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Tracing Paradox in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*

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Abstract:

A woman faces discrimination as a child, suppressed by brother, father before marriage and after marriage by husband, and in old age by her own children. She is denied to take decisions about anything even about her own life. Her desires, freedom, and individuality do not exist in this male dominated society. Mahesh Dattani being an aware human being has always tried to show the pain and suffering of the marginalized section of the society whether they are women, gay and lesbian or transgender. He always gives voice to these muted areas which are required to be heard. The present paper deals with the issues of gender inequality, suppressed condition of women as well as their attempt to make their silent voices capable of being heard and to establish their identity. The present play *Bravely Fought the Queen* exemplifies the exploitation endured by the females of educated urban India. At the same time it shows the reality that women cannot be kept suppressing for the long time. If they are not heard for a long time, they will fight back.

Keywords: Women, exploitation, domination, individuality, freedom, fight.

Yatra Naryastu Pujante, Ramante Tatra Devata

This is an incomplete script from Manusmriti which means “women are honored where, divinity blossoms there.” This is how woman’s status has been portrayed from ancient time. It was practically followed by the people in family and society as well. But in present era it has just become a beautiful theoretical saying which is only used during public speech or in writing. It has nothing to do in reality. A woman faces discrimination as a child, suppressed by brother, father before marriage and after marriage by husband, and in old age by her own children. She is denied to take decisions about anything even about her own life. Her desires, freedom, and individuality do not exist in this male dominated society. Mahesh Dattani being an aware human being has always tried to show the pain and suffering of the marginalized section of the society whether they are women, gay and lesbian or transgender. He always gives voice to these muted areas which are required to be heard. The present play *Bravely Fought the Queen* also deals with the issues of gender inequality, suppressed condition of women as well as their attempt to make their silent voices capable of being heard and to establish their identity. Dattani has taken this title from the poem “Khoob Ladi Mardani” composed by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. The poem is written in the praise of the manly achievements of Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi. She fought bravely during the battle between the British forces and the Indian revolutionaries in 1857, India’s first struggle for freedom. In this play Dattani shows Dolly and Alka as fighters who are struggling for their

identity. But as we study the play thoroughly we find that there is a paradox in the title which is given to the female protagonists of the play. As Aditya Kumar observes:

Alluding to the story of the Rani of Jhansi in the title, Dattani shows how the two women, Dolly and Alka, fight like men against emotional adversities to create an identity for themselves though their position in the Trivedi household is a stereotyped subjugated one. (n.p)

It is said that before marriage a daughter is the princess of the house and after marriage she becomes the queen. But in this play women are not treated even as human beings by their male counterparts. They are brave as they are bearing violence, humiliation, ill treatment and still living by covering all these from the eyes of the outside world. It is true that modernization and globalization has affected our society at a very large scale. This play scrutinizes the change that has been introduced in our social set-up. This change has reduced Dolly and Alka merely as the show-piece in their house without any real assertion of their will. In this play not only Jiten and Nitin who are Dolly and Alka's husbands respectively but Baa, their mother-in-law also the representative of patriarchal dominance during the entire play. It exemplifies the exploitation endured by the females of educated urban India. At the same time it shows the reality that women cannot be kept suppressing for the long time. If they are not heard for a long time, they will fight back.

The actions of the play are set around Indian family in which the owners of an advertising agency, Jiten and Nitin Trivedi are married to two sisters, Dolly and Alka. The play is divided into three acts-The Women, The Men, and Free for All! The first act describes the home centered claustrophobic world of women; the second act is about the corruption of business world and the narrow mentality of Trivedi brothers about women who are their own wives, their mother. Mandal states that;

The Trivedi brother treat their wives not only with a disregard which stems from an absolute negation of qualities other than those required in the capacities of a dutiful wife or docile daughter-in-law, but also do not hesitate to exploit the dependence of the female on her husband's home and her unequal resource position In a society that practice systematic exclusion of the female subject from the economic nucleus. (35-6)

In the third and final act, there are several revelations and attempts made by Dolly and Alka to raise their voice against the male domination. The play opens with Dolly, getting ready to go for a dinner party but she is not aware about the cancellation of program. Lalita, wife of her husband's business adviser Sridhar, comes to discuss the mask ball, the event that will launch the model for the ReVaTee ad campaign. Dolly is unaware about her husband's planning. This clearly indicates that there is no mutual understanding between the couple. Jiten just wants to impose his decision upon his wife without her consent. Her younger sister Alka also does not have any idea about it. Even she makes call to her husband Nitin to go for a long drive and spend some quality time with each other. But she gets a rejection as always.

Dolly and Alka are nothing but only the caretakers of the house as well as nurses to their old paralyzed mother-in-law. They neither have financial independence nor any emotional support from their husband. If they try to disobey them, they have to pay heavily for it. Once Alka made an offensive comment for her mother-in-law for this she was thrown out of the house for three months by her husband. Baa is very old and bed-ridden but comes out as a typical dominating mother-in-law. She often gets lost in her past which was very terrible. She was also the victim of violence and male chauvinism in her youth. Her husband used to beat her badly. She wanted to sing, but he did not allow her. But her personal sufferings do not make her to realize the condition of her daughters-in-law. She makes the life of her daughters-in-law as she faced in her past. She does not allow freedom of choice to them. She keeps provoking her sons against their wives in order to control them. Once she provoked Jiten to beat Dolly during her pregnancy on the revelation of the truth that her and her sister's mother was the second wife of their father. It resulted in two months premature birth of Daksha, a disabled child. Alka also blames her that she never permitted her son Nitin to have children and this is the reason why she is childless while the reality is far more different. Her brother Praful used her in order to cover his homosexual relationship with Nitin. He also cheated Nitin by telling him lie that Alka was aware of their relationship and after knowing all this she had gone ready for marriage. Praful used to dominate both his sisters before their marriage. Once he burns Alka's hair because she returns home on the scooter of her neighbor's son. Dolly defines him by saying that he was just doing his duty as he was our protector. Alka recalls the incident which has imperishable marks on her mind; "I thought he was doing to burn my face! He burnt my hair. I can still smell my hair on fire. Nitin was right behind us. Watching! Just... Praful said, don't you even look at any man. Ever" (32).

Dattani explores the hierarchy and plurality of masculinities through the characters of Praful, Jiten, Nitin and their dead father. Jiten makes his entry in the second act with his arrogant demeanors, dominating temperament, overbearing attitude through which he dictates his brother and secretary at the office and the members of the family at home. He has a luxurious office in which there is a comfortable couch next to his desk and a well stocked bar catering to his intoxicating trips. His discussion about the ReVaTee model acquaints us with his attitude towards women. It is nothing more than an erotic spectacle; an exhibition of female sexuality where the subjectivity of the model disappears under the overwhelming vision of the male gaze and she reduces to the status of a sex-object to satiate the lust of voracious men. He becomes offensive when Sridhar objects; "Men would 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" (54). It depicts our society's harsh reality where women are not given freedom to take decision. Their whole life spends in fulfilling other family member's choice. They do not have any right but only to follow the instructions of their husband. Nitin is an opposite side of his brother, Jiten. He is very calm and composed. However, he is a partner in RaVeTee, but he fails to put up a staunch resistance against his brother's oppressive and audacious temperament. The reason of his weakness or meek personality is exposed at the end of the final act, where he himself reveals his homosexuality. His sexual orientation ostracizes him within the patriarchal premise. He is pushed to the lowest strata of

masculinity where he shows behavior, values and principles that are seemed odd with those expected from a man.

The play dramatizes the emptiness and shame in the lives of cloistered women and self-indulgent, unscrupulous man, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception and hypocrisies. Dolly and Alka both are suffering in their personal life. They do not find any way or solution to come out of it. So, they try to find out solace in other things. For example, Dolly develops her infatuation for an imaginary cook Kanhaiya. The thought of Kanhaiya shifts her into an imaginary land where she feels herself special and away from harsh realities of her life. Kanhaiya is the product of Dolly's imagination and Alka too starts believing in it. Dolly openly confesses her physical relationship with this imaginary man in front of Lalitha. When Dolly asks Alka to go into the kitchen in order to enjoy with Kanhaiya, she refuses by saying, "No-O! I can't! (Sits on the sofa, crying.) Praful, your sister is good. She's good" (263). She just wants to show that she is a chaste woman who did not have any affair in the past and she even does not want any extra-marital affair now. But her cries shows that she also wants a relief, someone whom she can share her pain. Her husband is incompetent which she thinks but in reality he is homosexual. She is married to him only in a social sense but physically she is still unmarried. She started drinking alcohol in order to find some relief after marriage. Dolly loves to listen to the Thumaries of Naina Devi. She tells the story of Naina Devi to Lalitha. She became a famous Thumari queen after facing lots of difficulties. This is the reason that while hearing Thumari Dolly feels herself courageous enough to resist the suppression. Lalitha's fascination with nurturing Bonsai is symbolical representation how the natural growth of the women in our society has been curbed under the pressure of patriarchal code. In Asha Kuthari Chaudhury's word, "The grotesque looking tree is deliberately acclimatized to its environment and adopts its growth accordingly, even bearing fruit (that are, however, inedible) and turns a dwarf, stunted in every way and yet surviving" (46). Women are also compelled to live in and adopt the situations which are alien to them like Bonsai. All female characters in the play do not have any identify of their own; they are subordinated, tortured and suppressed in every way by their husbands. They are impoverished psychologically and marginalized physically. Even Lalitha is not free from this. However, her condition is different from other female character but at deeper level, she is the victim of same conditions. There are many other incidents in the play which ascertained those women are the plaything in the hands of men-the so called privileged and powerful class of society. They can exploit women; torture them and it is the duty of the women to bear the burden of patriarchy silently with tearful eyes. Dattani's use of various incidents and metaphors which show that women are trying to set themselves free and want to establish their identity in this male dominated society. Dolly, Alka and Lalitha find their own ways to escape from their sufferings as Beena Agarwal clearly states:

In spite of diversity in the mental thinking all three women try to escape the frustration of their claustrophobic spaces. Alka seeks a consolation in alcohol, Dolly develops a fascination in Kanhaiya, the cook while the obsession of Lalitha transmutes her passion for bonsai. (73)

Alka forgets her miseries in the state of drunkenness. She expresses herself fully and fulfills her hidden desires. Her wish to wear the costume of Rani of Jhansi in ball party and her dance in the rain in drunkenness suggests that she has sought freedom from her husband's domination and furry. Sagar Taranga Mandal comments:

Bravely Fought the Queen is a play by an alert mind; a mind not only alive to gradual everyday enfeeblement of the woman's soul, the legal expropriation of her labor and sexuality, but also alive to a new change that is slowly sweeping across and challenging old hierarchies.(44)

In the third act of the play each character shows their strong desire to come out from their fear, guilt and want to raise their voice against injustice. Both Dolly and Alka prove confident in establishing their identity. Their protest against male domination exhibit in their actions clearly. Dolly's feeling of solace in the strong arms of Kanhaiya, her desire to dress up like a tawaif, Alka's wish to come to ball party in the costume in Rani Laxmi Bai and her dance in rain; all these incidents indicate that women are liberating themselves from the claustrophobic spaces of home as well as from the male domination. Nitin's acceptance of his gay relationship with Praful in the final act, Dolly's remonstrations with Jiten on his inhuman behavior which resulted in two months premature birth of their spastic daughter, Jiten's crushing of poor beggar women under his car out of frustration and his attempt to strangulate Sridhar are some incidents which show that men are not only victimizers but in true sense victimized also. Dattani admits; "I am not sure I have portrayed the women as victim in *Bravely fought the Queen*. I see man as victims of their own rage and repression. This has serious consequences on the lives of women" (Subrrmanyam 130). This play shows that women are, to some extent, proved successful in their struggle to establish their identity in the male dominated society. Though they are the victims of age-old suppressions and tortures, but now they are making efforts to break the shackles of male supremacy and attempting to raise their voices audible. But the question arises here that how much success they get and what have they paid for this success. Dattani gave them a symbolic title *Bravery Fought the Queen*. Who is queen here and why she deserves this title? Baa, the elder woman of the house has suffered a lot in her past. Her husband used to beat her badly, but now she is provoking her sons to do the same with their wives as her husband used to do instead of understanding their condition. She is not a queen, a victim of her own false ego which wants to rule the lives of all family members. Then come Dolly and Alka both of sisters have suffered throughout their lives with fortitude no one knows about, in absolute obscurity. Dolly is living a terrible life. Suicide would be more pleasant options the kind of life she lives. But she has responsibility of her disable daughter and a paralyzed mother-in-law. So, she cannot make herself free by ending her life. After going through the play one can say that they are brave enough. Because the kind of pain and torture they have borne in a highly reputed family no one can even imagine. Lalitha finds it very strange and surprising when she comes to know about their lives inside the four walls. Their status is not more than caretakers or show-piece in the family. So, it is paradoxical to call them queen. Their condition is worse than a maid. In the starting of two acts they are victims of their male counterparts but at the final act they come out as fighters. But Dolly and Alka's fight after fifteen year's long

suffering has any significance? Dolly has responsibility a helpless daughter, a callous but paralyzed mother-in-law to take care alone as Jiten will have to spend all his life in jail under the charge of murder. Her fight did not bring any positive result expect of getting rid off from the domination of her husband. But now she has to face the society lonely with double responsibility. Alka's protest also does not bring major change expect of her husband's confession of his homosexuality but she is not still aware about this fact that her life will be same as an alcoholic lonely woman.

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