CHAPTER V

VICTIMS OF SUPERSTITIONS

Superstitions make a human being lose his sense of self and provoke him to a sort of inferior action. They are the terrible age-old maladies. They can neither be explained by human reason nor physical laws. Everyday people are increasingly falling prey to these antiquated beliefs. They involve both satanic faith and God-faith. Not only ignorant rural folk, even educated urban folk are becoming victims to these beliefs. About superstition Paul W. Pruyser says:

It has authoritarian trapping, It keeps man enslaved to his circumstances by diverting his gaze from earth to heaven. It promotes humility.¹

Most of Mahasweta Devi’s works explore the terrifying effects of superstitions on innocent folk leading them to inhuman subjugation under social forces. Among them are Bayen, The Witch, The Armenian Champa Tree, Aajir and Statue.

Bayen portrays the wretchedness of rural people in making an innocent woman a ‘witch’ and abandoning her from their village. It focuses on the superstitions of the gullible people, which are encashed by the feudal society whose wickedness drives Chandi, the protagonist out of the society. She undergoes solitude and humiliation in isolation.
The Witch deals with the beguility of the feudal mechanism in misleading the people of Kuruda. The superstitions of the people are encashed by the members of feudal society to turn a dumb and insane girl into a witch. The people are beguiled to know a witch among themselves. This suspicion among themselves leads to many sad happenings, even culminating in the death of many. Towards the end they realise that it is the dexterity of feudal society which deluded them.

The Armenian Champa Tree deals with the deception of a Tantrik Saint who takes advantage of the ignorance of the rural folk and bamboozles the people by telling them that there would be floods and to avert that, he must perform pujas and sacrifice a goat. Mato, the protagonist and his pet goat become victims. Mato struggles hard to safeguard his goat. The survival of goat brings a defiance to the age-old superstitions like animal sacrifice and also evokes the saint’s deceit.

Aajir involves a few instances of superstitious rituals which seem insane. In order to please rain god and bring down rain, a woman is tortured. She is made naked, allowed to fast and pray throughout the day and night. The ritual of frog-marriage is also involved in the play, where people perform frog marriage in order to propitiate rain—god.

In Statue, Dulali, a widow becomes a victim under superstitions. She becomes the cause of all misfortunes where ever she goes and is abandoned entry to the ceremonies and functions. She becomes an outcast when her family members themselves think her to be misfortune of their home. Another instance of superstition is based on the curse of god. A priest throws the shrine of goddess
Manosha into the uncleansed house of Dulali's father. He feels feared that Goddess would curse him. He prays to the goddess, he bows at the feet of the priest and begs him to take away the shrine.

*Bayen* and *The Witch* involve in satanic faith of Necromancy and Witch hunting. In both *Bayen* and *The Witch*, the protagonists are women who suffer the inhuman subjugation under social forces. They are branded as witches and are hunted by the people. Based on vested interests, the members of feudal society conspire against these women and victimise them by beguiling the ignorant folk. They use witch-craft as a weapon to suppress them.

The witch-craft practice is in vogue since ancient times. It is based mainly on the ignorance and poverty of the people and the vested interests of the people in power and plenty. Necromancy and witch-craft are necessary compliments of faith. Witch persecution which began in Europe about the close of middle ages, has been continuing among uncivilized people of the world. In India, especially in Santhal areas of Bengal, witch-hunting or witch-branding has been growing like cancer in rural areas. This is made a vicious instrument to take away the freedom of working class. Particularly, the women of the oppressed sections are alleged to have been possessed by evil spirits. They are victimised and are even killed. Mahaswetha Devi says:

> Any strange thing or event can be attributed to the 'witches'
> and they can be killed with popular 'approval' . . . . Majority of the victims are women and it is estimated that 600 women
are killed annually on this charge.  

Considering the realities that happen, Mahaswetha Devi counters this social evil through her works, Bayen and The Witch. She reveals the heinous mind of the exploiters. In Bayen, Chandi is charged that she is the cause of the misfortunes and the death of many children. She is branded a witch and is abandoned from the society. The plot of throwing her out of the society is done by Gourdas, a counter part of exploitative mechanism. In the same way, The Witch reveals the plot of Hanuman Misra, a member of feudal society, to cover his son's misdeed of spoiling a dumb and insane girl, brands her a witch. The people are alerted by Misra that she is the cause of all the misfortunes. Towards the end of each story both women lay a defiance to all age old constraints and bring awareness of the realities to the people. Though, Bayen and The Witch have some similarities, they differ in plot and treatment. In Bayen the story revolves only around the protagonist Chandi and her victimization. But, in The Witch, the story revolves around everyone to identify a witch among them. The suspicions bring a lot of havoc. Towards the end, they chase an innocent woman suspecting her to be a 'daini and later know that the happenings are due to the deceit of the feudal mechanism and their ignorance. The role of the protagonist here is very little.

Coming to victimization, Chandi in Bayen undergoes lot of humiliation. She is a grave digger by profession. Her duty is to bury dead children and guard

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* \text{daini} \Leftrightarrow \text{means a witch}
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graves. After marrying Malindar, a government employee in the morgue, she becomes a cynosure of the village. The privileged become envious and are belittled by the prominence of her household. They wait for an opportunity to harm her and her family. This leads to her separation from her loving child and her family. "Bayen is basically concerned with barbaric practice of witch hunting, evolves as an intensely human story touching on the large space of the social forces that separate a mother and her son in a male dominated society."3

They create a rumour that she has an evil eye and is the cause of the children’s death. This brings a lot of pain in her. She tells her husband all these, but, he doesn’t heed her. Besides this, she has another obligation. She finds an image of her child in the dead children. She develops an aversion to her profession. She repeatedly tells and requests Malindar to relieve her from the obligation and to take her and her child to a distant place where they can peacefully live. Malindar does not care for her feelings, instead, he asks her to continue her profession as it is a useful one.

Though she is blamed and feels frustrated, she continues her job motivated by a sense of duty towards the suffering humanity. It is this feeling that threatens her life. She feels to wind up the job, when her son is neglected. During this time, come Shashi, Malindar's brother – in – law and his friend Gourdas, a hypocrite and counter part of the exploitative mechanism who plot against her. Instigated by Gourdas, Shashi accuses Chandi of being responsible for the death of his child,
Tukni. He blames her of having an evil – eye. The conversation goes between them:

Shashi : What a thing to do, Chandi bou? How could you do it?

Chandidasi : What’s happened brother-in-law?

Shashi : Tukni, my Tukni, ah? She . . . Bou!

Why did you ask How’s Tukni and strike her with the secret arrow?

Chandidasi : Tukni . . . is . . . no more?

Shashi : Oh, how could you do it?

Chandidasi : Me? What did I do?

Gourdas : (to Shashi) Didn’t I tell you? Now you can see it?

Chandidasi : What are you hinting at . . .?

Gourdas : I have nothing to say.

Malindar : (Mad with rage) So? It seems Shashi has an adviser now in Gourdas! When neighbour’s house is on fire, would you pour kerosene over the fire instead of water?

Gourdas : Malindar, you fight me invain. I’m here only to stand by Shashi and take Chandi away . . .
Malindar : My wife won't go with you.
Gourdas : What?
Shashi : She . . . won't . . . go?
Chandidasi : (Weeping in grief and from a sense of injustice). No, no. Find somebody else to do it for you.4

She feels hurt for being blamed. She declines to continue her job. But, feeling pity and sympathy for Shashi’s predicament, she decides to do the last rites for his child. She is also driven by a belief which is evident from Gourdas’s words:

If you don’t bury them (children) their souls will remain hovering far from their destination. You’re a progeny of the illustrious Kalu Dome . . . You are the destination, . . . denied your service, the dead child hangs forever over the mother. Have mercy on us, mother, forgive us, our transgressions.5

These words awaken a sense of duty in her and she goes to perform her last rites to Tukni. During this time, Gourdas conspires against her. He keeps a watch on her activities.

After burying Tukni, she hears the jackals cry. Motivated by the love for the dead children, she leaves her son, Bhagirath at home and goes to guard Tukni’s grave. While guarding, she remembers her son and she talks to herself thinking of him:
Bhagirath, my dear, are you crying for your mother? I'm coming, son, coming . . . ? I'll gather you in my arms and suckle you. I'll sing you a lullaby then. (sings)

My child god sleeps in my lap,
My child god sleeps in my lap,
My child god . . .

Thinking of Bhagirath, her breasts ooze milk and her sari drips. Finding it a right situation, Gourdas leads the credulous folk including Malindar and sets them on Chandi. They all attack her. Gourdas in a loud voice, savagely shouts at Malindar: "you bastard. It's your wife, the Bayen, that's been killing our children." Malindar, then asks her why she left her bed, her son and has come here. He asks her for whom she is singing, why her sari is dripping milk, whom she is suckling and for whom is the lullaby. She pleads innocence and explains the reality, "I'm no Bayen. I've a suckling child, and that's why my breasts ooze milk all the time. Gangaputta, you know it's true. Why don't you tell them." Malindar never defends her. All of them confirm her to be a "Bayen", and declare her a 'Bayen'. Malindar, being insensitive, becomes one with them and he himself "(shouting at the top of his voice, crying heartrendingly at the same time) declares: I . . . Malindar Gangaputta . . . strike my drum (beats drum frantically ) . . . to declare that my wife has turned into a Bayen, a Bayen!" Thus, she becomes a victim of superstitious dogma of the people. She is banished from the village forever. She is forbidden to see any one and talk to anyone. The villagers set up a
hovel for her in the outskirts of the village. Once a week, they leave a hamper of food for her at her door step. Once a year they give two sarees and *gaamchhas. She is segregated and made an outcast.

Branded as a Bayen, her presence is considered inauspicious. If some one sees her, they feel that some misfortune and even death may come to them. The people, carried by the superstitions, behave abnormally and treat her like an animal. E. Satyanarayana says that, “the inhumanity of superstitious people in forcing a fellow being to the level of an animal is effectively depicted here”. 10

Dulali as a widow in the novel Statue faces similar victimisation from the people. As she is a widow, she is abandoned. The people feel her presence inauspicious and would bring misfortunes or calamities to them. Her entry into ceremonies and functions is restricted. She feels hurt for all this. As a small girl of thirteen years, she loses all her freedom. Once in agony and tears in her eyes she asks her mother, “Why did you have my Wedding, then? I wouldn’t be a widow if you’d done it later. I couldn’t see Kusi’s Wedding.”11 This restriction tells us the tormentation, Dulali undergoes. The superstitions make such bestial actions of the people on the innocent people like Chandi and Dulali.

Chandi suffers solitude and humiliation. She suffers more for her separation from her loving child, who shares her blood. Though, she helps all her people in burying and guarding graves of their children, she is victimised by the same people in a monstrous way. We are undoubtedly reminded of Jashoda in Mahaswetha

* gaamchha:- a piece of cloth material used as a towel.
Devi's *Breast Giver*. She takes up a job of suckling the infants of others “for her daily meals, clothes on feast days and monthly pay.” To keep her breasts always full of milk, her husband Kangali Charan, becomes a professional father. In the course of time she develops a terrible cancer of breasts and loses her job. All the people who received help from her, never sympathise her and desert her. Her condition like Chandi, touches our hearts when Mahaswetha Devi quotes:

> One must become Jashoda if one suckles the world. One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? . . . When a mortal plays as god here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone.  

Dulali in *Statue* also becomes lonely as an outcast. Unlike Chandi, she gets a lifting hand from her nephew, Nabin. Nabin once hears from his aunts that “their children would die by the breath of this inauspicious misfortune, this sister-in-law (Dulali)” and even from his mother, he hears that, “this witch, (Dulali) poured ashes on the family and is now making my son a stranger,” but, he never cares them. Instead, he thinks of her sorrows and responds to her.

Chandi and Dulali are made outcasts for no fault of theirs. They are abased to a large extent by the effects of the superstitions and ignorance of the people.

Chandi becomes a victim even in her husband’s hands. He becomes one with all others who brand her a witch and abandon her. Though, he feels sympathy for
her plight, he is miserably helpless. He never ventures to protest the tradition which is all set to wreak havoc in the family. He also suffers the superstitions as his wife does. When Malindar and his son walk, they come across Chandi. Chandi calls her husband:

Gangaputta! Gangaputta! (she stands with her back to them. Malindar stops in his tracks, and instinctively covers his eyes. He covers his son's eyes too and draws him closer to himself.)

Gangaputta! I'm not facing you. What's there to get scared about?

Malindar: (in panic) O holy mother! You had to call me at this hour of the day when the wind goes crazy?

Bayen: (a tired voice, she is tired of the superstitious terror that she carries with her). Tie knots in your hair and in what you're wearing. (Malindar ties knots in his hair and his dhoti). Spit on the head of the child. Tell me when you've done it.

Malindar: (Spits on Bhagirath's head) I have now.
(Bhagirath raises his eyes to steal a glance at the Bayen, but Malindar checks him in time.) Drop your eyes, Bhagirath.

Bayen : (turns around, in yearning disbelief).

Malindar : (ferocious in his fear). Stop it, you bitch! Turn your face away. (The Bayen dutifully turns away). You want to kill me ? Is that why you’re here? Eh?  

All this conversation tells us how the superstitions act on their minds and make them senseless. The motherly love cannot be ceased by anything. That’s why the instinct in Chandi makes her to look at her son, though she is prevented. When Malindar sees, fears and shouts at her not to see him and his son, then she "covers her eyes, shivers and cries No. No. No."  

She also feels afraid that some misfortune may befall on her son.

Having known that Bayen is his mother, Bhagirath feels to see her. The natural relationship between them which is severed by the society is again established. Initially, when Bhagirath confronts his mother, he decides not to look at her face. He says to himself: "I’ll just see her face in the water. There can be no harm if I don't look on her face. I'll look at the reflection in the water. The other day I didn't."  

But, he cannot resist his inner urge to see her face. It is evident
when "she is about to turn around. Bhagirath notices the reflection in the water wavering. He raises his face, and for one long second they stare into each other's faces, before the Bayen turns her face away. Bhagirath stares on." 19 The mother in her makes her weep for a long time. The filial bond wakes her up. But, the superstitions drive her to warn her son, that something may happen to him. She says, "there's poison in the air into which I breathe, there's poison in my touch." 20 She asks him not to see her again. Here we find a conflict within her, between motherly love and superstitions that lead to misfortunes. The play stirs up with all the superstitious dogma which suppresses the human feelings and lead to inhuman subjugation.

Through The Witch, Mahaswetha Devi projects how the deep-rooted superstitions disturb the life of the rural folk. She focuses on the ignorance of the people and how they act abnormally, thinking everything in a false manner. The people think that the cause of a famine is due to the presence a witch and not as a natural calamity. In The Witch, the inveterate superstitions cause a great havoc and turmoil in the village Kuruda. The village foresees famine conditions. The people feel that the inauspicious sayings, "Let the famine come and stay in the deserted village" 21 have come true and invited wickedness and misfortune. They take it that the misfortune and cause of famine is due to the 'daini'. They feel:

Everything that happened along with the famine is due to the daini.
It seems that children are drinking the soya bean relief milk, vomiting, falling over, and dying. Cattle are dying. Ravens are tilting off branches and whirling down, dead. All because of the *daini.*

This speaks how the superstitions plunge the people into a negative thought and raise havoc and fear in their minds. They hear many stories like:

It seems that in *Murhai,* when an old Ganju woman struck a flint to light her ‘beedi’, the stones yielded blood instead of sparks. It seems that somewhere a newborn infant walks down the road kicking a fire-bearing pot before him. It seems that some where the Munda dead have shoved aside their grave-stones to emerge into the burial ground, where they sit and sing.

This brings a view of the rural people who create stories to befuddle themselves between false and true. Such stories are many to be heard in most of the Indian villages. Here, we are reminded of a similar false belief in *The Armenian Champa Tree.* Everyone of Nose – cut – off – canal village believe that there are ghosts in a tamarind tree on the bank of nose-cut-off-canal. Everyone is scared to go to the tamarind tree or the banks of the canal during nights. They believe that nose-cut-off-canal is the abode of the fishmonger female spirits and the will – o – the wisp ghosts. The fishmonger female spirits wear bright white saris and move

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*Murhai:* name of a village.
around on back to-front feet, catching fish with a palo (cane fishing basket). If they chance upon humans, in a trice they change into enormous cats and vanish into the air. And the will-o-the wisp ghosts run around with fire in their mouths, enticing field labourers, market people and company post messengers to the edge of the water. "They drown them in water and leave them there." So, the villagers are driven to an unknown fear with these beliefs. The rumours in the villages cause such strong belief in their minds. Even today, going to tamarind trees in the nights is prevented in many places because the people feel that those trees are dwelling places for demons and evil spirits.

Chaos and terror of a witch strike everyone everywhere in Kuruda. Finally, everyone approaches Hanuman Misra of Tahar, a Hindu Brahmin priest of Shiva Mandir, where they are all beguiled. Hanuman Misra is an influenced person of the area and is a member of feudal society. Their frailty becomes a weapon for him to put them in aghast situation. He creates much more havoc in them by giving them false advice. It is all his deceit to cover his son's misdeed of spoiling an innocent girl who is dumb and insane. Their problem gives him an opportunity to cover the blunder, his son has committed. The truth becomes open to all only at the end. He pours kerosene into the burning fire. He tells them that he has fasted and prostrated before gods and they have sent him an awesome dream:

A terrifying, naked woman uttered the words, 'I am famine', before floating away on a blood soaked cloud. According to
the *Panjika*, she is a daini. The daini has to be found and driven away.\(^{25}\)

It reveals the dexterity of feudal society which has bestial qualities to create horror, taking advantage of the people’s gullibility. Hanuman Misra unleashes a horror into the village atmosphere. The innocent people start the hunting of the daini. The witch hunting is an excuse for the vested interests to torture the innocent. As Hanuman Misra provokes them, the people become fallacious and horrified. The problem becomes more complicated. The people begin to suspect each other for there would be daini among themselves. The narration says: “Everyone began to suspect everyone, to mistrust the behaviour of near and dear ones.”\(^{26}\) Due to this suspicion and disbelief among themselves, a chaotic atmosphere is raised. They even kill the innocent. Many such incidents happen.

Sodan Ganju of Murhai, notices his old mother going out at night and follows her. She does her work of cleaning the courtyard as usual. When she comes back and sleeps, it seems to him that the person lying on the mat is not his mother. Terror dents him and he calls all his neighbours to check whether she is a daini. They check her walk, if the feet touch the ground. With a razor they split open her skin to check whether her blood is red or black. Then they prove her not to be a daini and release her. At the same time she dreams that Sodan is abducted by a daini. She rises and screams “Don’t go with her, Sodan! It’s daini!”\(^{27}\) Reaching home, She sees Sodan chasing a female porcupine. So, she throws a stone at his leg.
to stop him. She feels that by laming her son, she has saved him from the daini, in the form of a porcupine.

Unknown terror attacks all the people. They try to watch each other. A strict surveillance is maintained to note all the movements of the people. "It's not easy to hunt a daini. Everyone, everywhere has to suspect everyone else, all the time. Hence, a few mishaps are bound to occur, and they do."  

Daitor's mother generally sits at the bus junction under the Banyan tree to beg. One day she dreams a black cow which is unwilling to enter the cowshed. She tells the same to the bus cleaners there. "Dreams, a black cow, the inauspicious colour black, and that too, calling out to it! The cleaners said – Scram! or we'll stone you." One day while she is trudging the three miles back home, she topples her head to the ground and dies. The people feel that the daini herself has devoured her.

People even start doubting themselves. The Pahaan, chief priest of tribals once doubts himself to be a daini as he sees his shadow. The narration says: "Even the Pahaan, the chief priest, who is in direct communication with gods, is not immune to the grip of terror." Later, his wife clears of his doubt by showing his shadow, lighting the debris and tells him that it is not daini but, his own shadow.

Budhni Oraon, gathering wood in the Kuruda forest sees a reflection of hairy arm in the pond. She thinks, herself as a daini. Later, learns that it is a bear, leaping over her crouched form with arms. She escapes and flees to the village.
One day Bisra Dushad in drunkenness feels that his black cow has turned into a young woman and is beckoning him. He kills it thinking it to be a daini. Feeling guilty of killing an innocent animal which is his only material asset, he hangs himself to the rafters of his shed and dies.

Even the officials turn out to be superstitious, no longer withstand their responsibility. One official from Adivasi welfare ministry forgets his identity as an official bureaucrat, trembles in fear, rushes to Hanuman Misra to ward off evil. A police official fears to interfere into advasi cases. He directly says, "if an adivasi or scheduled caste kills one of his brethren? As a daini. Then I'll go on leave. I won't interfere in the matter of dainis." He also fears of dainis.

All the incidents of suspicion revealed above are the consequences of upheaval caused by Hanuman Misra. The people in rural areas stand by false beliefs due to lack of knowledge and minimum awareness of the facts. Their ignorance even makes them abhor the people who come to serve them during famine. As they have heard from Hanuman Misra that daini would be a woman, they suspect every woman. When the relief officers, mission workers and Seva Sangh people come, they do not entertain any woman. "Every year, a lady doctor or missionary or even a female medical student would administer injections and vaccinations to uncomplaining patients. This time, they refuse to take the needle from female outsider." Once a wealthy middle aged lady of 'Krishna Mission' comes to offer relief to Tohri people. They pelt stones at her and drive her away. "Now human beings
stone them with heartless cruelty and drive them out." These events make all the
social workers anxious and also vexed up of people’s ignorance.

Till they find a daini they go on causing disturbance in the villages. Everyone feels Murhai as a dwelling place of dainis. There are a few stories which prove their presence. Roto Munda’s widow becomes a daini and later becomes normal as her nose is cut. Some old women and men turn into dainis, shoot cattle, lure women and bite them as puppies. In most parts of India we see that only women to have been possessed by witches. Undoubtedly this becomes true in the case of the story *The Witch*.

One day in Murhai forest two illicit lovers catch sight of the daini. They say: “On a stone in the heart of the almost black Kuruda river, sat a dark, near-naked, terrifying young woman, her stomach distended, gnawing the raw flesh of a bird.” About this Jennifer Wenzel Points out, "In *The Witch Hunt*, illicit lovers draw upon the tradition of forest as a culturally sanctioned romantic gateway, yet during one forest tryst. They are exposed when they come upon the seemingly bestial "Witch" who has been terrifying the surrounding villages.”

All the people become furious and in eerie, they rush to the forest and chase her like an animal. “The witch as an evil-doer, is believed to have become the enemy of the state, the individual, and her own salvation.” They do not kill her or stone her because they are alerted by Hanuman Misra’s Words, "The daini has to be found and driven away. If she is wounded, if she bleeds, or if she is burnt to death, a
terrible calamity will be visited upon them." So, they drive her away to Jilad Fields.

Their problem comes to an end and their fallacy could be understood, only when they find that she is the daughter of 'Pahaan of Tura. After Sanichari's death, they furiously chase her to a cave, where she delivers a baby. By the cry of the baby, Pahaan of Tura, enters the cave and notices his dumb and insane daughter, Somri to be the victim. In a breathless, distorted voice he says, it is "My daughter . . . kill me too. And this baby as well." By that the people are astonished.

The Pahaan reveals the story behind his daughter's present state. By that story the people realise the fraudulent nature of Hanuman Misra, the way he bullies everyone and creates a great havoc without minding the consequences. The story touches the sympathy for that girl and also for all the people who have struggled in the turmoil. Paahan's daughter who is dumb and mentally immature is left to work in the household of Hanuman Misra. Misra's son spoils that innocent girl and drives her away. When Pahaan questions Misra about his daughter, he is beaten and sent away. Later, Misra finds the ignorant beliefs of people and encashes the situation to put that girl in the name of daini and deludes everyone. Mahaswetha Devi throws light on the feudal mechanism which deceives the innocent people in the name of faith. This deception leads to a great turmoil and commotion which take away the lives of many. This is one of the major exploitations of the gullible.

* Pahaan :- The priest of the tribal community.
Of course, she also gives us a clue of the deceit of Misra and some people’s mistrust on the feudal society. Pahaan once says to Sanichari:

The Brahmin ‘deota’ of Tahar cares so deeply for us that if he sees our houses burning, he’ll pour kerosene on them instead of water. His standard line you’re low born filth, the dust off our shoes. I suspect that he’s the one who’s started this daini business; actually there’s no daini! 

This becomes true later. Though they find the culprit behind all this, they cannot do anything because it is the mighty that rules the world and the weak are suppressed. Whoever questions the feudal actions is either killed or victimised.

In this story, Mahaswetha Devi gives a beautiful picturisation of a daini, which is the replica in the villagers’ minds.

"On a stone, in the heart of the almost black Kuruda river, sat a dark, near-naked, terrifying young woman, her stomach distended, gnawing the raw flesh of a bird . . . catching sight of them (illicit lovers ), the woman glares out of terrible, cruel eyes, snarls, and then, swaying from side to side, begins to scream – anh - anh - anh! like an ox." 

Here daini’s manner of eating raw flesh of a tutui bird and eating a leg of a dog speaks of her hunger. Pahaan says to Mathur, “Hunger drove her to eat raw flesh.” The agony in her cry 'anh-anh-anh' and her nakedness reveals the torture and helpless state she has undergone in feudal exploitation. Many innocent women like

* deota :- means devata, i.e., God.
Chandi and Somri suffer in the hands of superstitious people and feudal lords. They are branded as witches and are killed mercilessly. Regarding this, Mahaswetha Devi says:

Laru Jonko, a tribal woman activist of Singbhum, sent me a short list in 1982. The list showed that 37 persons had been killed among the Ho tribals on suspicion of being witches, within a short span of time, most of them women.40

This statement reveals how many people are becoming victims under the practice of this superstitious dogma. It unveils the ignorance of the people living in rural areas.

There is one instance of superstition which exists common in many minds. Mathur’s mother doesn’t serve food to her children or let them eat infront of outsiders. She says, "the evil eye will be cast upon them."41 She doesn’t allow Mathur’s wife or sisters to go out when they are pregnant. She says, “the ill wind will get them.”42.

Though, this shows the naivete of the people, it can not be removed, as superstitions have been inveterate in the sub-conscious mind of people since ancient times. Mahaswetha Devi, by exposing the realities tries to erase them from their sub-conscious state. Sandeep Bhatnagar says, that this story can be interpreted at a symbolic level, “The Witch as the alienation or marginalisation of those already on periphery.”43 But, it is an exposure of truth to every one.
The Armenian Champa Tree, Aajir, and Statue involve in superstitions of God faith. These superstitions plunge the people to negative interpretations and negative deeds like offering sacrifice to god or goddess, performance of irrelevant rituals and performance of pujas, fearing of God's curse, fasting during festivals, sacrificing animals to Gods to make some desires fulfilled and performing rituals like 'yajnas' for the welfare of individuals or welfare of a state. These are practiced since ancient times and are followed even today. Mahaswetha Devi in these works touches a few such absurd superstitious practices of the people, in order to bring awareness and a change.

The Armenian Champa Tree is based on exploitation of faith. A tantrik saint deceives the gullible people in the name of devotion and faith. The fallacious tantrik saint creates a trepidation in the minds of the village folk that a great danger is ahead, all the village would drown in flood and this grievance is due to sins committed by them. His appearance "Sitting with a human skull in his hand, lost in deep thought. His back bent to one side," brings belief in them as he uses considerable guile. In a loud voice he tells them that 'Yajna' has to be performed for three days and three nights and an animal has to be sacrificed at the end. He points at Mato's pet goat, Arjun, saying, "this animal has brought sin to your village. Because of him Ganga will overflow." It speaks of the rituals that are followed by the village folk to avert a calamity. But, in Aajir, the situation is quite different. To bring rains, they perform a different ritual. They make a woman a victim. A whore named Punnashashi is victimised in the high handedness of lusty
agents of feudal institution. In order to propitiate the rain god, she is made to fast a whole day, then roam naked throughout night till the next day. She prays to Mother of cremation ground:

O Mother of cremation ground!

Have mercy on me, and let me pray for water! 46

During this ritual she undergoes torture. She reveals her agony and the torture:

I can't bear it any longer. They all know what I would have to go through the next day, and yet they had to bruise me all over! (Breaks into Weeping). Isn't a whore's body a human body after all? You bastards, you had to tear me apart, and then I have to fast without a drop of water. 47

She undergoes this affliction whenever famine conditions occur. She has to perform the ritual without any denial. In distress, she questions all and later begs rain god to sweep the world away with rain:

Why do all inflict yourselves on me when you know. It's only a whore? Eh? Why? Why do you draw the dust from my courtyard for puja? The famine and drought come again. And the whore has to strip naked and call for the water to bring rain down on you. (She raises the hamper upto the sky) Sweep everything away, lord, in a wild rush of water. Let the world be swept away. 48
This reveals her agony. In anger for her victimization, she requests rain god to sweep everything with wild rush of water. Such rituals bring a lot of humiliation to the innocent people. They look meaningless. All her prayers never yield any fruit though, they are done with due attention.

In the same way of performing a ritual in *Aajir*, "Kapalik in *The Armenian Champa Tree* wants to perform a ritual to beguile the people saying that Goddess Kali has appeared in his dream and ordered him to perform the said rituals. He alarms all saying:

> In recent famine, so many people died. Now the flood is coming; this time it will annihilate you all.\(^\text{49}\)

He creates a terror in them, taking their credulity as their frailty.

Arjun, Mato’s pet goat meant for sacrifice becomes a cynosure of the village as it has to avert the calamity by sacrifice. Mato is annoyed by this. He loves Arjun very much. Everyone is convinced that Arjun has brought misfortunes to the village and with its sacrifice, the village will be set in peace. Even Mato’s mother is under the impression that Mato’s inactivity and moodiness is due to this inauspicious animal. She confirms it when Janakinath, the money lender fears her saying, “that inauspicious goat has been living in your house, and it’s turned your head too. You’ve grown obstinate."\(^\text{50}\) Mato refuses to believe all this and asks his mother, “Could such a tiny little goat actually cause floods in the village? Was it possible?\(^\text{51}\)

\(^\text{1}\) Kapalik :- A tantrik saint.
Though, the people are ignorant and believe false superstition, Mato looks to be out of that group in his logical thinking. Mahaswetha brings such small children to defy the whole insane system. Mato in *The Armenian Champa Tree* and Bhagirath in *Bayen* are small children who defy the age old constraints and bring awareness to the people to end up superstitious beliefs.

But, Mato is consoled by his mother. To convince him, she says, “Such things do happen. There was an inauspicious cow in the Acharya’s house hold. As long as it was alive, their family was beset with trouble. After it died, everything was allright again. If you let this goat go, you’ll get ten more.”\(^52\) Chibbilas, his brother also tries to convince him saying, “During famine, the people had died all over like cats and dogs.”\(^53\) Having seen so much death, people no longer feel kind or pity to leave this goat free, without averting the calamity by its sacrifice. Mato is not convinced. His love for Arjun dominates all superstitions. When everyone is asleep, he escapes with Arjun into the forest. His aim is to safeguard it from sacrifice by reaching Armenian church at Berhampur. He struggles hard to escape from the clutches of many superstitious people. He feels for himself: “Arjun was going to be butchered for a puja. Why? Ma knows how he brought up Arjun, how he fed him with milk. Even his mother has joined them, that wicked sanyasi and his gang. And hats off to Mother Kali also. Why did she have to mention Arjun in the dream.”\(^54\) Mahaswetha Devi through Mato’s feelings defies the fallacy of such devotion and faith.
Soon after his escape, an announcement is given in all the surrounding villages:

There is a boy Mato. I'm warning all of you that he has run away with a goat promised by the village as a sacrifice to the deity. It is no ordinary goat. It has to be ritually sacrificed to prevent the great flooding of Padma river. Or else, not a single paddy field or village will remain in this entire area. Everything will be submerged and Mother Ganga astride, her 'makara' will swallow up everyone. Janaki singh has promised to give a gold "mohur to whoever captures the boy."

People are alerted. Some people fear of the flood and want to avert it by catching the boy and a few want to get a gold coin and strive for that. Though hungry and thirsty, Mato runs to safeguard the goat. He faces a lot of problems to escape from the people. Once he jumps into the river to save himself and Arjun but, he frowns. He, then feels "It was better to drown. Then there would be no need to run any further. No need to worry about how far the church was." But, he is survived by the root of a tree and reaches the bank. Later, he escapes all the people including Janakinath, Kapalik, Chhibilas and reaches the church, where he and Arjun are safeguarded by the father.

* makara: mythical creature bearing the goddess Ganga.
** mohur: a coin
Here, Mato, a small boy undergoes a lot of humiliation, under the clutches of all people. The boy protects the animal out of love for it and defies the whole village society by venturing his life. Mato infact teaches everyone to love people or animals in the same way he has loved Arjun and not to victimise them in the name of sacrifice or in the name of superstitions and false faith.

The fear of God is well evoked in Statue, The Armenian Champa Tree, The Witch and Aajir. Some instances in them reveal the fear for God's curse. In Statue, Dindayal loves Dulali, a widow who is called inauspicious girl. Both Dindayal and Dulali are restricted by their parents. Dindayal out of depression and rage leaves his home. He joins the revolt against the British and is hanged for looting a British train. Dindayal's father feels that Dulali is the cause for his death as she has cast on evil spell on him. He also feels that goddess Manosha has not rescued his son, though he did many Prayers. So, he questions the goddess: “Did I neglect any detail of your service? Any detail?”  

Meanwhile Mahananda, father of Dulali says in private that everything happened is due to Manosha's rage on Thakur. He says, “He must have erred some where. This god is most ruthless. If there is error the consequence will be curse.”

The goddess whom Thakur, father of Dindayal, worships is the home goddess of Mahananda. They have appointed Thakur as their priest for Manosha shrine. Now with rage on Dulali and goddess Manosha, he enters the shrine room holds up the worship scrolls and the brass image of goddess on his head. With
tearless lamentations he says, "Mother, we worshipped you for a few generations, and you took my son as sacrifice? I will not serve you with these hands." 59

At this time, Mahananda's sister-in-law delivers a daughter and the household is in the unclean ritual period. When Thakur enters their house with goddess Manosha, Mahananda cries, "Uncleansed! Uncleansed! Don't bring the God!" 60 Without heeding any word, Thakur throws the scrolls out into the courtyard, throws the image and says, "I return the god! I return the shrine room. You fed my son through that daughter of yours. I won't worship your god, I won't stay on your land. I curse you, let your line die, die, die." 61

Mahananda is terrified with all this and is more terrified, for goddess would curse and some evil may befall on him and his family. He falls to the ground, howls weeping and cries, "Threw you away, mother? Threw away?" 62 He runs to Thakur, pleads him by lying prone to the ground holding his feet; Rubbing his forehead on his feet, says, "Take the god back brother. . . . Great harm will come to me, brother. It has never happened that a priest has thrown away the image." 63

As his son is hanged by an untouchable, his son's corpse is lit by an untouchable, his wife is manhandled by a constable, he is pulled to the ground and his Radha Krishna Shrine Swims in elephant's piss, Thakur feels that he is no longer a brahmin to conduct worship. He asks Mahananda, "Does a Brahmin remain Brahmin after that? Does he? Tell me yourself?" 64 Yet, Mahananda begs him, "Great harm will come to me, brother. I hold your feet and eat dirt, I eat dirt, brother, take back the god, don't make a sinner of me." 65
It reveals Mahananda's fear for the consequences he has to face for Thakur's mishandling the Manosha Shrine and that has been thrown in his uncleansed home. He fears that goddess may curse him and some great harm may come to him. So, he prays and begs Thakur to take the shrine.

Even in *The Witch*, this kind of fear occurs in Hanuman Misra's mind. When Hanuman Misra is desirous to feed a sacrificial fire with one quintal of ghee to drive away the calamities, Peter Bharathi, an Australian gives him Australian ghee for the ritual. Then, Misra fears that he would be cursed by gods if he uses that ghee as it is not Indian cow ghee. He feels, "Shiva is a hot tempered god. Suppose he throws a tantrum because Australia is beyond his ken." And that may affect him. And even in *The Armenian Champa Tree*, a similar instance of fear of goddess is seen. Chhibilas, a dacoit fears that, "It is not advisable to venture out on a dacoity without making one's obeisance to her (goddess Kali)." So, he mentally bows to goddess Kali, the goddess of dacoits before going to rob somebody. And Chhibilas's mother, whenever she sees one-eyed king cobra in her garden, she is scared that some danger will befall on their family. So, she prays to goddess Manosha to relieve her from danger and bestow peace.

All these instances give us the account of the superstitions that affect the mind of the people terrifying them that some evil or some harm may befall on them. It is that fear that makes them senseless in their acts.

Mahaswetha Devi brings an awareness and defiance against these superstitions which abase the people to a sub-human level. In *Bayen* through
Bhagirath, she brings a defiance against the superstitions. When Chandi dies a heroic death averting the train accident, the guard comes to take down a note. He asks the people if anyone is related to her. No one speaks, then, Bhagirath comes forward and tells him:

Let me tell you all. You write down . . . She's my mother . . . Yes, sir. (*The guard takes it down*) . . . My mother (*Pauses for a while, the very distinctly*) . . . My mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi (*Suddenly breaks into loud weeping*) . . . Not a Bayen, She is never a Bayen, my mother.

Bhagirath's identification of Bayen as his mother brings a defiance to all age old constraints. Chandi's heroic death in averting a train accident and saving many lives brings an urgency to end up the superstitions.

In *The Witch*, all the people revolt against Hanuman Misra, when they know that he has branded Somri, the dumb and insane girl as daini to conceal his son's fault. They say:

We won't work as coolies for him. Won't let any one work.

Won't allow outside coolies in, either. (*69*)

They don't tolerate the evil done to them. They express that, " they (Misras) got their son to rape the dumb, slow witted girl and threw her out. Then, they spread the daini alarm, saying don't kill her, just stone her." (*70*) In all fury and rage they
revolt against Hanuman Misra. Their revolt in boycotting Hanuman Misra brings a
defiance against the dexterity of the feudal mechanism and superstitious beliefs.

Mato in *The Armenian Champa Tree* defies all the superstitious beliefs by
surviving the goat and exhibits the beguility of the Kapalik when no flood occurs.
Mahaswetha Devi through the father of the church logically brings a defiance to
superstitions, sayings, “Once a beast is inside the church it no longer remains fit for
sacrifice to your Mother Goddess. It’s you who say so.” And through Uddhav she
brings out the deception of Kapalik saying:

He (Kapalik) is longing to eat the tender flesh of Arjun!

Arjun ate up his cluster of bananas. Butted him in the tummy.

So, he’s furious of Arjun.72

About this novel, Nirmal Kanth Bhattacharjee says: "Mahaswetha Devi
exposes the manner in which religion exploits superstition for its own ends." This
reveals how Kapalik exploits superstition for his self interest and beguiles people in
the name of devotion. Thus, Mahaswetha Devi exposes the realities and brings a
defiance to the age old-superstitious beliefs and constraints.

In all these works on superstitions, Mahaswetha Devi exhibits the false
beliefs for which people suffer and become prey for no fault of theirs. She projects
how people are habituated to antiquated beliefs in supernatural gods, demons,
religious gurus, astrologers and clairvoyants. Her aim is to bring an awareness to
the people, by making them know how dangerous and ignorant these beliefs are and
how they are encashed by the privileged and made as a tool to victimize the
innocent. All the victims are the real examples from the society. She lays a
defiance against these false beliefs and also against the monstrous feudal lords who
deceive the people by these beliefs and reduce them further to lower-level and
ignorance. She doesn’t merely write, but also, fights against these practices by
creating awareness in them. She pleads with the government for the introduction of
a law against the superstitions like witch hunting, just as the one against the dowry
system. She pleads the government to educate the rural people about these beliefs
through teachers and doctors, who generally confront them. These works reveal her
agony for the innocent who are victimized everyday.
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