

---

**Mahaswetha Devi's Women as Victims Under Patriarchy****Dr. M. Umar**

Lecturer in English, Government College for Men, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh.

**Abstract**

Women in our society are always looked down upon and are considered as inferior human beings. Since ages, they have been crushed by the male dominated society and are denied a status. In everyday news, we witness one or two cases of women, victimized to some sort of horror. Woman is experiencing a continuous trauma under male subjugation, though a lot of awareness is brought forth. Woman is not as free and secured as man. She has been a victim to both psychological and physical affliction. She is considered frail and fragile. Since ancient times, man has acquired and occupied a superior status to a woman in the society. His status still continues unabated and his domination on woman has no end. Though many laws are amended to secure women, they become futile as man always has an upper hand in everything. Mahaswetha Devi focuses different phases of suffering the women undergo in the society. She does not write as a feminist, but, as a human being who opens up the realities of human trauma. . Mahaswetha Devi's works *Mother of 1084*, *Bayen* and *Titumir* depict the predicament of women under such imperious masculinity and patriarchal setup. All the women protagonists of these works are wives who undergo undue suffering and bear the pain with all the patience in the male dominated society.

**Keywords:** Male dominated society, trauma, psychological and physical affliction, suffering**Introduction**

Indian society has historically been structured on rigid patriarchal foundations that systematically marginalize women and deny them freedom, dignity, and equality. Patriarchy operates not merely as a social arrangement but as a deeply ingrained ideology that shapes family relations, economic structures, cultural practices, and psychological conditioning. Despite constitutional guarantees, legal reforms, and increasing access to education, women in India continue to face discrimination, violence, and emotional exploitation. The persistence of such oppression reveals the gap between theoretical equality and lived reality. Ram Ahuja comments:

“In spite of the legislative measures adopted in favour of women in our society after independence, the spread of education and women's gradual economic independence; countless women still continue to be victims of violence. They are beaten, kidnapped, raped, burnt and murdered.”<sup>1</sup>.

Women do not enjoy the same sense of freedom and security as men. They are exposed to both psychological distress and bodily suffering and are often regarded as weak

and dependent. Historically, men have claimed and sustained a superior position in society, a dominance that continues even today. Although several laws have been enacted to safeguard women's rights, these measures frequently prove ineffective as male authority continues to prevail in social, familial, and institutional structures. Women's suffering is often normalized within the framework of tradition, family honour, and moral duty, forcing them into silence and endurance. This social reality forms the background against which Mahaswetha Devi's writings must be understood. Ram Ahuja's observation highlights the contradiction between progressive laws and regressive social practices. While men largely enjoy freedom, authority, and mobility, women are burdened with restrictions, surveillance, and moral policing. Patriarchy thus functions as a power system that privileges men while rendering women vulnerable to exploitation at home and in society.

Mahaswetha Devi emerges as one of the most powerful literary voices exposing these injustices. Her writing is deeply rooted in social realism and human suffering. She does not romanticize victimhood nor does she limit herself to urban middle-class feminism. Instead, she focuses on the lives of marginalized women—tribals, rural women, widows, mothers, and wives—who bear the heaviest burden of patriarchal oppression. In an interview, she clarifies her ideological position:

I am a woman, and I am writing. But, I am not writing of women alone. What I am writing, most of my books, it is about class exploitation, the under class is exploited, men, women together. Of course, women get worst part of it, but not always. Definitely, I am interested in women's positions, women's thought. But I am more interested in active work.<sup>2</sup>

This statement reveals that her concern transcends gender alone and extends to class, caste, and economic exploitation. However, within these oppressive structures, women emerge as the most silenced and vulnerable subjects. Like Mulk Raj Anand, Mahaswetha Devi foregrounds class oppression, yet, she simultaneously exposes how patriarchy intensifies women's suffering within exploitative systems. Some of her works vividly present the hardships faced by women in a male-dominated society. Mahaswetha Devi's works *Mother of 1084*, *Bayen* and *Titumir* depict and more effectively portray women's suffering under oppressive masculine authority and present different dimensions of women's victimization—emotional neglect, institutional violence and denial of individuality. Through these texts, Mahaswetha Devi critiques patriarchy not only as male domination but as a social mechanism that enforces silence, obedience, and sacrifice upon women.

*Mother of 1084* projects both a woman's suffering under patriarchal set-up and her agony for separation and loss of her son. Sujatha, the protagonist suffers the misery in her family as her husband is dominant, self-caring and self-loving and does not care her feelings. There lies always a difference of opinion between them. The novel is totally based on Sujatha's search for her son who is killed in an encounter. She loves her son more than anyone in her family as he is quite different from others in morality and character. She is agonized for his death. All the memories of past haunt her. She is relieved only when she

knows that he has died for the welfare of the society. Her identification with him becomes total towards the end.

*Bayen* portrays the treachery of men and male-dominated society in subjugating and victimising an innocent woman, Chandi, for no fault of hers. Chandi's prosperity and wellbeing creates an envy among the privileged. They think of harming her. They brand her a witch and abandon her from the village. Her husband also becomes one with them in expelling her. She suffers much in isolation. She is separated from her loving child. Her agony has no bounds. Throughout the play, she longs to see her son and goes on singing lullaby for him, though, he is not present. The expressions and feelings of motherly love dominate the play.

*Titu Mir* deals with Sanyasi revolt and revolt against British. The novel revolves around Titu Mir, the protagonist. As a peasant leader, he leads all the people to revolt against the British exploitation. Keeping himself totally busy with his revolutionary activities, he totally neglects his wife and family. Maimuna, Titu Mir's wife is neglected and left alone. She demonstrates how women are often silenced and marginalized, forced to endure suffering and trauma in silence. According to Catherine Thankamma:

Patriarchy is the system that traces familial descent and economic inheritance down the male line. In a joint family the senior most male is the head, the patriarch, while in the nuclear families of today it is the father.<sup>3</sup>

### **Women under Patriarchy**

*Mother of 1084* presents a powerful portrayal of patriarchal oppression within the bourgeois family. Dibyanath, Sujatha's husband, epitomizes patriarchal dominance. Insensitive and self-absorbed, he disregards his wife's emotions and enforces his authority unquestioningly. His attitude deeply influences his children, who inherit his moral insensitivity. Sujatha, unable to assert herself, suffers intense mental anguish. Her mother-in-law further reinforces male supremacy by suppressing Sujatha's individuality and endorsing her son's control over household affairs. His attitude deeply influences his children, who inherit his moral insensitivity. Sujatha, unable to assert herself, suffers intense mental anguish. Her mother-in-law further reinforces male supremacy by suppressing Sujatha's individuality and endorsing her son's control over household affairs. She feels that everything must be done by his approval and consent and nothing should go without his notice.

“Dibyanath and his mother constituted the centre of attraction in the home. Sujatha had a shadowy existence. She was subservient, silent, faithful and without an existence of her own.”

This description captures the essence of patriarchal family life where women are reduced to invisible figures, valued only for their obedience and domestic labour. Sujatha's silence is not voluntary; it is the result of years of conditioning that demand patience and endurance from women. Dibyanath's sense of superiority reflects patriarchal entitlement. He remains emotionally distant and indifferent to Sujatha's feelings, treating her more as a functional

presence than as a partner. Along with this mental torment, Sujatha is also frustrated with her own kith and kin. Tuli, her youngest daughter who is much influenced by her father, always supports him in all his deeds. She does not mind his extra marital relationship. Instead, she feels proud of him. Dipankar, her elder son, follows his father's order and never has any individuality. Neepa, her elder daughter carries a relationship with her husband's cousin. Sujatha always finds herself at odds with her household which has demoralized out and out. Sujatha is frustrated. "That's why she tries to escape all the constraints by taking up a job in the bank rather than protesting." However, Sujatha's decision to work outside the home can be seen as a subtle act of resistance. Employment provides her with a sense of independence and self-worth, though it does not fully liberate her from emotional oppression. Her maternal suffering intensifies when her son Brati's death is dismissed by the family as shameful. The patriarchal system denies Sujatha even the right to grieve openly. Her pain as a mother is trivialized. Through Sujatha, Mahaswetha Devi exposes how patriarchy operates through neglect, silence, and emotional deprivation.

*Bayen* presents a stark and disturbing portrayal of how patriarchy intersects with superstition to destroy women's lives. Chandi, the protagonist, is a grave keeper's wife who initially commands respect in the community. However, her emotional vulnerability following childbirth becomes the starting point of her victimization. After she begets a child, she gets aversion to her job, as she imagines an image of her suckling child in the dead children she buries. She pleads her husband, Malindar to relieve her from her job totally. She begs to take them to a far of place where they can be peaceful. Malindar, is an insensitive man. He does not heed. Instead of asking to quit her job, he asks her to continue. Chandi gets frustrated by his attitude and carelessness towards her. She suffers and continues her job. Mahaswetha Devi, through Chandi seems to lash at men. She says, "Men in general are so insensitive." When Chandi tries to beseech him again, he shouts at her in anger:

Now stop whining. I can't stand it all the time. If you don't feel like carrying on, why don't you just throw it up?"

This statement reflects patriarchal insensitivity towards women's physical and emotional suffering. Instead of empathy, Chandi is met with cruelty, reinforcing the belief that women must suppress pain and fulfill their roles regardless of personal trauma. As Chandi's family has sustainable livelihood than others, people of that village grow jealous of her and spread a terrifying suspicion that Chandi is suckling dead children at graveyard. And she is branded a Bayen (witch), a label that strips her of humanity and social acceptance. Gourdas incites the villagers, declaring: "See for yourself Malindar, you bastard. It's your wife, the Bayen, that's been killing our children. Why don't you ask her yourself?". The most painful betrayal comes when her husband publicly disowns her: "I . . . Malindar Gangaputta . . . strike my drum . . . to declare that my wife has turned into a Bayen, a Bayen!"

Later she is ostracised from the village, separated from her son and family for ever. Her agony has no bounds. This act symbolizes the ultimate patriarchal violence—social death. Chandi is denied the right to defend herself, speak, or exist with dignity. Her silence is enforced by fear and collective aggression. Here, we are reminded of Patricia Waugh's

words: “If women speak outside the symbolic order they will either not be heard or be heard insane.”<sup>4</sup> Chandi’s experience demonstrates how patriarchy silences women by branding them dangerous, mad, or immoral. Bayen thus exposes the lethal consequences of superstition reinforced by male authority.

In *Titu Mir*, Mahaswetha Devi explores women’s marginalization even within revolutionary movements. While Titu Mir is celebrated as a freedom fighter, his wife Maimuna remains emotionally neglected and invisible. After having spent three years in jail for his riot, the news of his arrival come to Rokeya, his mother. Then, we get notice of Maimuna as her mother-in-law observes her deteriorating condition:

“As the day of Titu’s return approached, Rokeya’s eyes fell one day on her elder daughter-in-law. The sight brought tears to her eyes; she said, ‘You are my Titu’s wife, Ma! What an evil woman I am for not noticing earlier: Your hair has tangles in it, and your lips are unstained by paan. Your face looks wan and lifeless.’”

Maimuna’s neglect highlights how women’s emotional needs are often sacrificed at the altar of male ambition and public heroism. When questioned about her silence, she replies: “Have I ever said no to anything you’ve wanted to do? Have I ever stood in your way?” Her words reveal internalized submission and self-effacement. She further expresses her pain:

“You went to Calcutta, and I thought, how far away that is... You went to jail, which I cannot even visualize. How I worried myself to death.” Yet, Titu Mir remains emotionally distant, illustrating how patriarchy persists even among progressive men. Women are expected to support, sacrifice, and endure without acknowledgment.

## Conclusion

Mahaswetha Devi’s portrayal of women as victims under patriarchy is both powerful and unsettling. Her writings compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths about social injustice and gender inequality. Through *Mother of 1084*, *Bayen*, and *Titu Mir*, she exposes the multiple forms of oppression women endure—within families, communities, and ideological movements.

Despite legal reforms and modern education, patriarchy continues to shape women’s lives through silence, sacrifice, and suffering. Mahaswetha Devi’s works remain profoundly relevant, reminding us that true social progress is impossible without dismantling patriarchal power structures and recognizing women as full human beings with voices, rights, and dignity.

**References**

- Ram Ahuja, "Violence Against Women." *Social Problems in India*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1997, p. 243.
- Sue Dickman, "In Conversation: Sue Dickman with Indian women writers," *The Book Review*, vol. 19, No. 4, April 1995, p. 33.
- Catherine Thankamma, "The Women Patriarchy Created," *Theatre India*, November 2000, p. 42.
- Patricia Waugh, Qtd. Valerie Sutherland, "Post Modernist Strategies in Janet Frame's Scented Gardens for the Blind," *The Commonwealth Review*, Vol. III, No.1, 1991-92, p. 124.