

PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY IN MAHESH DATTANI'S SELECT PLAYS

T. Arul Prakash

Assistant Professor of English,
M Kumarasamy College of Engineering,
Karur-639 113, Tamil Nadu

Abstract

Patriarchy is the menace that haunts the life of women all over the world. It subjugates women and takes extreme means such as oppression, violence, and exploitation to gain control over women. Indian society is one among the societies around the world, in which patriarchy is deeply rooted and acts as a block for women's emancipation. Even education and economic independence does not liberate women from the shackles of patriarchy. Notwithstanding their self reliance, skill sets and earning capability in the modern world, women suffer gender discrimination, sexual assault and commodification. Mahesh Dattani is an Indian playwright who dramatizes the plight of women in Indian society in an authentic manner. His plays *TARA* and *BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN* deals with the issues of gender bias, oppression and domestic violence against women in a patriarchal family set up. This paper explores the hand of patriarchy in the dreadful, deprived life of Indian women in the light of Mahesh Dattani's select plays.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Oppression, Exploitation

The patriarchal world subjugates women and resorts to any mean, ugly and violent forms of male dominance to demonstrate men's superiority over women. In India, the patriarchal system has established itself strongly in family. The father is the head of the family and all other members: wife, children and other dependents are subordinated to him. He exercises his full control and power over his family members in all crucial points in their life like education, marriage, and career. The man in the family has assigned the role of bread winner whereas the women in the family have to take care of the household chores and nurture children. This patriarchal ideology has been indoctrinated even from the childhood by reinforcing the socio-culturally defined male and female characteristics, aptitudes, abilities, desires, personality traits, roles and responsibilities and behaviour patterns. Religion, caste and other influencing factors have been manipulated to insist that male are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females. Moreover patriarchy endows the men with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.

Mahesh Dattani unveiled the ill effects of patriarchy in Indian society through his portrayal of the sufferings of women characters in his plays *TARA* and *BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN*. Dattani condemns the evils that plague the Indian society in majority of his plays.

Albeit he has many plays to his credit that deals with the theme of patriarchy like: *WHERE THERE IS A WILL*, *DANCE LIKE A MAN*, his *TARA* and *BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN* has patriarchy as the main theme and helps us to understand the work of patriarchy with respect to man woman relationship, gender bias and how not only men but women too wedded to patriarchy.

Tara, the protagonist of the play *TARA* represents all female children born and brought up in Indian patriarchal family. It is a story of Siamese twins, Chandan and Tara who are born conjoined from chest to hip with three legs. A surgery to separate the twins becomes inevitable to save their life. Dr. Thakkar who is to administer the surgery realizes that one leg receives blood circulation from the body of the girl Tara, so it would fit naturally to Tara's body. But he is influenced by Bharati, twins' mother and her wealthy and politically powerful father to fit the leg to Chandan, the boy. This biased act brings in irreparable consequences in the life of Chandan, Tara and their mother. The leg that is fitted with Chandan's body against nature's will becomes lifeless. Tara, to whom, the leg rightfully belongs to leads life as a crippled girl. Bharati whose mind is conditioned to think in patriarchal way feels the burden of guilt, watching her crippled children. In the end, the whole family collapses, with its family members reap the consequences of their action. Chandan runs away to England and hides his identity. Tara withers away without realizing any of her dreams. Bharati dies of mental depression after donating one of her kidneys to Tara. Thus the whole family meets tragic end in the hands of patriarchal society.

The family set up in India gives enough room for patriarchy to be followed successfully. The male members of the family exercise a strong influence over female members as Tara's maternal grandfather who wields the power of money and authority to alter the destiny of his granddaughter. With his financial status and patriarchal mind, he could do injustice to a female child without any remorse. Patel, though who has no hand in the flawed operation, manacles Tara by controlling her life. He shows gender discrimination in his decisions on Tara's life. He prefers Chandan to be his successor, although Tara outsmarts Chandan in all aspects. As far as Tara is concerned, Patel's fatherly love is limited and secondary to his patriarchal authority over her. His authority does not end with Tara but also on his wife Bharati. He makes her life a hell on earth with his venomous outpourings on her love and affection towards Tara. He stands as a block to Bharati's desire to donate her kidney to save the life of Tara as well as to lessen her burden of guilt.

Bharati is a powerful symbol of patriarchy that demonstrates how a female can be set against another female through conditioning the female mind in patriarchal line of thinking from an early age. She yields to social norms that believe that only a male child will carry forward the name of the family and so a male has the right to take advantage over female in everything in life. Her fear of her daughter's future as the latter is physically challenged is a warranted one in Indian society, is well expressed in her lamentation as, "It is all right while she is young. It is all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan the world will tolerate you. The world will accept you-but not her! Oh!.....when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty, thirty is unthinkable and what about forty and fifty! Oh God! (Dattani 349). She, at no fault of her, but being a victim of a patriarchal society ruins both her and her daughter's life.

Tara is the female who endures the ill-effects of patriarchy from her birth to death. She loses the leg that rightfully belongs to her. That leg would have given her freedom and power to achieve not only her dreams but also would have supported Chandan in his endeavors to become a writer. But the tyrannical hand of patriarchy strangles her life. The venomous sting of

patriarchy takes away a part of Chandan i.e. Tara and made him to write a tragedy on Tara to overcome his guilt for Tara's tragic end.

The play *BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN* uncovers how the patriarchal system which is predominant even in this modern world oppresses and discriminates educated women on the basis of gender. In an urban posh drawing room setting, Dattani has recreated the everyday scenes of the humiliation, oppression and exploitation endured by women in Indian society. The play is the story of the sufferings of a three generation women of Trivedy family in the hands of male members of the family. The women characters of the play are Baa, Dolly and Alka, unnamed mother of Dolly and Alka and Dolly's mentally retarded daughter Daksha and Lakshmi. Only Baa, Dolly and Alka are physically present. Dolly and Alka are married to Jiten and Nitin respectively. Praful is the brother of Dolly and Alka. Baa is the senile mother in law of Dolly and Alka. This domestic tragedy centers round the life of the above mentioned characters revealing their psyche through their action and speech.

Dolly and Alka lead their life taking care of the needs of their husband and senile mother in law. Their world engulfed with these demanding duties leaves them with no time to live a life for themselves. The play starts with their getting ready for a dinner outside. This outing brings in a chance to breathe a fresh air by escaping from the claustrophobic life at home. But this outing is cancelled without their knowledge. Their passive resistance and pleading for an outing which give them a much needed relief from the drudgery of daily chores, don't yield any results. Moreover the intermittent bell ringing of Baa which calls for an immediate attention or retribution from their husband shows how women also become an oppressor in patriarchal society. The bell is used as a powerful symbol by Dattani to demonstrate the strength, power, and authority of the patriarchy that demands service, obedience and respect. Jiten Trivedy's wedlock with Dolly is purely for the sake of societal norm of marriage. He satisfies his sexual libido by calling whores to his office. He beats up Dolly for no fault of her that results in giving birth to Daksha prematurely. As a result the latter is deformed and mentally retarded. He does not feel remorse for his violent attack on a pregnant woman, as he feels it is his right to exploit women.

Alka is victimized not only by her husband Nitin but also with her brother Praful. With the ulterior motive of extending his gay relation with Nitin, Praful gives Alka in marriage to Nitin. To wipe out the shame she brought on her brother by returning from school with the neighbour's son on his scooter, she readily agrees to marry Nitin. The mind set of men who assumes the role of family head and demarcates the life of women is portrayed through the character of Praful. He violently attacks and threatens to burn Alka's face for crossing the boundaries drawn by the patriarchal society. Alka's impulsive questioning of the chastity of Baa in retaliation to Baa's blaming as whore, made Nitin drive Alka out of home. Alka remains childless because of Nitin's homosexual nature and Baa's control over her son. She turns a dipsomaniac to suppress her unfulfilled desires.

Both the sisters Dolly and Alka bear the brunt of Baa mainly because of their mother's second marriage with a man who is already married. The sisters are thought of Baa's family knows about their parentage. Praful hides the truth that he is the half brother of Dolly and Alka from Trivedy family. So Baa scolds their mother as whore and also takes them to be whores. So she induces her son Jiten to beat Dolly during her advanced stages of her pregnancy that results in Daksha become a victim of her father's brutality. Both the women Dolly and Alka masquerade themselves from the suffocating reality. Dolly tries to forget her unromantic reality by immersing herself in the musical world. She finds ideal love in the sweet voice Naina Devi in her thumri

song. Her fantasy as having sexual relation with Kanhayia; the cook is her attempt to give vent to her suppressed desires. Alka seeks refuge in liquor to numb her feelings.

Baa, herself, is exploited by her drunkard husband. He prevented her from singing and exhibited his authority over her by often beating her. His relation towards his sons also was so rude. Baa's suffering under her violent husband ended her in inability to live in the present. Even after his death, his memory haunts her, so she begins to hate his elder son Jiten who resembles her husband Trivedy. She seeks the denied love in her life by inclining to her younger son who resembles her both physically and mentally. Her guilt in turning Daksha a special child, and unwarrantably blaming her daughters in law's family made her to leave the house to Daksha with Praful as trustee.

Lalitha is the wife of Sridhar, an employee in Jiten and Nitin Trivedy's advertising firm. Even though she does not suffer as much as Alka and Dolly, She suffers from loneliness and repression of her creativity and imagination. It is reflected in her grooming of Bonsai tree. Lalitha's description of making a bonsai," You plant the sapling in a shallow tray-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" (Dattani: 246). Albeit it looks beautiful in its dwarfishness, its natural growth was suppressed by cutting short its branches. A wild tree is transformed in to a pet tree losing all its vigour and vitality; simply satisfying the onlookers. Dattani draws parallel between the stunting of the plant's natural growth and the arrested growth of the women. This bonsai tree symbolizes the women's plight in a patriarchal society.

The world of male characters are shown in the Act entitled, 'Man'. Between the two brothers, Jiten dominates their business world. His male chauvinistic attitude is exposed when he argues from the male perspective for the advertisement to be created for the Re-Va-Tee brand of Lingerie. When Sridhar, their marketing executive, delineates the women's perspective regarding the scene in the forthcoming advertisement., Jiten says, "Man would want their women dressed up like that .And they have the buying power .Yes, so there is no point asking a group of screwed women what they think of it" (Dattani 276).It discloses his narrow mind that woman's identity is subordinated to male desires.

In most of Dattani's play, female protagonists play a prominent role. The careful reading of the play throws light on Dattani's truthful concern for the pathetic women characters in his play .Albeit Dattani has no propaganda of feminism to convey, his story and characters underscores the struggle of women against the oppression of patriarchal Indian society. These plays, having family as its background, showcases the emotional, financial and sexual conflicts of a modern, educated urban Indians. It encompasses the feminist ideology when the subjugated women in the story give vent to their emotions and retaliate. Dattani's women, attempt to forcefully cross the margins drawn by patriarchal society, but at the end, succumb to the domination of patriarchy and waste away.

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