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QUEST FOR THE WOMEN IDENTITY : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MAHESH DATTANI'S  
*BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN*

Dr. PANKAJ KUMARI

Lecturer

Department of English, T.R. (P.G.) Girls College, Aligarh



ABSTRACT

On the Indian Literary scene Mahesh Dattani has achieved a prestigious status for his unconventional approach to theatrical Indian. For him theatre was not a medium for entertainment or for the presentation of philosophical ideals as it is evident in the plays of Sir Aurbindo and Rabindranath Tagore. He categorically accepts that society and theatre are closely dependent on each other. A theatrical artist cannot achieve perfection only through high standards of theatrical canons. For him the representation of society through stage can help to establish a better bonding between the commitments of theatre and the needs of society. If one of his interview with Uma Mahadevan, he admitted, "My milieu is theatre, you can't operate in isolation... I do want a theatre movement to happen. The major block for that is lack of sound training and professionalism. We have the talent, but theatre is more than that, it's a craft of community through the language of action." (Quoted by Dasgupta, 121)

Dattani has a realization that the wide spectrum of drama can help to have a better realization of life and of human conditions. He admits that strong dramatic situation must focus at social issues because they can contribute in bringing out social changes. The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a famous stage play of Dattani exposing and exploring the socio-psychological imbalance of gender-centric approaches in middle class urban families in India. Fissured into three acts, the play presents certain harsh realities affecting the life and sensibility of woman in the middle class families. In context the play, Asha Kuthari observes, "The play dramatizes the emptiness and shame in the lives of its cloistered women and self indulgent unscrupulous men, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets deception and hypocrisies." (Kuthari : 32)

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INTRODUCTION

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#### Discussion

The dramatist makes a use of multi-level stage to expose the inner working of the characters moving in their specific spaces. In context of the physical and mental spaces presented in the play to decode the position of the characters in the total social structure, it is said:

In Indian society where religious values dominated women's position and gave the status of 'goddess' to her, surviving with the ideals of sacrifice, love, sensibility, patience and resistance did not permit her freedom and independent identity. Under the burden titled brocade, she was treated only as a lifeless doll devoid of the 'will' and 'choice'. Her sphere of activities are confined to the four wall of the house dedicated to the welfare of the family. The home confined space beyond geographical locations has become the mental space of feminine psyche. (Agarwal : 70)

It indicates that the consequences of the marginalization of women are the focal point in the play *Bravely Fought The Queen*. In this play Dattani makes no specific agenda of women's oppression but he selects the situations to establish that woman is also endowed with the ability to construct her own human identity. He interprets woman as "a human being gifted with equal sensibility to reciprocate the sensibility of their male counterparts." (Agarwal : 71) In one of his interview, Dattani mentions that each woman possess her own private human self that provides her strength to resist the forces that are hostile to herself growth.

The three Acts in the play help to construct three different mental spaces corresponding with the family responsibilities in the Trivedi family. The script is divided in three acts, titled 'Women', 'Men' and 'Free for All'. The act one represents claustrophobic and domestic female world. In the second Act, the dramatist aims at exposing male world full of business activities and the unpleasant habits like abuse alcoholism, adultery and homosexuality. In the Act III there is a clash of two worlds inside the structure of familial relationship. It is said:

The fissure between conventional and current culture having thrown up a new social landscape. The play races towards a brave culmination, laying bare the gruesome truths that lie behind the pretence of conservative Indian morality. Questions of gender sexuality and identity are raised and the unspoken is voiced, the unseen made visible. (Kuthari : 32)

The Act I of the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* begins with Dolly's sitting in her drawing room. Lalitha, suddenly appears with a large shopping bag. Lalitha is comparatively emancipated and is fully aware of the outside world. She appears there for the campaigning of the product Reva Tee exclusively manufacturing women's night wears. Lalitha reveals her purpose, "It's a new range of colour – coordinated night wear and underwear for women. Very exclusive stuff. Now this is extremely confidential. We haven't yet begged the

account. They are doing what is called speculative campaigning.” (237) Dolly exhibits no interest in this business adventure. She only considers her going out in the protective company of her husband Nitin. In order to cater the attention of Dolly, Lalitha praises Dolly’s house-keeping. This discussion diverts her attention because the idea of home security remains rooted in Dolly’s consciousness. Dramatist exposes that inspite of her external satisfaction she bears the burden of the persistent torture of mother-in-law’s authority and husbands apathy. Even as a mother she has to look after her paralytic Daughter Daksha. Under these conditions, at mental level Dolly survives in loneliness. Her mind remains occupied only with the burden of the responsibility of family like managing a cook or managing the kitchen, popular space for woman. It is further revealed through her conversation with Sirdhar that she has no definite social contracts to move out in the society. Her subservient position becomes evident as soon as Alka, her sister informs that because some of the urgent business engagement, she can’t go outside. Like Dolly, Alka, is also desperate and pathetically request her husband Nitin:

Nitin, let us go somewhere. Just the two us... just for a drive. Anywhere. There are so many things I want to discuss but we are never... I’m all dressed and ready and all you have to do is pick me up. Forget Dolly. Forget your brothers! (241)

In this confession of Alka, it becomes evident that in her marital life she wants more attention and the involvement in social relations. Outwardly Alka is bold and confident but she feels the boredom of the household. As soon as a Lalitha introduces herself, “I do a bit of writing. Freelance I write an occasional woman’s column for the *Times*. Sometimes I review cultural events. I am into meditation.” (243) Lalitha in her discussions reveals the process of the a bonsai, “Anyway, then you plant the sapling in a shallow tray – you’ve got to make sure the roots don’t have enough space to spread.... you can shape their branches into whatever shape you want – by pinching or wiring the shoots.” (246) The bonsai image captures the consciousness of Alka and she estimates the personality of both of them only as an immature plant. Alka evaluates Dolly’s position, “Poor Dolly... she is neither interested in the so and sos of this world, nor unfortunately, in the bottle. Poor Dolly, sitting all by herself, looking pretty... and wasted.” (260) Dattani accepts that the isolation of women does not permit them to come out of the burden of their responsibilities and it hampers the growth of their personality. Dattani accepts that in traditional Indian society women are deprived of the possibility of self disclosure and this self disclosure is essential to escape this loneliness. In Behaviour Psychology, it has been accepted:

An individual may be attracted to a group because he feels alone and confused and the group provides him with readymade purposes, values and norms and something to give allegiance too. (Coleman : 291)

Dolly is lonely and it is her loneliness and depression that makes her introvert. At mental level she seems to be alienated from her surroundings. On the other hand, Alka in order to conquer her loneliness pretends to be extremely active and tries to forget her sorrow in drinking. In extreme drink she loses control over her thoughts and speech. She becomes angry when Baa rings the bell for call. Her anger is a sign of the negation of the authority that was responsible for her social deprivation. Her resentment is not only to the apathy of her husband but also to her brother Praful. She almost cries out, “I can’t forget what they did to me! Our brother is a cheat. He lied about our father to them.” (256) She considers Praful responsible for her forced marriage with Nitin. Being homosexual Nitin was never comfortable with Alka. Both the sisters bear their suffering and loneliness. Dolly’s daughter is invalid and her husband is a debauch. She is bound to look after an invalid child and has no choice of her own to make a selection of her own life conditions. Alka instead of withdrawal adopts the mechanism of alternative spaces to seek an unconsciousness compensation for her loss and loneliness. Besides of drink, Kanhaiya, the cook comes as a comfort in her life. In absence of her husband and Baa, she enjoys the company of Kanhaiya. She makes a frank confession of what she saw in the backyard:

The light outside the kitchen is on and I can see very clearly. I see Kanhaiya sitting on his launches on the parapet outside his room spitting on the plants below. The light outside the kitchen goes off. I can’t see him now! (261)

In these accusations, she takes the help of drink to reduce the pain of her heart. To compensate the loss of her married life, she gives herself to extra-marital relationship. For Alka her talkativeness, her drinking and her idea of extra marital relationship are the mechanisms to reduce the burden of loneliness and to make a reaffirmation of her identity beyond the authority of Praful, Jitin and Baa. It helps him to tolerate the bitterness of reality. According to Coleman:

For many people – both men and women – it is the severity of stress in their life situations that appears to lead to excessive drinking in an attempt to screen out unbearable reality. (Coleman : 426)

Alka's plight suggests that in traditional marriage, there is hardly any contentment. She is deprived of love, enjoyment and the exposure to outward world.

In the second Act entitled 'Men', Dattani focuses on the Man's world exposing the life conditions of Jitin and Nitin and their office assistant Sridhar. In contrast to the drawing room and kitchen of Trivedi family its setting is the offices of Jitin and Nitin. They are occupied in getting the advertising right of Reva Tee product. Sudhir finds out that the advertisement would not attract women to buy because still the purchasing power is in the hands of man. Dattani exposes that marketing strategies are still under the control of the demands and determinants of patriarchy. Jitin categorically points out:

Yes! Men would want to buy it for their women! That's our market men. Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power. Yes! so there is no point in asking a group of screwed-up women what they think of it. (276)

Jitin has no positive and respectful opinion for their wives as well as for the women in general. In fear of failure of advertisement agency, he orders Praful to make arrangements for a prostitute. In the second act, Dattani focuses on sexual and moral deprivation of Trivedi Brothers who enjoy the abrasions of life unmindful of their responsibility to family and society. Their neglect brings humiliation and loneliness in the life of Alka and Dolly. It is not only a question of social seclusion but also mental isolation that makes the adjustment in conjugal relationship difficult.

In the third Act of *Bravely Fought the Queen*, within the dramatic structure, Dattani tries to break the boundaries of gender discrimination and tries to reconstruct their human identity. Jitin and Nitin come home to find Alka all wet and muddy because she had danced in the rain. Jitin with oppressive authority asks Alka what she was doing in rain. At this stage, Alka is not petrified and with utmost boldness declares, "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." (299) In this act Baa also exposes the sights of brutality inflicted on her body by her husband. The scene shifts to the past where she recalls the sights of violence:

**Baa:** You hit me! I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! (278)

In the same sequence, Dolly dramatizes the moments of violence and brutality inflicted on her body even during the time of pregnancy.

**Dolly:** And you hit me! Jitu, You beat me up! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up! (311)

In spite of her own suffering, Baa is hostile to Dolly. She calls Dolly a 'Whore'. Jitin accuses his mother for motivating him to take undesirable actions. However, Dolly who earlier remains a passive entity, assumes her strength to make Jitin realize her oppressions. She desperately cries out:

**Dolly:** No! Oh no! I will not let you get away easily! They were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me! It's in your blood! It's in your blood to be bad! (312)

Baa and Dolly both in their own way are the victims of patriarchal oppression. Similarly Alka's agony admits of no bounds when she finds that Nitin is involved in homosexual relations with her own brother Praful. For a while Praful and Nitin come on the identical pedestal to complete, the cycle of female oppression. Praful gets her sister married with his partner to seek a safer space to his unsigned relations. Her anger bursts out:

**Alka:** Our saint of a brother, used to warn us against men like you. (Points to Jitin) And what does he do? The saint gives his sister to the sinister and disappears! Finished. Matter over or is it? The saint

has another sister who is (slaps her own face) bad, bad, bad, bad. He bears her till he gets better. A best friend! The sinister's brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a coincidence. (300)

Alka becomes a boozier to escape the horrors of the reality of her life. Having drunk heavily, she lied on the sofa. Looking at Alka in such a desperate position. Nitin gets a realization of his sin but he confesses that his marriage with Alka was a mechanism to meet the demands of the society. He said, "You only wanted the security of the marriage." In this statement the word "security" is ironical because it is essentially a mockery of conventional marriages. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* both Dolly and Alka are insecure. If Alka is mentally betrayed by the gayness of her husband, Dolly bears the imperishable impressions of physical torture. The annals of torture of female body continue through all the three generations (a) Baa, (b) Dolly, (c) Daksha. Dolly declares:

At the hospital you told them I feel down stairs! Daksha was born-two months premature. With the cord around her neck! I saw her and I knew! I knew instantly! Your mother loved her more than was natural! Praful loved her. More than was natural. You love her. You love her more than Baa or Praful because you feel the most guilt. (312)

In this respect Dolly develops her own notion of resistance and emancipation. Alka, Dolly and Baa become assertive in their own way by making a selection of their alternative spaces. Both 'Alka and Dolly turn out to be confident, breaking of their barriers and sharing the common space or the centric force with their male counterparts. (Agarwal : 75).

#### Conclusion

Dattani in this play defends the issue that the weakness is not inherent in woman's self. It is the privilege given to male folk that makes women to suppress their human potential. Dattani's ideology has come close to the vision of Carden, one of the member of national organization for women who comments:

I want to have part in creating a new society... I want women to have something to say in their own lives. I have never reached my potential because of social conditions. I'm not going to get the reward, I have been crippled... I want to see the kind of system that facilitates the use of potential. (Carden : 12)

In woman's life, social subjugation and deprivation essentially generates the psyche of discontent. Violence becomes a mechanism to defend the ego against socially imposed restriction.

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#### A Brief bio of Corresponding author

**Dr. Pankaj Kumari**, awarded by the degree of Ph.D. in the year 2013, from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Agra. The topic of my research is "A Socio-psychological study of major issues in the plays of Mahesh Dattani". I have keen interest in literature especially in drama. I have participated and presented research papers in several national and international seminars. At present I am working as a part-time lecturer, Department of English, T.R. (P.G.) Girls College, Aligarh.