

VOICING THE MARGINALIZED: A STUDY OF SELECT PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI AND VIJAY TENDULKAR

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Abstract- The paper is an attempt to discuss how Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar have highlighted the miseries of women folk in society. The cruelty inflicted on women exposes the intricate working of a patriarchal system that is instrumental in marginalizing them by giving them neither the rights nor access to resources. Dattani and Tendulkar, have written at different times and their canvass has been different but both have raised this issue through their plays. Both reflect on role change and rise of the feminine gender struggling with the dominant discourses of the system to gain the respect and a space of their own. Issues and problems associated especially with females- have been staged with the motive of changing the socio-cultural psyche conditioned by the dominant discourses.

Index Terms- Marginalization, feminism, Gender, women's perspective, power

Mahesh Dattani is the first English language playwright to win the Sahitya Akademi award in 1998 for his book of plays *Final Solution and Other Plays*. His theatre group 'Playpen' was formed in 1984 and he has directed several plays, ranging from classical Greek to contemporary themes. In 1986, he wrote his first full length play, *Where There is a Will*, and since 1995, he has been working full time in theatre.

Vijay Tendulkar, winner of Padma Bhushan, was a leading Indian playwright, movie and television writer, literary essayist and a social commentator. Several of his plays have become Marathi theatre classics and have been translated and performed in many Indian languages.

Feminist issues and the marginalization of females is a major recurring theme in the works of both the dramatists. This paper discusses/analyses Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*. It is an attempt to discuss how both the playwrights have highlighted the miseries of women folk in society. The cruelty inflicted on women exposes the intricate working of a patriarchal system that is instrumental in marginalizing them by giving them neither the rights nor access to resources. Dattani and Tendulkar, though they have written at different times and their canvass has been different, but both have raised this issue through their plays. Tendulkar wrote at a time when the idea of women's emancipation was in its infancy stage. Women were discontent and frustrated but these feelings were in their subconscious and they did not have the power to take steps for their liberation. Tendulkar understood the simmering chaos and gave expression to it. Tendulkar's characters are earthy, picked up from the street while Dattani's are urban, educated people. Dattani is a contemporary writer and his women characters are socially and intellectually more independent than Tendulkar's female characters. Theatre critic Kenneth Tynan once said, "No theatre could sanely flourish until there was an umbilical connection between what was happening on the stage and what was happening in the world." Theatre is a form of art that plays a significant role in our society. For a story to be loved and appreciated, it must be relatable to its audience, in the same manner for theatre to be relevant, it must have a symbiotic relationship with society.

In their search for the identity of their distinctive selves, the females have to raise themselves above the social taboos and strictures. The playwrights have cast their gaze on the struggle of women and the subtle power

politics that helps women construct the identity of the self. Through a search for the distinctive selves of their protagonists the playwrights give a voice to the marginalized and attack the social hierarchy that exploits women as a whole. The protagonists of Vijay Tendulkar are not heroes in the Aristotelian sense. In fact, they are types of anti-heroes full of human weakness and with no high morals. Dattani's characters, unlike the characters of Tendulkar, are heroes in the sense that they possess good qualities of a human being. They propagate change in the society at the level of societal and gender norms. His plays end with a conclusion which always talks about relaxing the gender norms for the realization of the distinctive self.

Gender norms abide by the power politics which as a matter of fact defines the gender norms favoring patriarchy. The subtle politics which favors the male establishes their importance in the societal hierarchy and in turn marginalizes the female. The real entity undergoes so much of cosmetic change that it mirrors always, without fail, what society wants to see and not what it actually is.

Dattani has revolutionized the Indian Theatre through his stirring themes and highly innovative techniques. Like many other writers he cannot be called a feminist who would pursue political agenda for women's emancipation but his concern for the position of women and the discrimination they face in this patriarchal society is genuine and unquestionable. He is a playwright with a social cause and he is aware of his responsibility towards society. Mahesh Dattani believes in "carrying on with the business of holding a mirror up to society". He offers no solutions to the problems he sees in today's India but gently stirs his audience to think about it. He writes for the urban middle class.

Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen* depicts the politics of a typical Indian joint family. It is a story of an upper middle class urban family based in Bangalore. In the Trivedi family we have Baa and her two sons Jiten and Nitin. There is another family with Praful and his two sisters Dolly and Alka. The story revolves around these two sisters Dolly and Alka who are married to the Trevedi brothers. Dolly is married to the elder brother Jiten. In the play Baa is old and her husband is dead but Baa is frequently haunted by memories of physical abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. Baa always incites her sons to beat their wives. Jiten beats his wife, Dolly, and as a result she delivers, Daksha, a spastic child. Praful arranges his younger sister Alka's marriage to Nitin, the younger son of the Trivedi household. In fact, Nitin and Praful are homosexuals and want to use this marriage to continue their affair. The play has Lalitha who is a visitor to the Trivedi household. Lalitha is a modern woman and is obsessed with her love for Bonsai's. Symbolically Bonsai represents the Indian women whom patriarchal norms never allow full freedom to grow. The title of the play has been taken from a translation of a Hindi poem about the indomitable Rani of Jhansi who fought valiantly till the last breathe of her life. The play has Naina Devi's Thumri as the background music. The thumri in the background of the play has a symbolic meaning as Naina Devi, though the queen of Kapurthala but loved to sing thumri, a style characterized by sensuality and usually sung by the *tawaiifs* (whores). In the play, Alka, Dolly and Lalitha are planning a ball where Alka desires to be dressed as The Rani of Jhansi and Dolly wants to dress as a 'tawaiif.' Later in the play we see Dolly as a strong character who stands up both for Alka and her own self. Their spirit can be seen in their conversation:

Lalitha. The poem was ...let me see.

Alka (interested). 'Jhansi ki Rani'.

Dolly. Bravely fought the manly queen

Dolly. Why manly?

Alka. Because she was brave.

Lalitha. Full of manly valour. You know- it might not be a

Bad idea if Dolly came as the Rani of Jhansi for the ball!...

Alka. I would like to come dressed like that! Dolly, can I

Come as the queen instead of you? Please?.....

Dolly. And we can all go- bravely fought the queen! (Alka stops swishing the imaginary sword) Full of manly valour...

Lalitha. What would you like to come as, Dolly?

Dolly. A tawaif. (CP 295-96)

Dattani uses the Trivedi daughters-in-law to show how the emotions, desires and feelings of females have no significance for men. The men are unscrupulous, self indulgent and dominate the lives of the women so much that the women are pushed to the brink of fantasy. Baa is old, widowed, bed ridden and lives alternatively with Dolly and Alka. She is full of contempt for her husband as he was dominating, hurt her physically and was brutal with their sons. Baa dislikes Jiten as he resembles his father and loves Nitin as he resembles her and is subdued like her. Baa represents the first generation of female victimization. Besides being a victim Baa is also the tormentor as she always instigates her sons to be violent with their wives. This attitude makes Baa the patriarch to her daughters-in-law. Dolly and Alka represent the second generation of female victimization. Dolly, the elder of the two sisters of Praful is married to Jiten. Jiten is a symbol of male domination. Jiten is violent with his wife, Dolly, and enjoys sexual relationships with other women. Dolly escapes her world by fantasizing about Kanhaiya, a cook of the house. Alka is a greater sufferer than Dolly as she suffers the cruelty of both her brother and her husband. Her brother, Praful, arranges her marriage to Nitin to continue his homosexual relationship with Nitin. Alka does not know this and leads a lonely and unconsummated married life. To escape from her realities she takes to alcohol. Even though a modern woman, Alka has deep rooted patriarchal influences on her psyche and does not raise her voice against the men who victimize her. She is ready to overlook Nitin's behavior and she says:

I know I haven't been an ideal housewife. And you haven't
 Been a...well, competent husband. But who is complaining?
 Nobody's perfect! (*Laughs*) Nobody's perfect! (CP 300)

Daksha, Dolly and Jiten's spastic daughter, represents the third generation of women's victimization. Lalitha is a visitor to the Trivedi household. It is because of Lalitha that the audience gets to peep in the lives of Alka and Dolly. Alka and Dolly behave as if performing in front of her. Lalitha represents the outside world which is different from the Trivedi family. Unlike Alka, Lalitha has her own freedom to take decisions about her own self. She can decide whether they (she and her husband Sridhar) should have children or not.

Dattani and Tendulkar both highlight the miseries of women folk in society with sensitivity by narrating how women have been used as a tool for the projection of socio cultural corruption, death of human values and a portrayal of the lives of those who are powerless. The women are victimized not only by the men but also by the other women who believe in the patriarchal system and sometimes they are victimized by society in general. Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session* was produced in 1967. Tendulkar uses the stage within stage, to mirror the double standards of society and to convey how women had to suffer in silence. Though they were going through certain feelings of resentment but their voice was suppressed. Tendulkar understood this chaos in the minds of the women. The play is a woman's fight against the orthodox society. The protagonist, Leela Benare, is a dedicated school teacher and an independent woman. She becomes a member of an amateur theatre group called "The Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association". The other members of this amateur theatre group are Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponkesh, Karnik and Prof Damle. Mr. Kashikar is the Chairman of the association while Mrs. Kashikar is a housewife who lives in the shadow of her husband. The couple does not have a child of their own and support Balu Rokhde who is an orphan. Sukhatme is a lawyer; Ponshe a clerk and Karnik an actor in the experimental theatre. Prof Damle has an invisible presence

in the play. In the play Leela Benare's co-actors conspire to have a mock trial to ruin her respect and to reveal her relationship with Prof Damle, a married man having five children. Sukhatme suggests that Miss Binare be the main accused. Ponshe declares, "Miss Leela Benare, you have been arrested on suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature and brought as a prisoner before the bar of this court." (CP74) Mr. Kashikar who is playing the role of a Judge, frames the charge of 'infanticide' against Miss Leela Benare. The play reveals different facets of Miss Benare's personality. During the first act she is lively, has a mind of her own and is bold. She mocks at Mr. Kashikar, Mrs. Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe and even Prof Damle. During the second act she tries to raise her voice against society but her voice is frequently suppressed by the word, "Silence" and the sound of the gavel. As the play proceeds the mock trial grows into a serious trial and all members torture Miss Benare. This torture reveals the sadist tendencies of society which takes pleasure in inflicting misery on others. It is not only Sukhatme and Ponshe but also Mrs. Kashikar who torture her. In Act Three there is a monologue where Ms. Benare protests against the society that has trapped her. She reveals that she falls in love with her maternal uncle at the tender age of fourteen. She wants to marry him but no one supports her. He uses her body and deserts her. When she grows up she falls in love with a professor. She loves him intensely but he too uses her body and deserts her. She is pregnant with his child but society does not allow woman to be a mother without marriage. She suffers because of the two men. The men had no commitment but society leers at her instead of questioning the men. Binare introduces Prof Damle as:

And we have an intellectual too. That means someone who prides himself on his book learning. But when there's a real life problem, away he runs! Hides his head. He's not here today. Won't be coming either. He wouldn't dare! (CP 60)

Leela Benare is innocent but no one seems to understand her innocence. In her simplicity she believed the two men but none of them appreciate her simplicity. It is a mockery of her innocence, simplicity, self respect and dignity. In Act III, she shares her feelings:

I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother...but it was he who came to me...I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was. I insisted on marriage...But all of them were against it. And my brave man turned tail and ran...Again I fell in love. As a grown woman. I thought this will be different... It is love for an unusual intellect. It isn't love at all- It is worship! I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering- and went his way. (CP 117-18)

Silence! The Court is in Session, is an important play which throws light on the repressive nature of society. Tendulkar shows his resentment against the social codes which have been made by people at the power centres. The women are the sufferers. Even though they want to speak but they have always been silenced. Gender sensitization is not only a major recurring theme but also a significant contribution that Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani make in their plays. The two writers wanted to relocate the position of women in India. Tendulkar has highlighted the miseries of women folk with sensitivity by telling that they have been used as a tool for the projection of socio-cultural corruption, religious decay, death of human values and immoral politics strangling the life of all those who are powerless. Power as a rule victimizes people irrespective of their gender, but the females are by far the worst suffers. Dattani is far ahead of other playwrights of India in taking up the gender issues related to the marginalized categories of the society. He reflects on role change and rise of new marginalized categories of gender struggling with the dominant discourses of the system to gain the respect and a space of their own. Issues and problems associated especially with females- have been staged with the motive of changing the socio-cultural psyche conditioned by the dominant discourses.

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