

SPECTACLE OF VIOLENCE AND CULTURE OF SILENCE IN BAYEN AND LIGHTS OUT: A FEMINIST READING OF WITCH-HUNTING AND URBAN APATHY

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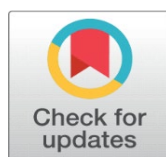
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores women's oppression and forced silence in patriarchal societies across different regions and socio-cultural aspects as portrayed in Mahasweta Devi's Bayen and Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out. Although the two works are set in contrast spaces - Bayen rooted in rural, tradition-bound society and Lights Out in an urban, modern setting, both underscore the patriarchal ideologies and the marginalization of women within the societies. Bayen analyses villagers' superstitious beliefs of witch-hunting and the suffering of a woman due to that in the male dominated society. On the other hand, Lights Out examines the exploitation of women in an urban context marked by apathy, sexual violence, and passive spectatorship. This paper focuses on the intersection of violence, silence and patriarchal domination through a feminist perspective, examining how women are subjected as victims of violence and silence by the male communities. It also underscores the patriarchal domination from traditional to contemporary spaces, presenting how superstitious beliefs, social inequality and cultural complicity sustain gendered violence. Furthermore, the study draws attention to the construction of female silence, the erasure of agency, and the complexities of their lived realities. Finally, this analysis argues for the urgent necessity to challenge cultural practices and societal complicity that perpetuate the subjugation of women across time and space.

Keywords: Witch-Hunting, Sexual Violence, Silenced Women, Subjugated Mother, Patriarchal Oppression

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women have faced numerous challenges in the male dominated societies and led their life within some restrictions. In the olden days, women were restricted to do household duties, being dutiful wives, bear children and take all the

household responsibilities. Today, women have freedom to pursue education and achieve in various fields. In spite of their growth, there are certain problems that pull them down. Apart from their development, they still face oppressions like sexual abuse, the male gaze, systemic violence and subjugation. Many women writers, through their works, exposed their real-life experiences to the world, describing their struggles, sufferings, silencing and helpless state within patriarchal structures.

The present study describes women's oppression in two different social contexts – traditional and modern, focusing on the female protagonists of Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*. These works are set in different space and society. *Bayen* is set in a rural, tradition-bound society and *Lights Out* in an urban, modern space. The writers describe the sufferings of women as victims of patriarchal control, societal prejudice and collective apathy. The protagonist Chandidasi in *Bayen* is branded a witch, and is forced to be isolated and stripped of her social identity, exposing the irrationality of superstition and misogyny that marginalize women and destroy their lives. Conversely, women characters in *Lights Out* represent the constrained life of urban women with fear, societal indifference, powerless state, and enforced silence, as they helplessly witness a brutal gang rape near their apartment. These works are the illustrations of gendered violence across rural and urban spaces from the past till now. They also depict how women are left as mere spectators of violence within the marginalized cultures. This study highlights the existence of patriarchal structure and the systemic erasure of women's voices in Indian society.

2. WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

"Women absorb what the society imposes on them and try to love accordingly. The very concept of woman as an angel or a goddess is nothing but a myth. The qualities of an idealized woman and her innocence have made her a mere tool to suit the needs and whims of the society. These qualities have in fact confined woman inside the floor walls of home and transformed them to speechless creatures who willingly carry on the burden of patriarchy. Patriarchy diminishes a woman's belief in her self-worth and has made her believe that her inferiority is pre-destined." [Chowdhary \(2017\)](#)

The select works are written in feminist perspectives, portraying women as victims of physical, psychological and emotional violence. This exposes the lives of many women under the patriarchal structures that oppressed women across generations. Violence on women occurs in different forms, which transcend geography, class and time, highlighting the universal nature of gendered difference. In the works *Bayen* and *Lights Out*, the authors have underscored how the societies, whether it is tradition or modern, oppress women as silent creatures and marginalize them collectively. They have portrayed their women characters as victims of collective violence, and incapable of expressing their voices.

In *Bayen*, the protagonist Chandidasi, though seems to be a courageous woman undertaking the role of her family men, is really a victim of superstitious beliefs and patriarchal norms that are expressed through systemic violence against women. As she is the only progeny in the family, the family duty as a cremation attendant falls upon her, after her father's death. The graveyard duties such as digging graves, guarding them, and preventing scavengers from disturbing the bodies are only meant to men in a patriarchal society. But Chandidasi is compelled to take up the tasks without option. [Saha \(2022\)](#) expresses that "Masculine valour which is the prerequisite for the daring profession of the Dom cannot be absorbed in the body of the apparently 'fragile' female." She breaks the gendered norms and takes her father's responsibilities, by entering into the male-dominated space. This leads the villagers to consider her as an object of suspicion. Her situation is uncomplicated with her husband's support, until the burial of her in-law's daughter, Tukni, which affects her entire life. Her motherhood spontaneously comes out, whenever she does burials for children who die in the village. She empathizes with every child that leads to spontaneous lactation, a natural physiological response associated with maternal grief. This feeling for the dead children is misunderstood by the villagers as evidence of witchcraft. The villagers fail to understand her humanity and sorrow, and label her a bayen (witch), ostracizing her and stripping her of dignity and identity. Chandidasi's suffering illustrates how women, especially those who transgress gendered boundaries, are subjected to violent othering and silencing under the guise of cultural beliefs and superstition. She is not afraid to be alone and she says, "Why should a bayen be afraid to stay alone?" [Devi \(1997\)](#)

In *Lights Out*, patriarchal violence and urban apathy can be observed through the anonymous woman and the female characters Leela and Naina respectively. The anonymous woman is brutally attacked and abused by four men, and she cries for help, which echoes throughout the nearby apartment complex. Though her plea reaches many ears, it results in

vain. Her suffering earns only spectatorship than any intervention. Leela and Naina hear her cries and recognize the brutality of the act, but remain helpless, as they are confined by fear and constrained by the pressures of a patriarchal society that renders them powerless. [Chakravarty and Thenmozhi \(2022\)](#) comment, “The male characters in every possible way dominated over the females in the play and thereby establishing the patriarchal rule both inside and outside the home.” They remain silent out of fear, paralyzed by societal restrictions, and believe that they cannot confront such a violent situation as they have no power. The voiceless and nameless victim reminds the readers of the haunting nature of urban space, which is often perceived as progressive, but continues to perpetuate violence through silence and complicity. [Khanna and Singh \(2022\)](#) highlight,

“Although rape harms the victim as well as the one who witnessed it and leaves some psychological disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder, multiple personality disorder, and emotionally unstable personality disorder on the one who is the viewer and the sufferer. This results in depression, anxiety, and mood swings in the victim as well as the spectator.”

Both the works *Bayen* and *Lights Out* pinpoint the spectacle of violence enacted on women’s bodies. In *Chandi’s* case, violence is evident through societal banishment, and the denial of her identity. In *Lights Out* violence is perpetuated through the normalization of public sexual violence and passive state of witnesses to intervene. These reveal that women are subjected to be passive victims and are marginalized by the community and the family.

3. PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION AND FEMINIZATION OF FEAR

Patriarchal structures have historically confined women within rigid boundaries of male control, compelling them to adhere to predetermined rules and restrictions. Whether they are willing or not, they ought to follow the norms dictated by men. Gradually women began to realize their status in the society and found ways to be independent and to step outside domestic spaces to pursue education, careers, and personal goals. Still patriarchy controls them either directly or indirectly, and binds them in various forms, which often result in violence, isolation, and the internalization of fear. Mahasweta Devi’s *Bayen* and Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* clearly portray how women remain trapped in fear and silence, though they are courageous in certain aspects of their lives, examining the constant feminization of fear under male dominated societies.

In *Bayen*, Chandidasi in her marriage life experiences both support and betrayal through her husband Malindar. When she decides to undertake her family work in the graveyard, he is very supportive and expresses his love by standing her side opposing the entire village. His emotional support gives her strength to perform her graveyard duties without any hindrance. When societal pressure mounts on Malindar, his love slowly turns into suspicion towards Chandidasi. Chandi’s mourning for the death of Tukni and the involuntary expression of her maternal instincts that manifest in physical symptoms further intensify suspicion in the minds of both the villagers and Malindar. Malindar asks, “Why is your sari dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling?” [Devi \(1997\)](#) He fails to understand her wife’s maternal feelings and abandons her, expels her from home, and forbids their son Bhagirath to contact her. The patriarchal structures’ domination on women is evident through Malindar’s act of avoiding his wife for the sake of society and his acceptance of societal prejudices. Chandi’s courageous nature in doing graveyard duties does not support her to confront her husband or reclaim her place in the family and society. [Abijith \(2024\)](#) states, “The fragile nature of women’s place in society is reflected in the heterotopic graveyard, particularly when they deviate from conventional roles.” Chandi’s acceptance of the name given by the society and her isolated state reveal the suppressed condition of women, who are compelled to accept everything imposed on them by the male-dominated society. Chandi embodies internalized oppression, which forces women to endure suffering quietly, believing that resistance will only exacerbate their plight.

The female characters Leela and Naina in *Lights Out* present the polite state of women in a patriarchal urban society. They experience empathy and emotional anguish for an unnamed woman, who is a victim of the gang rape in an unfinished building near their apartment. On the other hand, the men around them are very casual towards the incident and witness the event with apathy and curiosity. The women are disturbed and enraged by the victim’s cries, but are paralyzed by fear – fear of the assailants, fear of retaliation, and fear of opposing their husbands. Though they want to help the victim, either by intervening or calling the police, they are immobilized by the thought of being powerless and lack the authority to act without the support of their family men. Manjula Padmanabhan, in her play, has powerfully depicted how patriarchal society takes advantage over the fear of women and prevents them from acting even in moments of moral urgency.

Through Bayen and Lights Out, the authors have revealed the fact that patriarchal oppression is meant to a specific time, place, or class. Chandi's life in traditional rural context, and Leela and Naina's in modern environment expose how women remain silent for centuries, suppressing their voices and emotions due to the constant fear of challenging male-dominated structures.

4. FROM RURAL SUPERSTITION TO URBAN SILENCE

Lifestyles of people differ in rural and urban setting, and traditional and modern spaces due to varying circumstances. Yet, patriarchal domination on women and the hierarchal positioning of men and women are similar across centuries, defined by subjugation, silence and systemic marginalization. In rural space, people are shaped by deep-rooted superstitions, whereas in urban space they are governed by a different form of oppression and cultural structures. This reflects that either traditional or modern setting and rural or urban contexts, gendered expectations and power hierarchies have its impact on women's actions and decisions. This tension is vividly explored in Mahasweta Devi's Bayen and Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out.

In Bayen, rural superstition shapes the fate of Chandidasi, a descendant of Kalu Dom. Chandi's life is ruined by the villagers' superstitious belief in bayen (witchcraft), which makes them to suspect her maternal instincts as acts of witchcraft. This leads them to corner Chandi, forcing her to live lonely life away from the village, wear red as a signal of her presence, and denied of societal interaction including contact with her beloved son, Bhagirath. The mother-son relationship is disrupted due to this superstitious belief and she is deprived of meeting his son or nurture him. His second mother always insists him saying, "Bhagirath, come back straight from school, and run whenever you hear the canister clanging. Otherwise she'll suck your life-blood" [Devi \(1997\)](#). The villagers blindly believe that if anyone ill-treats the Bayen's child, it will harm or kill other children in the village. This demonstrates how superstition in rural spaces disproportionately targets and punishes women, denying them agency, dignity, and a sense of belonging within the community.

Similarly in Lights Out, superstition is not exposed through blind belief of people; instead, it is replaced by an equally oppressive culture of women's silence and passivity in modern urban space. Leela could only notify Bhaskar about the gang rape takes place in the building opposite their apartment, as the societal norms and fear constrain her to be an unwilling passive observer, without giving any option to help the victim. He [Padmanabhan \(2020\)](#) replies as "Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face." Although she knows the brutality of the act, she cannot compel her husband to take action or challenge the oppression imposed on her. Even Naina remains silent, being constrained by the same patriarchal conditioning, which prevents women from intervening or questioning authority. Although the urban setting appears modern on the surface, it continues to perpetuate gendered imbalances, rendering women blind, deaf, and mute in the face of violence. [Charanya \(2022\)](#) describes, "Women find these male behaviours repulsive and dislike seeing the imaginary discrimination; nevertheless, for males, women are only a means of enjoyment. Women have historically been viewed as the weaker sex, which has traditionally placed them behind males."

The reality of both rural and urban societies is revealed through the works Bayen and Lights Out. Rural space is occupied by superstition, while urban space by fear and apathy. In both spaces, lives of women remain similar as they remain trapped in systems that suppress their voices and deny their independence.

5. CULTURAL PRACTICES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE SILENCE

In Indian societies, cultural practices have its origin in ancient traditions and belief systems that are designed solely to subjugate women and force them to be silent. These practices keep women powerless across generations and spaces. Numerous literary works highlight the experiences of women in patriarchal systems. Women's silence is a forced condition rather than an individual's choice and is shaped by patriarchal cultural norms and gendered expectations. The select novels for the study illustrate this systemic suppression and silence that is constructed in both rural and urban contexts.

In Bayen, communal stigma and superstition occupy Chandi's life giving her sour experiences. She is believed as a witch by the villagers and is forced to live lonely life by the railway tracks, leaving her family and community. She cannot stop herself when she meets Malindar near the pond and conveys her basic needs such as oil for her hair, kerosene, and

food. She expresses her emotions and the fear of being alone. This incident and her longing for her husband's presence reveal her humanity and vulnerability which are not the qualities of a dangerous witch as believed by the villagers.

Still Malindar fails to acknowledge the needs and suffering of Chandi as he is blinded by superstitious cultural conditioning. Instead of understanding her, he humiliates her by throwing mud and stones on her that reinforces her alienation and silence. Chandi [Devi \(1997\)](#) says that, "I don't have anybody anymore, nobody. When I hadn't become a Bayen I had everybody." Chandi is unable to argue or protest against him. Her patience towards the humiliation demonstrates how cultural practices compel women to endure rather than resist, especially when oppressed by those close to them. According to [Begum and Ramanamoorthy \(2021\)](#), "The root cause of all the evils that women face is gender discrimination. It is the most prevalent form of oppression in the world....The patriarchal structure of society prevents women from attaining their full potential."

The same dynamic of enforced silence is portrayed in the urban setting of *Lights Out*. Leela and Naina's life under the male dominated society affect their personal decisions and social interventions. They lead a constrained life satisfying the patriarchal expectations, and neither their education nor their modern urban lifestyle gives them independence. When they witness the assault on a woman outside their home, their instinctive empathy and outrage are quickly subdued. They are disappointed with the casual responses of Bhaskar and Mohan to the assault. Naina's courage and willingness to help the victim disappears with her husband Surinder's entry. This exposes women's lives in the restricted patriarchal society. [Padmanabhan \(2020\)](#) says, "You shut up. This is no time for women's nonsense... Shut up-or I'll kick your teeth in." Here, women bury their anger and silence their voices. This reflects how patriarchal power structures suppress women and normalize their passivity.

The subjugation of women is intrinsically linked to entrenched cultural practices. In Bayen, Chandi is isolated due to the entire society's fear and superstition, while in *Lights Out*, Leela and Naina's voices are suppressed by urban apathy and patriarchal expectations. Both in rural and urban spaces, cultural system shapes, and controls women, stressing them to be meek even when they face violence and injustice. The authors of these Bayen and *Lights Out* emphasize the enduring persistence of patriarchal norms that still dominate even within developing social and cultural landscapes. [Rai \(2014\)](#) comments, "Since gender discrimination is the sole cause of women's subordination, subjection and oppression which leads to social injustice of women around the world therefore women is most marginalized creation of humanity."

6. THE SUBJUGATED MOTHER AND THE SILENCED WOMAN

In general, women's identity is shaped by motherhood and womanhood that embodies love, care and emotional strength. Though these roles are considered as sacred, their lives become traumatic when they try to express such feelings, emotions and ability. They even feel alienated from their own selves. This bitter reality is powerfully depicted in Mahasweta Devi's Bayen and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*. These works depict subjugation and forced silence on women by patriarchal norms and cultural restrictions, in spite of their innate strength and compassion.

Chandi, in Bayen, is a representation of the subjugated mother, who is forced to control her maternal affection for her son. Due to the superstitious beliefs of her village people, she is denied of holding her motherly rights to express her feelings, to hold, speak to, or comfort her child. She [Devi \(1997\)](#) cries, "When I guard the graves through the night, my breasts burst with milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by himself. I can't, can't stay away from him." Her fear of Malindar's anger and society's judgment prevent her rejoicing Bhagirath's love, even when he tries to approach her. Malindar cannot forget his past life with his beloved wife Chandi, and at the same time he cannot accept her after branded as 'bayen'. He instills fear in the boy by advising him not to go near his mother. Despite his father's advice, he approaches her mother on hearing her cries. But Chandi deliberately avoids him and his offering of a sari and dhoti, as she is bounded by fear and shame. Chandi's maternal instincts extend beyond Bhagirath to the village children. It is evident through her compassion on little Tukni and other dead children. This motherhood is tragically misinterpreted by the villagers, who deepen her isolation by continuing to brand her a witch. Here, motherhood is subjugated, distorted and controlled by patriarchal structure and superstitious beliefs.

In *Lights Out*, Leela's silence and helpless state expose the widespread restrictions imposed on women in a modern urban setting. In the beginning, while hearing the desperate cries of a woman being assaulted, Leela experiences disturbance and empathy. As the assault continues, her fear modifies into paralyzing terror. Her husband Bhaskar's absence and her isolation drive her to close all the windows and doors, draw the curtains, lock her children's room and even stuff cotton in her ears to block out the sounds of violence. She [Padmanabhan \(2020\)](#) says to her husband,

“When you are away on tour, I couldn’t sleep at night! And with all the windows shut with all the curtains drawn, cotton in my ears- the sound still come through! Even in the children’s room on the other side of the house, I could hear it!”

Leela’s powerless state and her trauma affect her both emotionally and mentally. Despite her desire to intervene by calling the police, she remains passive due to her fear of crossing boundaries and defying her husband. Her repeated pleas to Bhaskar to take action remain unheard, which leave her trapped in a helpless state of apathy. She is unable to ignore the violence, yet equally unable to stop it. [Bais and Singh \(2025\)](#) Comment, “Padmanadhan portrays a world where women are denied identity, voice and status, forced to appeal to men for recognition and basic rights. This lack of agency perpetuates systemic discrimination across all aspects of life.”

In both works, the authors depict the suppressed emotional worlds of Chandi and Leela, whose voices are suppressed by societal and patriarchal control. Chandi’s motherhood and Leela’s compassionate distress for another woman’s suffering remain paralyzed within them, which never allow manifesting into action. Both women are left powerless: Chandi by rural superstition and patriarchal marginalization, and Leela by urban fear and domestic subordination. The narratives reveal that their emotions, though deeply human and pure, are confined within a patriarchal framework, forcing them into a state of silence and fear.

7. CONCLUSION

The present study on Mahasweta Devi’s Bayen and Manjula Padmanabhan’s Lights Out reveals that women’s oppression still exists across region and space, and traverses both rural and urban contexts under similar patriarchal structures and restrictions. Even though the settings of superstition-ridden villages and progressive urban environments vary, marginalization of women, oppression on their voices and emotions are still alive through cultural norms and social expectations. Chandi in Bayen is dehumanized by the superstitious belief in witch-hunting and violent practices, while Leela and Naina in Lights Out are restricted to domestic roles and supposed to live under the fear of social disruption. Both narratives depict the silenced and oppressed lives of women within social boundaries that regulate behavior and impose moral responses. The greatest qualities of motherhood such as empathy and compassion are neither respected nor valued in male dominated superstitious societies and are cornered and punished. Chandi’s motherhood is misinterpreted as an act of witchcraft, while Leela and Naina’s empathy is portrayed as impractical and dangerous. In both settings, silence is not chosen by women voluntarily but imposed on them, which reflect the entrenched nature of gendered violence. Notably, this study challenges the belief that urbanization or modernization automatically leads to women’s liberation and growth. Both Mahasweta Devi and Manjula Padmanabhan reveal the enduring male domination over women across centuries. They manifested it differently as superstition in rural spaces and domestic authority in urban environments. By exposing the realities of women’s lives in diverse contexts, this study stresses the urgent need for resistance and structural reform. Even in the modern world, true freedom for women is possible only by dismantling patriarchal practices and enabling women to express their feelings and move beyond passive roles without any obstacle.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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