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Witchcraft Allegations and Sati- the Strategic-Removal of Women from Space and the Politics of Ostracism with Reference to the Writings of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract:

In this paper, I propose to draw a parallel between the practice of witchcraft among the lower castes and the imposition of the custom of Sati upon the upper caste women as mode of their strategic-removal from the domestic and public domain. Both these practices prevalent among the different categories have the one specific objective of the gender-cleansing of the private and public space (in case they dare to interfere the public one). While there is no reference to Sati among the lower castes (recorded history doesn't hint at any), the upper castes have widows, child-widows, Satis but less rather no instances of witches as such. With the custom of burning women as Sati in hand, the upper castes could easily avoid/ignore the brandishing of their women as witches. Moreover, Sati was ritualistic, sacramental; had a religious dimension as the women were sanctified through memorials, accorded the stature of a Goddess, shrines were built in their names with regular puja offerings. The Sati women being strategically removed from the space, efforts were made cautiously that they occupy public memory for long, were revered and applauded as family's pride. The upper caste could never allow or accept the lower caste women to occupy any sacred space either in topography or in Public memory. Raising the stature of a low-caste woman by offering her or giving her a Public, sacred, religious space could disturb/destroy the hierarchal set-up, idolization of a subaltern woman was non- acceptable to the dominant majority; and so they were ostracized as savage representatives of the evil. Whatever the ruse, Sati or Witchcraft, the motive, I argue was the strategic removal of independent, powerful women or women who stood to benefit from inheritance, from the domestic or public domain.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Ostracism, Conventional history, Myth, Ostracism, Community, Survival rights, Cultural Silence, Anti-accommodative stance,

In her narratives, Mahasweta interrogates the anti-accommodationist stance of the dominant community in post-independent India that has failed to rectify the wrongs of exclusion of the marginalized by acceptance and accommodation. In both the cases, the victim is a woman or more so a capable one, who either owns land, is a claimant to family- property, is economically independent or can pose a threat to the male hierarchy and status. Finding their continuity in history, Myths support these practices and

consequently certain practices of alleging women as witches and Sati become real, get accepted as real, influencing the culture inadvertently and occupying the social space implicitly. The role that energy and asceticism play in myths is somewhat subverted in social life and the Patriarchal set up deprives the women of agency under the pretext of its values and ideologies. Witches sustaining on their own, living in a domain in which men have no access and exercising a knowledge that is secretive have always infuriated men and as a result, this imagined terror, born out of ignorance and a deep urge for vengeance for all real/imagined controls that circumscribe their lives; they embark on a mission to extinguish/lynch/burn the witch. Witches have been feared, spited, ostracized and have remained unacceptable to every human society. Imaging women is an imposition and has a strong element of social control. It confers a certain degree of passivity on the subject which is cast in an image, the active role being bestowed upon the image-caster. The Witch is always a woman, and every woman in the community is a potential witch. A woman is never directly attacked by a witch; rather the victims are always children who become sick, and sometimes die, and men in whom she poses a threat. Perhaps the worst fear associated with witches was that some men are made impotent by witchcraft. When things go wrong in a village or family- an illness or death, bad crops, an accident- villagers can be easily persuaded to blame some vulnerable member of the community who is usually childless, widow or lonely woman. Mahasweta traces the logic behind the tribal's adherence to the dogma. Having little control over the forces governing their lives, the tribals attempt to gain a false sense of control by eliminating the object of imagined terror. Weighed down by the overwhelming socioeconomic-political pressures, living a life of destitute deprivation, the ignorant tribal/Dalit seizes up the imaginary and the superstitious. Barbara Bond points out that "When a community believes itself to be under the threat of physical or cultural extinction, people tend to rely more heavily on supernatural explanations." Parulekar comments, based on a study of the conditions of superstitions in Western India, "Whenever there was an epidemic of diseases like cholera, people believed that the "bhutali"(witch) was responsible for it and a regular witch-hunt used to take place during which women would be beaten up. When they had decided who the bhutali was, they would beat her and then kill her." Jenni Irish in her *Massacres, Muthi and Misery* rightly observes that "in societies in which the belief in witchcraft is entrenched, accusations of witchcraft and witch hunts will escalate if the community is under stress."

When men ostracize a woman as a witch, they do it as a religious duty; as a necessary step taken to protect Men and Nature. Nature's failure to yield is attributed to the ominous presence of a female whose eradication becomes a necessary pre-condition to restore normalcy in nature and social sphere. Mahasweta's *Bayen* (1971) demonstrates the agony, pain, poverty and discrimination experienced by the Dome community. It also shows the impact of social ostracism on domestic settings when a husband abandons his

wife after she is branded a Bayen by the community. Chandidasi Gangadasi, the proud descendant of the legendary Kalu Dom who gave shelter to king Harishchander when he had lost his kingdom and was awarded 'all the burning ghats of the world' when the king was restored to power, lives a happy, contented life looking after her husband and son and executing her given task of burying of dead children of the village, and guarding their graves. Strong, courageous as she is Chandi's heart undergoes change when she herself becomes a mother. Because of her own child, she now feels a deep pain for every dead child and her heart suddenly starts feeling hurt burying the little ones. When she guards the grave through the night, her breasts ache with milk for her own son Bhagirath. In a moment of despair, she decides to chuck her work – her ancestral profession. But the peace of her and her family is torn to pieces by the illiterate, ignorant community. For her crime of overstepping the borderline of a stagnant social order, she is awarded the severest of the penalties – she is banished from the human world to the condemned world of the supernatural. Her decision to give up the job of grave tending threatened to disrupt the static social system. Overnight, Chandi, the beloved and beautiful wife and mother, the proud descendent of Kalu Dom, is branded a "Bayen" – a woman who would supposedly cast an evil shadow on human children, who is believed to dig up the graves and raise the dead babies, kiss them and suckle them.

In "A Corpse in the Well", an autobiographical narrative by Shankarrao Kharat, the life of the Dalit community of Mahars is depicted. Being a Mahar, the father has to guard a corpse inside a well for a whole night. The next morning he has to retrieve the corpse from the well. The son, on the other hand, is bewildered by the implicit obedience of the father to the authorities. They are forced into believing that such mean and gruesome tasks are inherited and if discarded will invite the wrath of God on their ancestors, as Chandidasi reiterates: I can't get over the scare. Whenever I seem to have made up my mind that I won't go back to the job ever, I seem to hear my father's voice roaring like thunder: If you opt out, it'll be my beat again, is that what you desire?(83)

The story ends on an ironic note as Chandi saves the lives of the people of the very same community by sacrificing herself. The Bayen averts a major train accident at the cost of her own life. Nobody is willing to claim the corpse and it is Bhagirath, who finally picks up courage and acknowledges the dead woman as his mother.

Chandi is alleged to possess certain magical, supernatural powers and hence to be feared. Ironically, these very 'mystical', 'dangerous' powers nullify her power and position in her family and the community. Ostracizing Chandi for fear of her 'evil' powers (which they attribute to her themselves), the community seeks to ensure a false sense of security. By labeling the assertive, self willed Chandidasi a witch, the low caste patriarchy finds a way to eliminate the threats to its power-status. The outcaste paternalists, themselves

victims of upper-caste oppression, attempt to reduce the threat to the stability of the “given” social codes of gender dominance by victimizing their own woman. The unacknowledged fear of female agency, disguised as the authority enables the community to judge the individual and eventually leads to Chandi’s estrangement from her son and husband. Even her identity as a mother does not apply to Chandidasi as she is a lower-caste women and the community overlooks her maternal sensibilities for her minor son. This dislocation from space unleashes a train of sufferings; severs all her ties, deprives her of the secured boundaries of home and presents fresh challenges of livelihood too.

In our suffering, we are broken, stripped of our sense of agency, stripped of the sense that we participate in a meaningful world. It is the experience, Levinas writes of “extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment and solitude”; in the language of Elaine Scarry, pain is “world-destroying.” This Pain is the common denominator for the women belonging to both categories; whether they are witches, potential witches or satis or potential satis. The story Bayen also reveals the vulnerability of the tender maternal sentiments in the face of dogmatic, superstitious ness of a male-dominated social system. She endures with limitless perseverance the crime that the community commits against her. Refusal to adhere to the norms of the social set-up caused this ostracism; which means that the upper caste Patriarchy wanted to retain lower caste women for their “services” viz., the menial work, as field-hands etc. This being the plausible reason behind the non-imposition of the practice of Sati among the lower castes; they were allowed to remarry and reproduce as human labour force was a necessity to the upper- castes who kept themselves away from lowly, menial work or agricultural labour. “In a survey of witch-hunt incidents in China and India, Govind Kelkar and others argue that witchcraft accusations emerge especially when men want to exert power over women. Also, those in privileged position ensure that these mythic formulations are put to practice in a correct way. In the narratives there are also instances where Community performs a dubious role and gets involved in inhuman atrocities on its own people. At times, it is coarse, over-emphatic and intolerant especially in the case of the gendered subalterns its indictments are often harsh to loosen the grip of a retrograde culture that thrives on exclusionist politics and supports unhealthy segregation of the social fabric. The outcaste paternalists, themselves victims of upper-caste oppression, attempt to reduce the threat to the stability of the “given” social codes of gender dominance by victimizing their own woman. The males of lower caste Dom community who are exploited and powerless themselves, attempt to capture some sense of power by controlling their women through “magico-ritual spheres.” The unacknowledged fear of female agency, guised under the authority of a people to judge the ethicality of an individual, leads to Chandi’s estrangement from her son and her husband. She is obliged to subordinate her interests and desires to the collective will of her community. Behringer and Edward Bevar in “Witchcraft fears and Psychosocial Factors in Disease argue that feelings of envy, jealousy, hatred and fear

frequently accompany witchcraft accusations, which have been interpreted as a “conscious or unconscious displacement of responsibility for a rupture in an interpersonal relationship.”

Usually in most of the cases, the suspicion of a woman being a witch spreads from the home of the victim herself. It is mostly the working of the other women of the household who want to get rid of a useless burden. In Bayen, the suspicion begets the mind of the community at the behest of the woman relative whose child dies. Males encourage such tales and soon the concocted story of the woman being a malefic one spreads into the community and in the process her subsequent ostracization makes it feasible to hold upon all that the victim possesses viz., land, ornaments, cattle etc. Lonely, dependent woman become an easy prey. Being poor, often unmarried, these women were dependent on the community for assistance and were therefore the source of resentment in times of dearth. Fredrick Golooba rightly points out that it is easy to accuse poor women of jealousy-induced witchcraft, and the well-to do can be accused of practicing witchcraft to acquire wealth. The fact that many women accused of witchcraft was reported to be sharp-tongued and quarrelsome only served to reinforce this social interpretation of witchcraft accusations. The prosecution of women for witchcraft therefore represented a mechanism by which communities purged themselves of their least desirable members. In “The Witch”, for example, there is the dumb and slow-witted Somri, the ‘daini,’ who comes out as mute metaphor of patriarchal (feudals as well as subaltern) exploitation. She gives in without resistance and succumbs to male sexual violence that is rampant in rural areas. The narrative of “The Witch” and “Bayen” record the fact that both the feudal as well as the subaltern patriarchy are equal participants in the fabrication and the fuelling of the superstitious dogma attached to ‘witch-hood’ and the consequent extinguishing of the woman in question. The status of women depends upon the whims of the men and their assumptions that may not be fair. The veil of superstition only hides the true motive behind the killings. “Superstition is only an excuse,” Pooja Singh Purwar, a social welfare official, told the Washington Post’s Rama Lakshmi in 2005. “Often a woman is branded a witch so that you can throw her out of the village and grab her land, or to settle scores, family rivalry, or because powerful men want to punish her for spurning their sexual advances. Sometimes, it is used to punish women who question social norms.”

Once stigmatized and ostracized the victimized women convert their isolation into a secretive domain and are presumed to have supernatural powers to harm and kill and thus are imaged as violent, cruel, and fearless. They try to assert and establish a reign of terror or create an aura of fear around themselves. This is a ‘coping mechanism’ for survival in an otherwise rigid, weird society of men. On 28th August 2014, Damien Gayle covered the news for mailonline-

“Witches” chop off Indian father’s hands and burn him alive in front of his son after he went to see them to treat a medical problem and they feared he was a rival wizard. “They were laughing and dancing around his body to music while he screamed in agony. In the end, there was just a pile of ashes left, said a police spokesman in Mandla, Madhya Pradesh, the closest city to where the ritual slaying happened.

“They cut off his hands because they said that was where his power was.”

A man being reduced to a pile of ashes appears another fabricated piece of the story. However, it is ascertained that the fear of death at the hands of those who compelled them to live a doomed life cause them to induce fear and terror, and they try to gain some power for the sake of mere survival. No doubt, witchcraft indicates at the tensions and strains in the social structure. Ostracism and dislocation make women revengeful and assertive.

On the other hand, the element of austerity attached to Sati makes the victim a figure of sacredness and reverence which is blissful, moral and upholds the status of the women and her community. All kinds of tensions are converted into a sublime state of glorification as the object of contention is removed cleverly from space. The binaries that exhibit both these states are that of Upper caste/Lower caste, Sati/Witch, Sacred/Profane and their functionalities/ influences got defined by the hegemonic Patriarchal set-up.

Communities exercise their control over their women, define their role and see to it that they abide by the community’s norms. In “Dewana, Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree” marriage drives a thirteen years old girl away to bed-sit an old, aged husband dying of tuberculosis where a series of misfortunes follow her. She is beaten heartlessly by a wretched, inefficient, suspicious husband and on his death; the greedy relatives want to kill her persuading her to become a Sati so that she is exterminated from the claims of a share in property.

Control over women deals with two aspects. One is women’s disinheritance from immovable property in the form of land, and their exclusion from the productive economy, involving removal from Public life and seclusion to the domestic sphere of the house in the form of purdah. The second is the far greater control exercised by men over women’s sexuality- imposed by caste constraints- through arranged marriage, child marriage, prohibition of divorce, and strict monogamy for women, leading to Sati and bans on widow remarriage, including infant or child widows. These strictures were enforced most severely by the higher castes, particularly by the Brahmins.

Unlike the West where wealthy women were also accused of witchcraft and the stratagem employed against them as well; the Indian upper caste had the custom of Sati that could

eliminate the women quite easily and also became a means of securing social status and renown for virtue. Ashis Nandy in his essay on “Sati” writes that the rite had been prevalent among upper-caste Indians for at least two thousand years without ever becoming a standard practice. As he writes, “So while constituting about 11 percent of the population of Bengali Hindus, the upper castes accounted for about 55 percent of the cases of Sati, whereas the lower castes, constituting 89 per cent of Bengali Hindus, contributed about 45 percent of the victims. This 45 percent came mainly from the upwardly mobile, Sanskritizing sectors of the lower castes. In other words, the rite was becoming popular not among the rural poor or the small peasantry, but amongst the urban nouveaux riches who had lost part of their allegiance to older norms and had no alternative commitments with which to fill the void.”

In her introduction to *Symbols of Power, Studies in the Political Status of Women in India* (1979), Vina Mazumdar has drawn attention to the difference between Western and Indian views of womanhood. Despite the common fact of oppression, the causes behind the oppression of women have been different. Women were oppressed not because they were considered inferior, but because they were considered powerful. It was this ‘Shakti’ which needed to be controlled. She was seen as the other which represented the impulsive and the irrational and posed a threat to the masculine virtue and power. The Witch because of her secret knowledge that she exercised was/is considered powerful; while the mystique of Sati fed on the values of chastity, female virtue and sacrifice projected women as brave and virtuous.

Sati as an act of virtue and renown was a popular prevalent practice among the upper castes, as the need to be chaste and virtuous was not a necessary condition among the lower castes. Their women were allowed re-marriage, moral constraints loosened as they were looked upon as ‘a menial force’ whose presence was needed for the much-required domestic and field- services. In “Panchkanya” the five dispossessed wives of foot soldiers paint an entirely different picture of the war at Kurukshetra. The narrative carries a message as these women of “Janavritta” or the commoners teach the young widow Uttara how to cope with her life which is rendered meaningless due to widowhood. Among the Royals, a woman is allowed only a half life when her husband is no more. In young Uttara’s case the trauma is manifold more as she loses her husband barely six months into her marriage. Her unborn child remains the sole cause for her existence but here, too, she knows that the joy of motherhood will be short lived as the Princes of the Royal families are reared by the wet nurses. For Uttara, life becomes an endless wait for death. However, the Panchkanya- whose names derive from the names of rivers, continue to flow towards life. They teach Uttara that Life is not static. They too have lost their loved ones but they will marry again and have children. They will keep alive the cycle of births and deaths. “We worship the earth. After the terrible calamity, the Sun always

rises. Even after this dreadful war, Nature will stand still... As long as there's life, that life demand fulfillment. Our widows remarry, are respected by their families. They work alongside their husbands cultivating their land, harvesting and storing the crop. They never deny the demands of life in order to exist as mere shadowy ghosts, shrouded in silence. Once we had husbands, now we don't. Crying won't bring them back to life. Also our husbands fought and died in the king's war. No divyalok for them. That's only for the rajavritta."

While Mahasweta sees these lower castes women as stoic, robust, having the quintessence of life; the same lower caste women were seen by the upper-caste men as an easy prey for mindless physical and economic exploitation. As they were not confined to the courtyard throughout their life and had to leave homely spaces to work in fields or work in other households to eke out a living, the social prestige was out of question. Sans morality, sans virtue (upper castes per se) they could not be burned at the altar of Sati, and so were projected as a dehumanized entity and made witches as a punishment for being alive and powerful as well. Ania Loomba observes in her essay "Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Post-Colonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India" that widow burning has been one of the most excruciating ways of patriarchal vehemence. According to Ania Loomba, the representations of Sati have tended to homogenize the burnings and to isolate them from the specific social, economic and ideological fabric in which they are embedded. Thus the spectacularity of widow immolation lends itself to a double violence: "we are invited to view sati as a unique, transhistorical, trans geographic category and to see the burnt widow as women with special powers to curse or bliss, as one who feels no pain, and one who will be rewarded with everlasting extra-terrestrial marital bliss." Loomba argues that the Sati is marked off from all other women by her will. She desires or wills to be burnt. As a result her decisions are to be revered by the community. In all ways, Sati was putting an end to the tension and unusual suspicions that the presence of a woman exudes.

Even in the ritual-practice of burning evil embodied as woman in the festival of Holi; it gets ascertained that the bygone ages have always found it convenient to force a woman sit on the pyre for upholding the norms and cherished morals of civilizations. Burning of woman in any form is a devilish act; that compel women to "become witches" sometimes by acting dangerous and powerful; so that they can withstand the devil inherent in men under the garb of tradition and morality.

Since independence, the 'burning' of women as witches or sati has lessened (Sati being abolished and not in practice since long); but the allegation on women of being a witch persists and the life of an upper-caste widow is a life-long curse even to this day. An

alleged witch is allowed to live with all banalities of movement and is denied all life-assisting materials and basic needs. Ostracism is social for her, she becomes an alien figure for the entire space; while an upper-caste widow even to this day, is ostracized in the socio-ritualistic sphere. Her presence is considered inauspicious in religious occasions; birth ceremonies, marriages etc. Besides, a widow being alive with all her unsatiated desires of mind and body is always under the suspicion of being a potential witch whose simple gaze, touch, smiles, gaits can harm men and children. The Politics of ostracism for women is annoying, disturbing and violent even today, its implications being more mental than physical. The past and its influence have been internalized by generations of people and needs to be reviewed as a much-needed process of self-renewal. In the state of Uttarakhand where I work, the state dailies report of certain unusual incidents that are read, accepted but never questioned either by the people or by the administration. Every 3-4 months, it is reported that some primary or secondary school of some village is hit by the “wind” as on one particular day, the school-girls swayed themselves, cried aloud together or fainted. So, some priest/ Ojha/ Dangaria is called for the purification of the school-premises to ward-off the evil-spirit. Consequently, the school remains closed for the next 10-12 days. The general perception is that the wind affects only the girls and never the boys and the reason given is- the girls being delicate in constitution both physically and mentally succumb to the pressure of the forces. Another belief is the pollution of the space by the unclean, menstruating girls. The people consider the hills to be clean and thereby, inhabited by holy spirits; once their clean spaces are violated by unclean girls they get enraged. It is believed that a menstruating girl coming in contact of others who have not started their cycle yet pollutes others as well resulting in this mass-hysteria. Beautiful girls are considered more vulnerable as the evil –spirits are on the look out for their sexual-satiation. The movement of the girls is restricted, they are always under watch and any kind of abnormality in their behaviour makes them prime victims of allegations or being possessed. So, a girl is protected and separated by the family and the community at the same time. Female Foeticide, Honour-killings are rampant in both rural and urban space and such crimes continuing in the present social scene show the signs of inescapability of the past that allow the gross violation of survival rights of women. Since the Culture is again defined by the dominant and the elite and is inherited, transmitted, altered, modified, and reproduced as per the convenience of the dominating, elite class, the malefic cultural tools like Sati, Witchcraft allegations, segregation of women reflect the motive of the hypocritical community for whom gaining economic power and independence in material concerns is the utmost priority. As I write this paper, the Union cabinet is reported to have approved Rajasthan government’s bill called Rajasthan Women (Prevention & Protection from Atrocities Bill, 2011 that lays down stringent penalties for those who harass or assault women by branding them as “Witches.” Section 4 of the draft Rajasthan Women Bill says that whoever maligns or accuses the woman of

being a “Dayaan’ will be punished with a prison term extending up to three years, along with a fine that can go up to Rs 5,000. Since 2001, Jharkhand has also enacted a state law called “Jharkhand Dayan Pratha (Witchcraft) Act” to rein in the crime, but it has been proved more effete than effective. Legislative intervention can help sort out the problem to some extent; but an implicit tension exists as the civil society doesn’t accept all the agenda of the state. It acts in a sense of counter-balance; neither opposing nor collaborating with the state, thus producing a problematic situation. Conventional history keeps intact the Traditional Power within the Indian system as people tend to drag on the burden of history, memory and the past which obstructs/restricts change in the social sphere. Questions of social justice are not culturally addressed, even though legislation attempts to make inroads. Devi’s work is an attempt to break the ‘cultural silence’ on oppression. The representation made by Mahasweta Devi is the ethical reminder that signifies a different kind of identification to the Subalterns. Her works prove to be instigating, not a challenge to subaltern self-representation rather they enable the subalterns to interrogate exclusionism.

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