



THE WOMAN QUESTION REDEFINED: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA AND DATTANI'S BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN.

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ABSTRACT



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Girish Karnad's and Mahesh Dattani's plays are the mirror of contemporary Indian Society. The woman question is vehemently touched upon by these two writers in some of their plays. They discussed the pathetic plight of women in the male dominated society. This paper aims at a comparative study of Karnad's *Nagamandala* and Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* where both the plays speak of the marital status of a woman in a patriarchal society. The former is a play based on myth and legend and the latter reflects a totally cosmopolitan lifestyle. The plays show that whether rural or urbanized, past or present, woman's condition is no better. It is rather degenerating. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the gender issues, marital disharmony and the theme of homosexuality.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Society, Homosexuality, Marital Disharmony

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"Men have careers; women have jobs. Men are breadwinners; women are bread bakers. Men are sexual leaders; women are sexual followers. A man's home is his castle".

(Lindsey 241)

INTRODUCTION

To centralize the marginalized and to question certain accepted patterns of society is the aim of any good writer. To give a voice to the voiceless, to highlight neglected issues and place

them in front of an audience is the ultimate purpose of theatre. So along with entertainment, the onus of social reform is also taken up by the modern Indian playwrights. In the galaxy of contemporary playwrights Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani have with their bulk of productions, roused the soporific state of Indian English Drama into a vibrant, popular genre. The woman question is touched upon by these two writers in some of their plays. Hence this paper aims at a comparative study of Karnad's *Nagamandala* and Dattani's *Bravely Fought the*



Queen, where both playwrights speak of the marital status of woman placed in a patriarchal society. The former is a play based on myth and legend and the latter portrays modern urban culture but both plays convey the same message that, whether rural or urbanized, traditional or modern, woman's condition is no better even on the domestic front.

KARNAD'S *NAGAMANDALA* AND DATTANI'S *BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN*: AT A COMPARATIVE GLANCE

Except for the feminist angle, the plays are totally dissimilar in plot, setting, handling of theme and characterization. Karnad's play reflects folk tradition and Dattani uses the modern city background. *Nagamandala* was produced in 1993 and *Bravely Fought the Queen* in 1991, which shows that the two works belong to the same decade.

Nagamandala is a play with a cobra. The setting is a village. Rani, a beautiful, innocent village belle is married to Appanna. But she is ill-treated by him as he is interested in a concubine. He locks her up in the house and comes only for lunch in the afternoon. An old lady named Kurudavva, who notices the plight of Rani, gives her a root to be cooked and served to Appanna, so that he will fall in love with her. But when the curry is prepared, it turns red in colour. So Rani throws it on an ant-hill which is outside the house. A King cobra living in it falls in love with Rani and visits her in the form of Appanna, every night. She soon becomes pregnant and Appanna is furious. He calls her a whore and makes her take the snake ordeal before the village elders. Rani emerges a pure woman and Appanna begins to love her imagining that she is divine.

Bravely Fought the Queen is a play in three acts. Act I is titled "The Women", Act II "The Men" and Act III "Free for All". The play is set in a metropolitan city where two brothers, Jiten and Nitin Trivedi live in twin houses with their wives Dolly and Alka, the two sisters. At the outset everything is fine but gradually the mask gets cracked. Jiten is a sadist and is more interested in prostitutes. Nitin is a homosexual and loves his wife's brother Praful. Alka is the sacrificial heifer masking the homosexuality of the men. Jiten had kicked his wife during her pregnancy and the result is the birth of a retarded

baby girl. Unable to bear the frustration Alka becomes addicted to alcohol.

Both plays question the concept of chastity which is a prerequisite only for a woman and not for a man. Sexual promiscuity is permissible for the male members but women are destined to lead cloistered lives. The plays subtly debunk the notion of virginity and expose the brutality ingrained in men and also prove that sensible writers are sensitive to the issues paralyzing society. Dattani draws a parallel between a bonsai and a woman to show the constraints on her which have stunted her growth.

Nagamandala is an old Indian folk tale dramatized in English. It has the sap and essence of its native culture. Hidden behind the fairy tale like story of Rani, is the hard truth of pain and suffering of a young woman. The girl who used to sleep with her parents is now left all alone, locked up inside the house. She does not know the outside world. If Rani is locked up by her husband, Alka and Dolly are confined to their homes and cannot break away from the shackles and the suffering. They also have to tend to the senile mother-in-law. If Karnad's Rani is tortured by Appanna, Dattani's Dolly and Alka are harassed and humiliated by their husbands, Jiten and Nitin. From the proscenium to the public the message conveyed is that women have to reassess their roles, reassert their positions and fight their battles in a society where patriarchy is growing from strength to strength in reassuring its power and position.

It is surprising that even educated, urbanized women too live under the shadow of fear, frustration and torture. The locked door of Rani is noticed by the outsiders but the goings on in the so-called modern affluent family are shocking and go unnoticed. Rani, Alka or Dolly are women with the same predicament. They are not aware of the activities of their husbands and do not know that they have pleasure from prostitutes. Rani and Dolly are kicked and beaten by their husbands and Alka is totally neglected. Since it is a fantasy *Nagamandala* ends on a happy note but *Bravely Fought the Queen* hits hard at reality to show that fractured lives can never be fixed. Behind the screen of myth and fairy tale is the hidden question of chastity. Both plays pose the question. 'Is chastity



a prerequisite only for women?' Appanna who visits a concubine calls Rani a harlot and Jiten calls his wife a whore. In a tradition bound society moral codes differ in accordance with gender. For Appanna, a wife is a non-entity, just a commodity which can be locked up inside the house as any other article. Subversive tendencies are deep rooted in the colonial culture.

Appanna, who neglects his wife and lives with a concubine, is not questioned by Rani and she does not take the matter to the village court. Alka and Dolly have nowhere to go and have no choices to make. They are doomed to lead isolated lives. Rani is so ignorant that she does not even try to find out the whereabouts of her husband, why his behaviour alters during the day or about Naga's mysterious appearance and disappearance. Karnad reverts back to the notion of woman considered as Shakti to show that the power of superstition can silence the voice of the male world. Talking about the two types of women – the assertive and the submissive Gauri Shankar Jha says, "The chasm between the two categories of women presents the rift between colonial consciousness and post-colonial compulsions. It is here that we find the post-colonial dichotomy and perhaps Dattani unconsciously hints at the plight of women, torn between being and becoming." (Jha:197)

A wonderful parallel is drawn by Karnad through the character of Rani and the same connotation can be drawn from Dattani's play. Karnad compares a story to a woman to show that a work of art is as delicate as a young lady. Hence it must be passed on with care and the beauty of it preserved. If handled brutally, it results in a curse. Dolly who is kicked by Jiten during her pregnancy gives birth to a spastic child, symbolizing that brutality results in a deformed society devoid of humanism, truth and beauty. Karnad terms the audience as the "Fourth Wall" denoting that it has to protect the stage as well as the society.

The transit from Karnad to Dattani is the transition of India from tradition to modernity, rural to urban culture, ignorance to technological advance, naivety to subtle ways of thought, poverty to riches - yet focusing on the fact that the position of women remains stagnant. Education, westernization and

urbanization are in no way improved the status of women. They still have their battles to fight. Years of financial dependence have made them servile and passive and in spite of ill-treatment there is no strong protest from them. The rich, fashionable, educated Dolly and Alka are no better than the naïve, unsophisticated village belle Rani. Lalitha, in *Bravely Fought the Queen* describes the making of a bonsai, "- you've got to make sure the roots don't have enough space to spread. You still have to keep trimming them as they grow." "You can shape their branches into whatever shape you want - by pinching or wiring the shoots" (Dattani: 246). The words best convey how women are subverted.

As Tutun Mukherjee writes in her article "Women's Drama" in *Muse India*:

"Theatre is clearly a difficult field to write for and is obviously mired in a complex interweave of history, representation and convention as well as being the site of interaction with the audience through performance. The act of writing plays and the theatre world seem to be no more progressive than the other areas of our subjective experience and re-assert the general picture of inadequate, unsatisfactory and even incorrect representation of women in the social sphere. This may be due to prevalent socio-cultural conditions, attitudes and practices, some of which are typically Indian."

Thus the plays present the plight of women in the society. Indian society is patriarchal society where women's rights are curtailed like the bonsai. She has no life of her own but her life is related to the male counterparts of the family. They are the dolls and subjected to the will of male. Thus, the plays present that women are abused and ill-treated from generations at the hands of men.

CONCLUSION

Through drama and theatre which hold a mirror to the society and rouse a collective conscience, the two playwrights show that there cannot be two different parameters of the same values for the two genders. Attitudes ought to change and practices suppressing one section of the



society must end. A true relation between man and wife survives only with mutual trust and love.

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