



MAHESH DATTANI'S DELINEATION OF WOMEN AS MARGINALIZED IDENTITY IN 'BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN'

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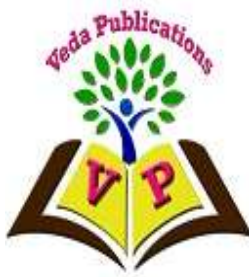
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ABSTRACT



Major themes of Mahesh Dattani's plays are rooted in marginality of various sorts. His subjects are drawn from the complex matrix of modern Indian social set up. The worldwide postcolonial discourses in 1980s and 90s inspired Dattani's concern for subjugated and marginalized sections that remained behind the gauze of the mainstream society. Their voices so far fell in deaf ear until through his plays the invisible and subdued issues of Indian society were brought on the surface of Indian stage as visible ones. The present paper unfolds diverse aspects of marginalized women in his play, *Bravely Fought the Queen*. A close study of Dattani's plays gives us the impression that women, in spite of being doubly dispossessed, come out as powerful agents of the society at the end. The female characters in the present play have succeeded to startle and astonish the readers and spectators with their brave fight against oppression. All the characters in the drama are so widespread in our society and their issues evade our attention as we turn a blind eye to those issues because our society has held those as taboo. The powerful depiction of characters with very honest and close observation of Dattani's scrutinizer eyes and the very deftness of his stagecraft in which the interior and the exterior are often dissolved into one have forced the spectators to rethink on the fringe issues while inducing a change of attitude toward women.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Homosexuality, Post colonial, Subaltern, Taboo.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani depicts the various facets of marginality of Indian women in the modern era, who descended from the enviable position of women in the period of Rig Veda to the present state of marginality not withstanding the fact that the country has come up as a giant economy and the largest democracy in the world. Closely allied to the issues of women is his concern for taboo subject like alternate sexual behavior or homosexuality in one hand and on the other, he deals with confrontational sexual behavior of women as a major concern against the backdrop of gender discrimination in general on stage in which the interior and the exterior sinks into one. Dattani attempts to bind the audience and the players on stage together by bringing the periphery at the center through stage setting, dialogue, costume, theme, spectacle and problematization of issues. The problems like the pathetic condition of gay people, marginalization of women or gender discrimination which are very much Indian in origin, still they are seen, or at least, considered to be alien. So Dattani displayed the courage to take up these issues.

B. MARGINALITY

The term marginality originated from Robert Perk's (1928) critique on the causes and consequences of human migrations which, over the years, assumed diversified reference points to multiple connotations. A reading of the sociological literature since 1928 reveals at least three distinct ways of using the term "marginality" (Billson: n.d) which are designated as cultural marginality, social role marginality, and structural marginality. Dattani's portrayal of women characters as marginal assumes all these three aspects together in varying degree with a difference that it is more close to the Social role marginality. It occurs when an individual is denied his/her belongingness to a positive reference group or mainstream social groups because of gender, class, situatedness, or an occupation defined by the society as inferior, hence marginal. Connotation of marginality of Indian women in Dattani's play is closely associated with subalternity of the lot as the dramas concur the Indian scholars' voicing of the subaltern perspectives in journal articles, published in Oxford University Press during

80s, from a stand point of reclaiming history in support of the marginalized people whose voice remained unheard. Scholars like Rama Chandra Guha and G C Spivak focused their inquiry on subaltern condition of Indian people on the grounds of class, gender, race, culture and language that might have been affected by the dominant politics, but unlike Gramsci's concept of subalternity, it was not the result of hegemony. Both the Euro-centric bias and the elitist discourses have been counted down and an alternate mode is suggested to locate the subaltern voices.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique on the subaltern studies or the cultural discourse, 'Critique on postcolonial Reason' (Spivak: 1999), reflects on how the under classes in general and women in particular are marginalized. Similarly, Dattani has attempted to provide an alternate source or platform through his drama portraying the women characters so realistically that the audience and readers get a distinct lens to discern the various degrees of marginality. His drama in general is a voice for the women and the entire marginal people toward redressing the imbalance created in Indian society. India has witnessed tremendous socio-political changes in both pre-independence and post-independence period, but little change occurred to the lot of women. They continued to be marginal at multiple levels.

Subordination of women or any gender discrimination, as a theoretical background, is fore-grounded on the premises of binary opposition within class, caste, gender etc. in any given society and for Indian society, the same question is asked by Dattani through fringe issues whether a woman or Hijra can speak or not. This paper unfolds these vexing issues that have not been answered concretely so far. Dattani has mastered the courage to answer the question comprehensively that still majority of women cannot speak as their choices are restricted by the society, with an exception of a minority who dare to speak, not without suffering, as is the case with the *Bravely Fought the Queen*.

The subalternity or subjugation of women are shown in almost all of his drama by bringing in the seemingly unimportant issues, issues of silenced subjectivities or fringe issues through small dialogues



or bickering among the dramatic personae, stage setting, light, and music with the additional aid of an indigenous English and every day vocabulary in a manner that the relatively unexplored subjects could be pushed to the centre amid the themes of alternate sexuality, gender discrimination, abuse of the minorities, or conflicts arising out of differences of class, religion, creed and so forth. The drama discussed here reflects the marginality of women in general with certain exceptions which vouch for Dattani's artistic genius and his deep concern for bringing in a justful society.

C. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PLAY

The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) at the outset shows that Indian women's identity is dependent upon their husbands' and hence, maintaining individuality becomes a Hobson's choice for them. The identity of Lalitha is through her husband as the wife of her husband's boss asked her whose wife she was, rather than who she was: "... You may be somebody's wife. What I mean is your husband- I know- is working for my husband" (p234). She is made to feel inferior twice: as wife and as a subordinate in class. The Trivedi brothers Jiten and Nitin in the drama own an advertising company and are at the highest ladder of the society as males and as employers of Sridhar, their accountant and Lalitha's husband. Wives of the Trivedi brothers Dolly and Alka are shown in varying social position in the drama. They are superior as wives of employer brothers, but marginal as women in the same place and it is made clear when Dolly boasts of twin luxurious houses built for the two brothers, but feels uncomfortable to the question of Alka and her share in the houses as she knows the uncertainty of their rights in a male dominated society.

Dattani, here, brings shifting centre-periphery movements of these two classes of women to display the shifting level of marginality. The crisp conversation between Lalitha and Dolly has deep nuances of class consciousness where one asserts her superiority over other on grounds of a chasm between the working class and the capitalist class. The tone and dialogue between these two ladies projects a difference of social class and status. Dolly expects Lalitha to go home but she is dropped to be here as her husband is engaged with his employer

Jiten-Dolly's husband. Lalitha is willing to leave but she cannot risk the journey by an auto to her home at the outskirts of the city as there is a fear of crime against women, especially, rape. Lalitha was asked to discuss the mask ball by the Trivedi brothers as part of their advertising requirement, but Dolly does not consider her fit for this due to her coming from an inferior class, instead she is asked to attend the delirious patient Baa. A stereotypical Indian business family is shown where husbands are busy chasing after money and wives stay put home-bored, lonely and they are compelled by ennui and boredom to gulp pegs to negotiate the state of vacuum in their solitary life. Dolly and Alka might be superior to Lalitha in terms of their superior class, but their condition is equally marginalized. Baa, a tyrannical mother in law and nevertheless a woman herself is rather too ruthless to Dolly and Alka who being exasperated with her cruelty, cannot look upon her with respect. It is clear in the curt response to Lalitha's inquiry about her health- "*She is alive*" (p239).

Again, Lalitha, a lower middle class woman, cannot have the luxury of drinking rum or soft drinks as her character is designed to reflect the struggle and certain characteristic traits of the class. She resorts to multiple pursuits like writing column on women, growing bonsai plants, or dabbles her hand in creative writing to keep pace with the world as well as earn to augment her husband's income. She keeps saving for down payment for a loan from HDFC for purchasing her own flat. Symbolically, bonsai represents women in general and the lower middle class women in particular in Indian context. Lalitha cannot be extravagant, nor can she take to the growing mixed culture of urban middle or upper class women flirting in fashion, drinking rum, going for costly outing or partying etc. She shirks away from cosmetics, big talks, big show or bragging; rather she prefers to keep her desires pruned off like bonsai: "*The trick is to talk about things you know a lot about. That's what I do. Like I always talk about my bonsai, given half a chance*". (p248) Sometimes her husband also thinks she is crazy spending so much time over the bonsai instead of going for some recreation. She is brought up with such mind set through cultural dissemination of her class. It is



obvious, when she won the raffle against made-for-each-other contest; she preferred cash instead of two free tickets to Goa, as she was a bonsai girl, committed to prune her passions, rebelling against wishes and even small pleasures of life.

Bonsai is also a symbol of restraint. Both Dolly and Alka have got a sophisticated modern life of club culture, partying, outing, driving for exploration and so on. Businessmen husbands are too occupied to give them their due attention. Many a times they dishearten their wives by cancelling any promised outing. On one occasion, when a phone call from them comes for being late in reaching home, Nitin looks at the bonsai annoyingly, indicating that the wives need pruning and restraint.

One of the central themes of the drama is: *"discord in marriage arising out of conflicting expectations of a man and a woman from marriage, and as a result of the corrosiveness of materialistic yearning"* (Vijay Kumar: 2007). Husband's apathy, insensibility to their wives' need for recreation leave them quarreling on petty issues. Added to their woe is the constantly nagging mother in law, Baa. In their upsetting mood, Baa would intrude their ear drum with grating screams or the calling bell that would bring Dolly to her tether's end: *"God should fix her arms as well so she can't ring that wretched bell! Two things she fights us all with. That bell and her loud mouth!"* (249)

A comparative analysis of traditional society and modern society shows that a distinct shift of consumerism, of gossip, rum, gin, pepsi, partying etc. have crept into urban middle class society with more and more participation of women. Drinking alcohol as a fashion and consumerist culture became a habit for Alka. She lost control once in a dinner, abused her mother in law in front of her husband and she was thrown out of the home for two months. Her brother Prafull came twice begging and pleading with Nitin to take her back. It was utter humiliation for Dolly, Praful and the entire family. Bored women often resort to flirting with their servants or cooks. Dolly allowed that Kanhaia, a 19 year old man to ravish her beautiful contours; she enjoyed the young touch, tight arms around her and the warmth of the body as well as the soul amid the slow music of Thumri: "The Thumri plays. And it ends. Another one

plays. I forget when that ends and a new one begins! All I'm aware of are two tight arms around me and the beautiful sound of heartbeat of a warm gentle soul" (p 262). It was her secret meeting at the kitchen of the house with the servant while Alka is drunk with alcohol.

The subjugation and isolation of the wives in the drama is rooted to evolving Indian society, its conflicting value in a business family, and sharp class divides. Trivedi brothers are ready to exploit their own brother in law for investing in their advertising company. The current advertisement that vouches for a brand of women under-garments is designed as Re Va Tee in which women are shown as a sex object and it's opposed to any Indian notion of sobriety that: *"a woman exists only to please a man... No woman waits for her husband to arrive to change into a frilly overpriced nightie and jump into bed..."* (p279)

Indian women, in Dattani's drama, have not been passive under the domineering husband or society. Alka is among those few women who could speak and fight back bravely which draws the name of the drama itself following the English rendering of the Hindi poem, Jhansi Ki Rani and Alka proved the spirit of the historic Rani in her brave fight against the tyrannical husband and mother in law. Alka plans to appear as Jhansi Ki Rani in the mask ball while Dolly prefers to play the role of tawaifs. Alka's dance in the rain is her liberation from the shackles of loveless marriage. Rain also symbolizes her tears that she has shedded all through her life as a woman and now she has got the strength to fight back like the brave queen.

Baa, the mother in law, inflicts her own suffering upon the daughters in law as she herself is victimized by the same age-old patriarchal domination. In the decrepit old age also she could not forget the trauma of being treated cruelly by her husband. She was dominated at her youth violently as her husband beat her regularly, and stopped her pursuing her passion for singing. The sons were also not spared from ill treatment. The process of socialization made Jiten a monster, and Nitin was a gay by his very basic nature. Baa could see the image of her tyrannical husband in Jiten. Mother's affection goes to the younger Nitin from whom she wants



care, love, affection and support what she lost from her husband. Freudian theories of Oedipus complex applies here as Nitin felt his Oedipus pull toward his mother like the case of Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, in which Mrs. Morel's unhappy marriage to a drinking miner draws her attention to her son, Paul, and in turn Paul fails in his love for Miriam Leiver as his mind was preoccupied with the reciprocal love of his mother. Baa takes Nitin in her fold with so much of a pull that he turns into a gay. Further, Baa's possessive nature prevents Nitin from developing any kind of emotional attachment with Alka. As a woman she represents as a catalyst of male dominance of her husband reacting with both of her sons and then hastening the process of a complete breakdown of the family with Dolly deciding to walking out and the tragic death of Alka.

She was of a generation when women were subjected to so much injustice and cruel treatment. There are instances that many of them would turn mentally abnormal or develop some kind of psychological disorder what even they were not aware of. She at her delirium with past memory gets back to her young age and addresses Nitin as a small child. She wants him to hate his father. Until Nitin answers to his mother's repressed wishes, she does not find solace. The fear-psychosis turned hatred continues to haunt her even now. Thus, Dattani shows that the root of the disease of an apparently conflicting behaviour or aberration in an average Indian woman is sowed in them as repression, torture or injustice that may be fringe to so many, but it has deep impact on the individual as well as the society.

D. CONCLUSION

In a strict sense, Dattani has varied his themes in every play but they grossly fall into one common category of marginalization. In each case an ontological question of being and becoming has been put forward through the protagonists. Alka and Lata questioned their becoming. Lata violated the border line. Tara's (Central character of 'Tara', another play by Mahesh Dattani) tragic death churned out a debate as to: must the girl child be put to death again and again to prove the male superiority? Thus, a transformation to changing reality is ardently sought and the readers are left to decide upon. Dattani has

used certain common dramatic tropes like bonsai as a metaphor for women, or has brought in parallel minor characters like Lalitha in *Bravely Fought the Queen* using her as a pun, or comic relief to unravel the hidden recesses of the characters against the backdrop of their silence in the society, hence, the facets of neglect and marginalization of women continues to plague Indian society.

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