual with a lighter vein and as time goes Venba grapples the audience with

her speech. She says “ why is it when women narrate their problems or stand for justice they are often considered as mad and labelled as dramatic”. This is a powerful question that makes us think. Society often overlooks women’s expression of anger and fight for justice as a minor issue. Most often such expressions are shoved off either as unscrupulous or as dramatic without recognizing it as an outlet of extreme frustration bestowed on her either by people at home or through societal pressure. The movie highlights the callousness of people and how nothing could affect us until it becomes ours. The movie is also a soulful dedication to so many children who have lost their lives. To shatter one’s identity is the biggest crime inflicted, be it anyone.

Another major manipulative tool are the Gossips. Gossips are basically unauthenticated, baseless yet powerful weapon for destruction of a person’s identity that is usually over looked as a manipulative tool. Gossips are effective patriarchal tools. Like virus they encompass every space present. The judgemental nature of our society promotes it. Even an acclaimed writer like Ambai recounts on how a divorced woman in an apartment undergoes psychological stress due to the very many gossips generated by the neighbours and the indifference with which she is looked upon /treated by others even today. Psychological wounds are severe than physical wounds. The body rejuvenates easily while the mind does not or if not that easily. They leave indelible marks in the minds of the victim and many a times pushes them to either depression or even suicides. However people who generate gossips do not understand the gravity of offense they are involved in. It is done either intentionally or unintentionally and in either cases people are the carriers of offence.

One movie which has gossiping as a major manipulative tool to victimize a woman is *Eeram*(2009). *Eeram* is a supernatural crime thriller released in 2009 written and directed by Arivazhagan. Ramya is the girl next door pursuing her degree in a college. She falls in love with a man called Vasu. When Vasu offers proposal for marriage after some time Ramya rejects it on the context of he being a policeman. Later again when Vasu asks her to marry him without the consent of her father she once again disagrees. With this they part ways. After sometime she ties her knot with a rich businessman Bala and in a short interval after marriage Ramya dies. The investigation is taken by her ex boyfriend vasu and he gets to know that Ramya had died of asphyxiation in a bath tub on the pretext of some extramarital affair with a man and his frequent visits to her apartment complex is confirmed by her neighbours in her apartment as per investigation. However vasu rejects all these claims and smells some foul play behind her death as he knows Ramya very well. Meanwhile strange

mishaps are happening in the apartment. A woman, a man and a watchman in the same apartment all die under mysterious ways one by one. Vasu is able to relate a supernatural or strange intervention about the death happening in the apartment with the death of Ramya but is left puzzled. In a short time he finds out how Ramya takes the form of water to kill her perpetrators.

The movie celebrates two vital issues. One is about the psychological trauma inflicted by her own husband and her neighbours in the apartment who create untrue stories and spread it around through gossips and make it true. This is what is called “imagined” or “constructed “identity which challenges ‘female subjectivity’. A love affair she had had before her marriage in a romantic /platonic level brings in all suspicion to her husband. Same way each neighbour in order to hide their own infidelity create untrue stories about Ramya that ends in her death. Two is the director’s attempt to bring in a supernatural element to get justice says a lot about the denial of justice to such victims even today. Even among the genre of the ghost movies where the victim is a rape victim who rises back to supernatural form in order to restore justice is true of most of our Tamil cinemas.

Women from rural to the urban, from the subaltern to the elite from country to continent have experienced violence of many kinds. Though we might collectively get together as victims we can’t homogenize the experience of one woman with the other. It differs according to social, economical, linguistic, racial diversities. There is a vast gulf between what an educated economically independent woman undergoes and an uneducated poor subaltern woman does. Both the category of women experience struggles but the kind of struggle and intensity differs. The lives of the subaltern have always been the central concern for a writer like Mahasweta Devi. By making the subaltern speak, Devi reconfigures the identity of such women through the subaltern historiography. In most of her works she talks about the different kinds of “subalternization” of Indian women. While capturing the violence on Indian women Devi has deliberated on the role of history in being a testimony to show how deification of women was a trick to constrain her expression and prowess. Her Jashoda in *Breast giver* is an excellent example. Deification sets boundaries for women. The story is an apt example of the misuse of women’s sexuality for male interests and benefits. Through this story Mahasweta reiterates the point that not only caste but class becomes a prime criteria for suffering of a woman. Jashoda hails from a socially upward class but still undergoes all kinds of struggles because of her class.

Another extreme form of women’s oppression and subordination that Mahasweta Devi deals with is Ostracization, witch craft, aggression and labelling of women. Bayen a

play that revolves around Chandi dasi that deals with one of the most cruel form of subjugation of women. Ostracism in simple terms means exclusion from society. The term ostracism has a Greek Origin wherein people who are considered dangerous to the society were exiled for few years as punishment. Witchcraft and ostracism have been a serious patriarchal practice happening in rural areas. Aggression in women has always been seen as a form of abnormality since ages. But a psychological rendering into women's mind shows how various societal factors particularly those institutionalized ones like unhappy marriages, pregnancy, verbal and physical abuse by in laws illtreatment and neglect at home and by loved ones go in to triggering aggressive behaviour in women. These factors are thoroughly the repercussions of patriarchal social pressure on women which is most often ignored. The other extreme is that sometimes women who express their emotions veiled by religious aspects are deified as Goddess themselves who predict future. Even today women becoming hysterical at temples is a subconscious expression of their bottled emotions. However deification and ostracization are two ends of the same problem expressing womens loss of freedom in expression and the patriarchal constraint on women.

Mahasweta Devi's Bayen is a deep plunge in to female subjectivity and its misconceptions in a predominantly patriarchal society. As Bell Hooks affirms;

Under patriarchy, men are the arbiters of identity for both males and females, because the cultural norm of human identity is by definition , male identity- masculinity. And Under patriarchy the cultural norm of male identity consists of power, prestige, and prerogative as over and against the gender class women (138, Aint I a Woman)

Restating the above ideas in this research a women's identity is most often not subjective and its often distorted and manipulated. As critic Vandhana shiva rightly observes it "the power groups create false stories and phobia in order to exert control on those who are disobedient. Women are scapegoats in this context(228, witch craft, pain and resistance). she also stresses on how such control over women takes place through "cunning, coercive means; gossip malicious rumours fed by folklores, mythic or imaginary tale(226, Witchcraft, Pain and Resistance). Devi presupposes the discrimination of the Bayen in the play " A Bayen is not an ordinary witch: she cannot be killed like an ordinary witch because to kill a bayen means the death of your children. The play al brings out the cultural bias that constitutes mythology.

Having come from the lineage of the Kalidome clan Chandi readily accepts her ancestors job of child burial. She gets married to Malinder Singh. Chandi is accused of the death of the child "Tukni" her relative and then on is labelled as 'Bayen'. Her husband partially supports her during the initial phase but finally gives up on her and labels her as 'Bayen'. Devi describes the scene

Malinder: (shouting at the top at the top of his voice, crying heartrendingly at the top of Voice, at the same time). I Malinder Gangaputta..... strike strike my drum(beat the drum fanatically..... to declare that my wife has turned into a Bayen, a Bayen (Five Plays, 87).

When a woman is excommunicated by society based on superstition or through other means of subjugation. She experiences extreme form of alienation and in due course they either accept social stigmatization or become radical and resilient. Women both in literature and life experience acute sense of emotional and physical aberration due to patriarchal subjugation. The complementary nature of literature and life helps us understand how through literature we identify ourselves with the characters. and most often conceptualize their stand point and empathize with them. Literature after all is the offshoot of real life experience. Literature today both texts and movies are overwhelming with strong feminist stance and contemporary message. Still the change remains a distant dream. people have still not got out of the patriarchal mindset. Change is happening but such transformations are only partial.

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