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MAHESH DATTANI'S BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN: A PLAY OF MOTHER-SON-RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

A completely different kind of play, much dark, starkly serious and violent, *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) was rather disturbing picture of the relations between men and women in a wealthy isolated suburb of Bangalore. The play traces the lives of two sisters married to two brothers, living side by side in identical bungalows. It was partly inspired by Dattani's observation while visiting the home of a Gujarati family that the women of the house were always dressed up but had nowhere to go. A powerful domestic tragedy, this play highlights the circumstances of a woman fighting against all the odds that the forces of the patriarchy have bestowed upon her. As a lively and provocative play, it charts through the emotional, financial and sexual intricacies of a modern-day Indian family. The play is a cry for the acceptance of shifting Indian values and it portrays the clash between the traditional and contemporary cultures that has created a new social scenario.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Silence, Kam Sutra, Contemporary Cultures, Sexual Abuse.

Introduction

The play, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, questions the male and female roles in society. It depicts the plight of helpless women victims of male tyranny. With the delineation of Baa, he handles the mother-son relationship. Baa represents many Indian mothers-in-law, who set up their sons against their wives. This is an act of vindictiveness because of her angry and sad past, she is embittered. Jiten beats his wife Dolly when she is in an advanced stage of pregnancy. This results in her child, Daksha being born deformed. When Dolly reminds Jiten of that bloody day, Jiten says: "I didn't mean to —you know I didn't. It was Baa! Blame her but not me!" Dolly says that they were Jiten's hands hitting her, his feet kicking her.

The plot of the play is in three acts, titled 'Women', 'Men', 'Free for All'¹. The indoor female world of Act I is pitted against the 'male' world of business of Act II and the characters stand exposed in Act III, where the two worlds clash and collapse, with the home as the site for the battle. The trademark Dattani-stage often uses the various levels to create theatrical resonance in a special way. For instance, the level where Baa is placed remains a constant in all the acts, and the time shifts that occur in terms of her memory carries the audience back and forth in time even the present seems to parody the past. The multi-layered reality in the play suggested by the split-stage, levels more constantly into an internalized reality, as it were.

The play looks closely at the politics of the Indian giant family as the setting, it constantly points at the gender divide and the dominance of the one over the other. To some critics, the play deals with the issue of rapidly multiplying consumerism and gender relations in the contemporary urban scenario with its belief in a global world. It focuses on the advertising sector and its impact on class and gender relations. According to some, in this play, Dattani presents the ways in which exploitation of middle class domestic women is couched in terms of culture and refinement. It presents a classical example of the way in which the process of female silencing is at work in the polished ambience of the drawing room in an urban setup. In this play the questions of gender, sexuality, and identity are raised. The unspoken is voiced, and the unseen is made visible. While the women escape to create their own spaces, the men use escapism as a means to avoid unpalatable disclosures. Baa, the mother partakes of both situations - she is both the persecutor and the victim.

The narrative is centred on an Indian family in which two brothers, Jiten and Nitin, co-owners of an advertising agency, have married two sisters, Dolly and Alim. The women remain at home much of the time where they look after the men's ageing mother Baa. Baa, white-haired in a white sari wandered constantly through this space. Jiten and Nitin's father was a cruel and dark man who usually harassed their mother. The kind of cruelty perpetrated on Baa by her husband is brought to light every now and then in the play. Jiten is cruel and bad like his father, so automatically she develops an inclination towards her younger son, Nitin, who resembles her father. So here we have two generations sharing the same experiences at the hand of their chauvinistic husbands and yet to come third generation, Daksha—Dolly's daughter, who also experiences the maltreatment of her father, even before her birth, and is born as a disabled child. Dolly has kept Daksha away from her husband and Baa, as they should not get chance to compensate Daksha by loving her.



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Dattani's treatment of this mother-son relationship takes on psychological overtones. It is happening around us every day in any family. Baa encouraged her sons again and again to throw their wives out of house as well. She called Dolly a whore and asked Jiten to hit her on her face. He believed it without reason and hit her while she was carrying Daksha. At a point, Dolly mentions that the fate of her mother was also woeful. She too, was deceived by her father, as Dolly and Alka were deceived by their brother and put into Trivedi family. Baa called them the daughters of a whore, a keep, a mistress.

Dattani's male-female roles in society hints at the problems found everywhere. The problem is related with the women with a rich and powerful father, recurs in most of Dattani's plays. For instance, Ratna in *Dance Like a Man*, Bharati in *Tara* and Baa in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are the daughters of rich fathers. The association of these women with money and patriarchal control that finally falls into their keeping is seen as problematic. According to Dattani, in using such situation for his characters, he has not used this problematic as a definitive view of life but it is part of personification of his perceptions. However, Payal Nagpal thinks: "One wonders if this is a comment on the nature of women in financial control or is it Dattani's comment on the men who marry them for their money."² Thus the play explores the psychological damage caused to the women in the Trivedi family, by the hypocrite men who signify patriarchy.

Dattani is interested in gender issues and he wants to bring the issues like the alternate sexuality which is still an invisible issue in India. Though *Kama Sutra* has a chapter on homosexuality, still it's not something people talk about. Here Dattani writes about issues which are very contemporary in nature, like gender issues, homosexuality, and marginalization and presents his idea of forced harmony. Tanu pant rightly comments: "The whole play is beautifully presented in multilayered levels which again is Dattani's adroitness. The way he juxtaposes the past and the present, the imaginary level and the realistic level without breaking the flow of interest is simply marvelous."³

Women, in Dattani's plays, are not victims. They are marginalised but they fight back. His plays depict the plight of educated Indian women of our time. Tara in the play *Tara*, doesn't see herself as a victim, she fights back till the end. She spits her anger every now and then on the outside world. She stands strong and does not get disturbed when people like Roopa make fun of her physical disability. In the same way Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* arm themselves at the end of the play to fight back.

Alka very boldly questions the authority of her husband and asks for his disloyalty. She also exposes the betrayal of her brother for not revealing the existence of homosexual relations between her husband and her brother. When she enters limping, completely wet and muddy, she says: "What have I done that I should feel scared? — I don't know! I don't know what I was doing outside. Aren't there times when you don't know What you are doing? (To Nitin) What's the harm in that? Huh? (No response.) Tell me. What's the harm?"⁴ This liberal dance in rain signifies the sense of freedom from the shackles of society. She seems to be getting ready to fight back; with an imaginary sword swinging in her hand for all that she has suffered. Dolly, too is ready now to fight with society. Her life is a battlefield and her husband has become her real combater.

In this play, women have not been presented as sinners, but they suffer because of the men who are part of their lives. Instead, men in the play are the victims of evilness, which has serious consequences on the lives of women. The play highlights a woman fighting against all the odds that the forces of patriarchy have piled up against her. This woman is, of course, the "Queen" referred to in the title of the play. The title in itself is an inter-textual derivation sourced from a translation of a Hindi poem about the brave Rani of Jhansi. Tanu Pant aptly says: "The play also reveals the fact that the suppression can not last long as woman will fight back to question the autocracy of men."⁵

At its most basic, *Bravely Fought the Queen* shows the distance in dramatic maturity traveled by Dattani from his early conceiving of the well-made play, plot structure in *Where There's a Will*. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a far more complex piece of dramatic construction - which successfully leads to the unexpected revelation made in the end. The play is so carefully plotted whole that all the layered ironies become evident only in the light of what we come to know later. This technically and skillfully made production made the play a success not only in India, but in England, too.

The play is rich in its use of various symbols. Dattani's use of these symbols is apt and telling. Dolly's face mask, which she is careful not to crack by laughing but which nevertheless, cracks a little later, is a cleverly used symbol. Functionally, it represents the image of normality as housewife, daughter-in-law, and mother which she presents before Lalitha and the world in the opening pages of the play, but which cracks open as the dark and sad secrets in her life tumble out. The beggar woman, who is occasionally referred and at the end knocked down by Jiten, represents probably, the guilt-laden burden of the past, which Jiten would destroy if he could. Baa's wheelchair and bell perhaps signal more than the old age and paralytic condition. Reference to the singing of Baa as well as Dolly's



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mother which was banned suggests the code of patriarchy. The ‘thumris’ of Naina Devi played over and over again on the stereo-system simultaneously evoke and comment on the yearning for love and an unfulfilled experience by the major characters in the play.

Thus, the play is remarkable for Dattani’s use of highly witty and suggestive symbolism. Lalitha in the play reflects the post-feminist view point regarding women’s status in the post-modern, social and cultural environment. She “freelances”⁶ and enjoys her reproductive rights, pushes her a few steps ahead of the domestic position of Dolly and Alka. Her creative writing and growing bonsai is a gift of the post-feminist individual world. She is independent, free, choosy and creative. The evening she spends in the Trivedi household is enough to tell her of the existing cruelties of patriarchy which a modern or a post-modern woman would repudiate to believe. Dattani points out that Lalitha is the you and me in the audience. He has become successful in presenting Dolly’s bravely fighting on the home front Dattani intends to highlight the masculine arrogance and deceit displayed by Jiten and Nitin. There is no room in their conduct for a conscience, for values.

Patriarchy harms an individual by thus permanently impairing the reasoning power. The anguish and guilt complete in denying the women their peace. However, it is ‘bravely fighting’ of Dolly that matters most in the play. She fits the social identity given to her, only that she never allows it to unmask and reveals her personal tragedy. All these women and men as well in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are afraid of ‘cracking their masks’.

All the women characters in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are the examples of exploitation prevalent in educated urban families and also the examples that die woman fights back if they are ignored or are suppressed for a very long time. Baa, Dolly and Alka, all from a single family were exploited by their husbands. Alka’s anguish and frustration is due to her husband’s homosexual libido and her brother’s deceit of not revealing the reality of Nitin to her. With all this knowledge, she lives in the house and her life is a fight against her fate. While listening to Naina Devi’s ‘thumri’ and the story of her journey from a queen to ‘thumri’ queen, Lalitha remembered the poem in school ‘Jhansi ki Rani’: “So bravely fought the manly queen....Khoob ladi mardani who to...”⁷

Certainly, the play captures the pulse of the urban audience by reflecting the problems on a familial level. However, it focuses only on the middle and upper class of society while eliminating the working class. So the play fails to create a world-view by focusing on a specific section of society. In this play, it seems that there is ample space to deal with a sub-plot related with working class problems. Moreover, it is shown in the last Act that Jiten is affectionate towards Daksha, his daughter, as she was born premature and disabled by his guilt of beating Dolly. He says: “I didn’t mean to — you know I didn’t. It was Baa! Blame her but not me! She is my daughter! (Crying) Get her back! Get her from wherever she is. I want her home.”⁸ It is incredible that, a cruel, gay and a corrupt man like Jiten could cry before his wife for his daughter. Again, one more question arises; had Dolly the freedom in the house to keep her daughter away against the will of her ‘bad blooded’ husband and a tyrannous mother-in-law? However, one must appreciate that Dattani is a creative genius able to deal with many complex issues with, seriousness and insights in a single play.

To sum up, *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a play about mother-son-relationship and their secret guilt; it is about violence against women, about exploitation of the weaker, about the mean, squalid corporate world. The play seems to be approving Freud’s theory about repression. Jiten, who had a very bad childhood, has turned into a demon of a man. He is a violent, alcoholic, lecherous, wife-beater, inclined to kill at the slightest provocation. The play is a fine example Of naturalistic theatre with a poignant presentation of the layers of exploitation in the advertising world as well as in the domestic world.

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