

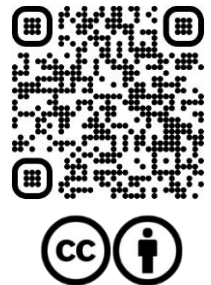
Supernatural Narratives Entwined with The Subjugated Class- Mahasweta Devi and Charles Dickens

Nimisha Lall

MA English Student, Department of English, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India

Received: 19 Jun 2023; Received in revised form: 21 Jul 2023; Accepted: 28 Jul 2023; Available online: 06 Aug 2023
©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Supernatural events in narratives have been a part of literature since Shakespeare. There's a new aspect added to it by the concept of ideology which is now getting interweaved with the subjugated class. People affected by supernatural events are taken for granted in society. In fact, they are marginalized to an extent where no one can help them. Their fate is unpredictable. The research paper takes two short stories completely different in their origin- Bayen by Mahasweta Devi and The Signal-Man by Charles Dickens. Mahasweta Devi's Bayen illustrates life's difficulty for those living on society's margins. They are looked down upon and stripped of the basic tenets of humanity. Dickens molds his narrative where the supernatural elements find their place. Stripped of his name, the signalman is thrown much beneath his level of education. Focussing on the protagonists, the paper would aim to find solutions to free these characters of their plight.*



Keywords— *ideology, narratives, oppression, power forms, subjugation, supernatural*

I. INTRODUCTION

Supernatural narratives are bound by elements that go far beyond the realm of the natural world. Authors intentionally use these mystic forces to create an ambiguous tone in the narratives. Thereafter, some questions remain unanswered even after the story gets finished. Like Frost's poem, the narrative is every road not taken leading to a path of limitless possibilities towards the end.

Precursors to supernatural writings can be traced back to Shakespeare with ghosts in *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, and evil witches in *Macbeth*. Something above the world was understood in response to the 'Victorian crisis of faith.' Thus, Victorian writers including Dickens incorporated the unseen and strange in their stories. Even after a century, writers in India like Mahasweta Devi couldn't resist penning down a paranormal narrative. Some factors remained similar in both the account which was written in different times and spaces. The primary theme of a marginalized entity haunted by supernatural events. Their voice is reduced to uphold no value compared to the common beliefs of the majoritarian. Thus, they get further subjugated in society unable to express their distress.

The paper discusses how the supernatural and subjugation are related. Also, there are hardly any studies that had mentioned these two coming together within narratives. This study would further enhance looking into supernatural accounts from a different postcolonial perspective. It would also point out how the subordinate in the community gets disparaged when no one helps them. The paper is divided into two parts focussing individually upon each story *The Signal-Man* and *Bayen*, and then drawing out conclusions from them.

II. THE SIGNAL-MAN

Dickens was involved in 'The Staplehurst Rail Crash' which left him traumatized until the end of his life. The crash saw forty casualties and many people even died in Dickens' arms. The author never really recovered from the shock (Kellermeyer, 2018). His helplessness to save the people's lives despite his best efforts is mirrored in the responsible signalman.

The story starts with the narrator calling the signalman three times after which the latter ultimately responds. From the beginning itself, the signalman is

symptomatic of an eerie behavior. The narrator comes down a steep path giving hints about the Victorian gothic narrative, “The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate. It was made through a clammy stone, that became oozy and wetter as I went down.” (Dickens, 1866, p. 2)

When the narrator arrives at the signal box, he describes it as the most dismal place he had ever been. It completely blocked any view of the sky with only a dungeon to look forward to. Moreover, the tunnel to him was massive but extremely depressing and filled with forbidden air. The narrator views, “So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy, deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world.” (Dickens, 1866, p. 2)

This home to signalman can be seen as peripheral from the common society of Old England. He lives in a hole that even sunlight finds difficult to reach. Let alone the people. From the onset, Dickens’s portrayal of the signalman in such an atmosphere gives the foreshadowing of how his life will turn out. A life shadowed by darkness where no traces of close ones are found. The narrator expounds upon the signalman’s place as a transcendence from the natural world throwing light upon a supernatural narrative. While the signalman was speaking to the narrator, he is interrupted by the bell quite a few times. This amuses the latter who writes:

The circumstance that while he was speaking to me he twice broke off with a fallen colour, turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring, opened the door of the hut (which was kept shut to exclude the unhealthy damp), and looked out towards the red light near the mouth of the tunnel. (Dickens, 1866, p. 4)

The signalman then vests in the narrator explaining his behavior. He elucidates that he had been seeing a ghost along the tunnel foreboding disasters. When he saw it the first time, it was standing near the tunnel covering his face and waving over with similar words as the narrator, “HALLOA! Below there!” (Dickens, 1866, p. 1) Taken aback by this sudden event, the signalman went through the tunnel to check if anyone was there. But he didn’t find anything. Nonetheless, an accident occurs causing dozens of deaths just after a few hours.

The phantom covered its face with both hands when the narrator saw it the second time. The appearance presaged the death of the beautiful woman boarding the train which passed moments later. Since the past few weeks, the phantom has recurred. The signalman now feels that he must prevent any accidents which can occur.

At this moment in time, the narrator thinks that the man needs some medical help. Because if the job of the signalman is not done properly, it might cost lots of lives. The signalman is oppressed because he is unable to share this with the authorities he works for. They will immediately conceive him as a lunatic who is throwing tantrums about his job and fire him. If this happens, the signalman would be left with no jobs. And thus, he becomes a subjugated identity who had to perform his duties irrespective of his fears. The helplessness of not being able to save the lives fills the signalman with guilt.

The conceived ideology in society believes more in the advent of scientific justifications for any phenomenon. The occurrence of spirits just exists in the minds of those who witness it or the people who believe in the paranormal. The authorities of the railway and the narrator comes from the dominant set of classes, who does not believe in the existence of ghosts. Thus, questioning this ideology is not in the hands of the signalman. He relies upon the narrator, who thinks he needs medical treatment. The narrator says, “Men of common sense did not allow much for coincidences in making the ordinary calculations of life.” (Dickens, 1866, p. 6)

When the narrator first arrives at the station box, the signalman gets interrupted by bells. Now the former asks him if that was the ghost who rang the bell, to which the signalman agrees. The narrator does not get convinced and replies:

How your imagination misleads you. My eyes were on the bell, and my ears were open to the bell, and if I am a living man, it did NOT ring at those times. No, nor at any other time, except when it was rung in the natural course of physical things by the station communicating with you. (Dickens, 1866, p. 8)

But somewhere the signalman lies at fault too. His inability to give his best shot at career options is an instance. Being a natural philosophy student, he could have tried for getting his hands on a better job. Facing failure due to his behavior lands him on this job which burdens him. He could have pushed himself to grab better opportunities with all the knowledge he had. If he could have been a person of power, he could have easily narrated these incidents to someone. Not all people would have seen him as a madman. Gramsci (as cited in Nayar, 2009) suggests that speaking from the positions of power results in the reinforcement of the ideology, which is created by the people who hold a stature in the community.

III. BAYEN

Another story in this research paper comes from Mahasweta Devi known as *Bayen*. The writer is known to give a 'voice to the voiceless,' especially to women. The 'bayen' in the story Chandidasi Gangadasi is one such example. She comes from the Dom community and was occupationally engaged in digging the graves for dead children below the age of five. After her father dies, she takes up the occupation owing to the lack of a male member in the family. At his moment, Malinder falls in love with her and they get married.

Malinder tells Bhagirath that his mother was the most beautiful girl in the community. And he used to bring her striped sarees to wear. He gave Chandi everything she deserved. In the narrative, it's evidence of how privileged her life was. But after she is outcasted, she has to beg for oil, and even her sari is torn. Her son Bhagirath tells her, "Don't you have another sari? Would you like a sari that is not torn like this one? Want my dhoti?" (Devi, 2015, p. 12)

After the birth of Bhagirath, Chandi feels frightened to dig up the graves of other children. This happens because she can empathize with those mothers who lost their children. She finds it difficult to continue her profession. However, Malinder does not listen to her and pushes her further. Her voice remains unheard, and eventually, one-day people find her digging up a grave while her breasts are heavy with milk. They term her 'bayen' which means a 'witch' and blame her for all the deaths of the children occurring near them. At this moment in time, Malinder not only disowns her but declares his wife as a 'bayen.' He looks at Chandi with bloodshot eyes and says, "O-ho-ooo! A bayen you are! Who was it in the grave when you were nursing with milk? O-ho-ooo!" (Devi, 2015, p. 11)

Malinder's declaration pushes his wife to the margins of society. He is deemed a husband who cannot understand his wife's pleadings. Announcing her as something mystic which is quite impossible to be comprehended by the eyes of the world makes Chandi an outcast. She subsumes the position of the subaltern woman whose voice is not worthy of a word. Her clarification as to why she is filled with milk gets neglected, "No, no, I am not a bayen! I have a son of my own. My breasts are heavy with milk for him. I am not a bayen. Why, Gangaputta, why don't you tell them, you know best." (Devi, 2015, p. 11)

Chandi gets forced to live in a hut in the same village far from the general crowd so that she could not cast their evil shadow upon them. Limited rations are provided to her, considering a bayen is already healthy enough. Malinder then marries Jashi, the ugliest girl in the

community just because he believes the prettiest one was not the fortunate one either.

Gramsci (as cited in Nayar, 2009) states that the ideology is sustained, reinforced, and reproduced through the cultural form- that is the supernatural narrative. Popularizing that something evil does exist that can take the lives of children instead of some relevant diseases is proof. When Tukni, the daughter of Malinder's sister is infected with smallpox, Chandi takes her to Goddess Sheetala. The folklore story that paying homage to a goddess of epidemics will cure a child stands completely illogical. In a similar fashion, village people are superstitious in their set ways.

Blaming Chandi for Tukni's death thus does not come as a surprise. The members of the village operate the power structures in their society through which the superstitious ideology proliferates. The evidence lies in the lines, "What about the milk that spilled out of your breasts as you were piling earth on Tukni's grave?" (Devi, 2015, p. 9) There is some evil magic that a 'bayen' is capable of. Society's assumptions make Jihai believe that if she mistreats her stepson, Bhagirath with violence will be her downfall. The bayen would take revenge and kill Jihai's daughters. She takes the gospel of the supernatural narrative passed on from the community.

However, still, no one deemed Chandi as a 'bayen' until Malinder said so. His declaration was conceived to be true not only because he was Chandi's husband, but the only educated one who can sign his name in the village. He earns more than enough for a month and has even acres of land under his name. His tutelage gives an edge to accord power and legitimizes a supernatural deposition (Nayar, 2009, p. 131).

As a consequence, hegemony flows from Malinder to be further emphasized by the public. The verdict is pronounced that Chandi is a 'bayen.' On the other hand, Chandi does not protest enough. She does not have enough power to explain her situation. Even the public does not want to hear her when her husband disowns her.

IV. CONCLUSION

The signalman is stripped of his identity from the beginning of the narrative. Dickens is not interested in awarding him with a name. He is alienated from society by doing a job that is much beneath his education. Accepting his role without raising his voice makes him a subjugated entity in the book. He is further pushed when he is entangled in a web of spirits. At the end of the novel, his demise is the ultimate foreshadowing that Dickens highlights in the book. The narrator then comes to believe the signalman's words about the supernatural incidents. He understands the latter's

plight when he dies. Thus, the signalman gets freed from his oppression when he herself has passed from the natural world.

A similar event happens with Chandi too. Being an outcast in her village away from her son adds a fraction of pain every day in her life. Her life takes an opposite turn at the moment when Malinder announces her as a 'bayen.' She is maligned by the community responsible for the deaths of children. The conceived ideology of witchcraft existing in a normal person prevails in the minds of the occupants. Especially when Malinder, a literate man with power justifies it. Chandi accepts her position as per society to become a subjugated woman. When she comes in front of the train to stop any thievery, she succumbs to death. People then realize that only a normal person with a rational head can die. She is freed from all the mistreatment she had endured. Chandi's son comes forward to acknowledge her existence as a common woman who was not a 'bayen.' Now existing in a somewhere paranormal dimension, she gets peace.

REFERENCES

- [1] Devi, M. (2015). *Bayen*. <https://idoc.pub/queue/1-bayen-by-mahasweta-devi-d4pqwk0z8rnp>
- [2] Dickens, C. (1866). *The Signal-Man*. https://shortstoryamerica.com/pdf_classics/dickens_the_signal_man.pdf
- [3] Kellermeyer, M. G. (2018). Charles Dickens' the Signal-Man: A Two-Minute Summary and a Literary Analysis. In *oldstyletales*. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://www.oldstyletales.com/single-post/2018/11/20/Charles-Dickens-The-Signal-Man-A-Two-Minute-Analysis-of-the-Classic-Ghost-Story>
- [4] Mahasweta Devi: Her Ideas And Legacy|. (n.d.). *Countercurrents*. Retrieved November 7, 2022, from <https://countercurrents.org/2016/07/mahasweta-devi-her-ideas-and-legacy>
- [5] Nayar, P. K. (2009). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson.