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Questioning 'Family': A Study of Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*

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Abstract:

Feminist research has always given central place to the power and hold the private space has over a woman's life. Family is such an institution which had been devised to keep women and their sexuality under control. One of the major weapons used by the close kin of women is violence to keep them inside the boundaries prescribed by the patriarchal society. Family is given such a venerable space in the society and culture that it becomes impossible to question it. This very private space becomes an ancillary of the patriarchy which unleashes domestic violence on women and it is so revered that the violence is quietly accepted and even justified by majority of women every day. The present paper focuses on Poile Sengupta's play 'Mangalam', which tries to reveal several types of violent actions inflicted on women and their timelessness.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Family, Patriarchy

Violence has remained a constant, unfortunate companion of innumerable women since time immemorial. It is omnipresent and is not limited to a certain class, caste or society. It comes in various forms causing physical, psychological and spiritual abuse of a woman. It is used as a tool of subordination to control mobility and free will of women. As explained by U. Vindhya, "Violence, whether domestic, or in any other form, is not merely a criminal act of physical force perpetrated against women. It covers the entire gamut of exploitation, discrimination, maintaining unequal economic and social structures and creation of an atmosphere of terror and threat, all of which are supported and mandated by the socio-economic context of power relations" (Kannabiran 197). Most of the time it is inflicted by the family members themselves to restrain her and to show her, her place in this patriarchal society. In this scenario the lauded and celebrated safe heaven called family becomes the very cite of oppression and torture for the female victim. There are several literary works which have taken the theme of domestic violence as their central idea. One such literary gems is Poile Sengupta's drama 'Mangalam'. It is one of the earliest drama written by her in 1993. It was highly acknowledged and it also received a special prize for its social relevance in the Hindu Madras Players Playscript Competition, 1993.

According to the dramatist, "... (the) play is about family politics, seen through the perspective of women. The play deals with serrated relationships behind ostensibly normal households, whether in small town in Southern India of the 1960s, or in a modern cosmopolitan family.... It is about vulnerabilities of women across all strata of society, and in varied households, and the tenderness and spirit that is so often brutally suppressed" (Sengupta 01). The relation between violence and patriarchy is intrinsic one. Patriarchy uses various means to subjugate, subordinate and suppress women and violence is one of the major tools used in this process of subordination. It can come in many forms, ranging from actual physical abuse to subtle, not-so-visible psychological one. Whatever might be the form it takes, it inflicts irreparable harm to the psyche and self-image of a woman. It renders her ineffective, sub-human and helpless. Poile Sengupta has done a worthy effort through this play to expose varied forms of violence against women and its persistence.

'Mangalam' is a two-act play. The dramatist has used the technique of play within the play to generate discussion and present her point of views through the characters. She has shown the timelessness of violence against women through this technique. To quote Sengupta, "It (the device) is used as a means to lend perspective to an issue. But in 'Mangalam' I have used the same actors in both 'plays' as an indication that nothing really changes, the sameness of it all, to me, is deeply disturbing" (Sengupta 01). The title of the play is the name of the central character who is not present physically in the act, but pervades the drama and the action throughout the first act. The first act revolves around the unsuccessful and devastating marriage of Mangalam and Dorai. They are married off to each other for urgent, confidential and practical reason. There is an absence of any kind of mutual affection, communication or understanding between them. Both consider themselves victimized by the other and so are at constant war with each other. Dorai, being a husband has been given an upper hand in a patriarchal societal structure. He harasses Mangalam to such an extreme end that she embraces death rather than life with him. As the play unfolds, audience realizes that Mangalam is the victim of the vilest of crimes, but she is not able to express herself. One incidence- one heinous drunken act- rape by her drunk brother-in-law changes the course of her life forever. She is married off to economically poor Dorai, who comes to know of her pregnancy after marriage, which was an outcome of the atrocity committed on her. Dorai acts on impulse, branding her as characterless in his consciousness for the rest of their life together and punishes her in every way possible to avenge his betrayal by her and her father. She is humiliated, taunted, abuse physically and emotionally throughout her life by her husband who fails to understand her plight and silence. He interprets her silence as betrayal.

Mangalam has to suffer in silence, because speaking up would compromise her family's honour. Perhaps she blames herself for whatever has happened with her or her fate, which is beyond her control. Mangalam has a troubled past which stops her from seeking help. This secrecy for the protection of family name is the very nature of the domestic violence. Kishwar and Vanitha in state in their article 'Initiative Against Dowry Deaths', "She (the woman) has been

made to think of this (violence) as 'normal', 'a woman's fate', religion, films, her elders, her own and her mother's experience – tell her that if a woman is unhappy, nothing can be done about it. It must be her own fault” (John 45). Thus, Mangalam's life becomes a series of never ending assaults on her mind and body, which she abandons at last by ending her life.

Mangalam's elder sister Thangam is a really strong character, who is dominant, wants to control others, a representative of older and orthodox generation. Thangam is a traditional woman who wants to impose her age-old values and restrictions on other women around her. She is the most outspoken character who openly criticizes Dorai's treatment of her sister in extremely blatant terms. Whenever Dorai accuses Magalam of characterlessness, she takes her side. She accuses Dorai of mistreating her sister, of torturing her when she says:

Thangam: “..... But what else can I expect from my brother-in-law? He has been like this since the day he tied the thali around that poor girl's neck! Thali! It was more like a rope”

(Sengupta 05).

Addressing the Thali as a rope has really potent meaning. It summarizes a woman's experience in the institution called marriage, which forces her in a subordinate position when she is married against her will. As Rinki Bhattacharya states, “Any traditional custom that places women in the subordinate positions within society or in the family has the potential to turn violent” (13). In traditional societies marriage is a medium to control women's sexuality. A forced marriage will only suffocate and restrict a woman damaging her self-esteem and confidence. In Indian society marriage is universally considered as the essential point in a girl's life irrespective of her class, caste, religion and ethnicity. A marriage forces woman into an unequal position, where she is supposed to forget an essential part of her identity and has to adapt to an alien one without asking any questions. She is to perform her roles of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law. She is not supposed to show her individual existence, her point of view becomes secondary and if she strives to show independence, her own opinion, it is considered rebellious and is generally looked down upon by her in-laws. A woman's suppression in a traditional of her in-laws happens at several levels and it is assumed that she will accept all the changes occurred in her position post-marriage. Majority of women accept this kind of degradation silently without posing a question, because in a patriarchal societal structure such sacrifices are expected and demanded from women.

What Thangam says about Magalam's marriage stands true for her own marriage as well. Here is the woman who has to live a life of mourning as a widow of a man who was an abuser, who abused no other but her own younger sister. To save her family's name and her sister's prestige she is not able to do anything about the crime committed by her husband against her own innocent sister. She is as much as the victim as is Mangalam. Her marriage restricts her from asking for justice. She has to keep quiet and live through all of this for the sake of so called prestige. She cannot ask for separation from her husband for her own and her natal family's sake. A separation could have followed by loss of honour and grim prospects for her natal family with

a younger sister still unmarried. This is how both the sisters become victims of this patriarchal institution and left without no hope of justice or even the space to express their sorrows. This crime becomes a closely guarded secret amongst them and their natal family. The reason of this victimization lies in the system of marriage which renders women vulnerable to all kinds of atrocities and powerless to demand for any justice. They have to endure all the pain inflicted on them in the private space called 'home' and the family. "An analysis of the power hierarchy within the conjugal home would suggest some identifiable features- a gendered division of labour, the fact that in most Indian marriages women enter as strangers into an already structured world, the creation of a permanent inequality in the relationship of the natal and conjugal homes, and overarching domestic ideologies that legislate gender status and role" (Bhattacharya 58).

Another woman character who also is a victim of patriarchal oppression is Usha, Mangalam's daughter. Violence inflicted on Usha is not physical in nature, but is of subtle and invisible kind. She is married against her wish too, for economic reasons by Dorai. Usha's said affection for a lecturer who was also her teacher is looked down upon and criticized severely by Doari. Usha has her mother's sympathy and they share a close bond. Mangalam is a confidant for her daughter where she expresses and shares everything. To Dorai this bond between the mother and the daughter becomes a cause of concern. He despises their attachment and sharing, taking it as a threat to his authority in the home. To punish Mangalam he marries off Usha into a wealthy family ignoring their wishes. Here, he is not only acting in financial interests, but is trying to prove his upper hand in the household. Usha wishes to study further and Mangalam supports her in her desire, but Dorai intentionally ignores that too. He considers Usha as the image of her mother and according to him, characterless like her. Though Mangalam is trapped in this forced marriage with Dorai, she wants to live her dreams through her daughter. She is trying to fulfil her wishes through Usha by giving her the choices she never had. Comprehending Magalam's wishes Dorai not only kills the dreams of his daughter but punishes Mangalam too.

Poile Sengupta has successfully picturised various forms of violence inflicted on women in our patriarchal society through a single play. What Usha experiences at her in-laws is a subtle type of severe mistreatment, when her mother-in-law allegedly strives to take away any privacy to the husband and wife. She has no freedom to exercise her will. The in-laws keep demanding for material possession and torture her mentally for the same. She finally has to leave her marriage and return to her natal home. V. S. Elizabeth analyses this invisible violence succinctly: "The gender-based division of labour, the differentiated socialization process, and the roles and characteristics culturally assigned to women restrict their options and their autonomy are based on repressive and symbolic form of violence that is expressed in the limitations imposed on them in terms of employment, social participation, decision-making and power at all levels; this is what is known as invisible violence, which includes objective situations of aggression, either physical, psychological or sexual, direct or indirect" (Shiradkar 146).

Revathy, Mangalam's daughter-in-law is the only character who doesn't have to undergo any vicious forms of violence like other female characters. Even though she generally fares well

compared to other characters, the injustice and isolation she experiences in her husband's home is discreetly picturized by the dramatist. Revathy always seems on the lookout for something listening stealthily to the conversations, silently observing and assimilating whatever is going on around her. Thangam, who seems really generous towards Usha and sympathetic towards Revathy, shows no affection or understanding towards Revathy. She is always seen complaining about something or the other. She tells Mani that she is not given equal treatment as her sister-in-law Usha. She feels ignored and isolated without any kind of understanding from anybody. Bhattacharya observes: "The politics of the household cannot be simply seen as a struggle between oppressing men and victimized women. As the household constitutes the site for struggle over resources and power, women themselves may be inserted into a hierarchy based on age, marital status, the ranking among daughters-in-law and so on. This differential access to power and resources would lead to a re-division of household labour among women, relationships of antagonism between them, and a re-entrenching of patriarchy as the more privileged of the female members function as the surrogate (and, often, violent) agents of male hegemony and control" (60). Thangam treats Revathy as an outsider and takes pleasure in constantly criticizing her behaviour or work. Thangam also ignores Revathy's attempt of communication with her, thus clenching her wish to open up and participate. Revathy's inquisitive probing and complaining behaviour is the product of the treatment given to her in the home. The treatment given to her serves as an example of the treatment given to the daughters-in-law in traditional patriarchal households. Their labour and the money they bring with us is accepted without any problem or even demanded of them. But when it comes to accepting their place in the family, they are not considered as the part of the family, they are never accepted totally. They don't have any role in the decision making process in the important matters concerning their home, their opinions are of no value and are never considered. Most of the time they are kept out of matters which are controversial or problematic. A woman who has left major part of her life and identity behind her will feel rejected and alienated in her new 'family'. All the negative traits in Revathy's behaviour are nothing but the shadows of the place that she is made to occupy in her home.

There is no connection or positive communication between Revathy and other female characters in the play. Even when there are positive relationships between women and existence of sympathetic communication, they are not able to help each other out of the misery in their lives. The patriarchal family structure compels them to be fragmented and many a times in opposition to each other. In spite of all the negative aspects in Revathy's persona, she displays some traits which one can admire. Even though her role as a daughter-in-law sets her in opposition to Mangalam, she has sympathy for her and is aware of her suffering. But the nature of her relationship with Mangalam as well as Thangam overcomes the sympathy which she feels for both of them. In spite of all the tender feeling Thangam has for Mangalam, she is not able to help her because of the relation she shares with the perpetrator of the violence. She has to ignore her role as a sister to save her marriage and her family. Managalam is powerless to help her daughter Usha to fight for her dreams because of Dorai. Gerda Lerner observes, "The

connectedness of women to familial structures made any development of female solidarity and group cohesiveness extremely problematic. Each individual woman was linked to her male kin in her family of origin through ties which implied specific obligations. Her indoctrination from early childhood on, emphasized her obligation not only to make an economic contribution to the kin and household but also to accept a marriage partner in line with family interests" (219).

In the second act the paly within the play technique is revealed when the same actors take up different characters. This act revolves around a modern woman in her twenties – Sumati. Like Mangalam in the first act meaning 'holy', Pole Sengupta has given a positive name to this character too – Sumati meaning conscience. She is outraged at the indecency and lack of character in her younger brother. She is an economically independent woman who has just joined a college as a lecturer. From her conversations with the other characters it is apparent that she is sensitive towards women's suffering and comments thoughtfully on the play's portrayal of the same. She is intelligent and has perception to look beyond the given. She seems a little subdued and emotionally detached from everybody including her mother. She is acutely aware of the differential treatment given to her brother compared to her. She accuses her mother of raising her “without soul” (Sengupta 46). In spite of her understanding nature, intelligence and sensitivity, she is not able to respond to Vikram's genuine feelings for her. She poses some fundamental questions about the relationships in the patriarchal societal structure. The most disturbing question she put up is about the authenticity of love – romantic love in Indian culture. There are reasons for asking this question because of the mercenary nature of marriages and the familial ties. She notices lack of love, even absence of the word 'love' in the play. She has her own disturbing reasons for having disbelief in love as it is revealed through the action in the play.

She is a victim of molestation at the hands of a very close family friend Nari, Vikram's father. It is apparent through her behaviour and her thoughts that this violence inflicted on her at a tender age has affected her so much that she is apprehensive about any such relationship i.e. romantic relationship between adults. Sumati criticizes her mother for not being grateful for a wonderful husband and considers herself as a victim. Her character shows that the times might have changed but the oppression of women and the values in a patriarchal society have just remained same. Sumati is not helpless like Mangalam, she is educated and independent. She has accepted the age old way of keeping mum about the pain that she is going through when it came to molestation by a very close family friend. The values imposed by a patriarchal value system about a woman's modesty and negative portrayal of women's sexuality and fear of losing her dignity stops her from exposing Nari till her breaking point. Her one dialogue gives away her pain and tortured mental state.

Sumati: I think so. A woman who allows herself to be soft, who relinquishes her weapons...well she gets chewed up, doesn't she?..... I know it's a terrible expression but then it's a terrible state to be in...”

(Sengupta 66).

Another Important female character in the second act is Thangam, Sumati's mother. As is generally observed in a patriarchal society, she is partial towards her son. She even accepts her preference for him to Sumati when she is accused of giving differential treatment to her children be Sumati. The distance Sumati feels from her mother is the main reason she was not able to open up and protest against the molestation she is subjected to from Nari. Sumati lacks the space to tell what she feels and this absence can be directly attributed to Thangam's attitude towards her. Thangam comes to know of her husband's affair coincidentally when she discovers some letters in his diary. This is a revelation which shook her to her core. Somehow the circumstances and the time she is living in empowers her enough to let go the relationship which has betrayed her after so long a life together. Sumati is also able to give voice to her silent suffering by the end of the play. These two characters by their act of taking control of their life give a kind of hopeful conclusion at the end. Though the timelessness of the suffering endured by women is portrayed here, the dramatist also gives some positive insinuations by creating female characters who take action against those sufferings.

Thus, the basic social structure 'Family' becomes the location of oppression and discrimination for countless women victims. As it is considered as the 'private' domain which should be protected, many women don't act against it or never ask for help too. The sacredness or the sanction this structure has in the society prevents them from breaking out of it or calling it into the question. One might as well say that it is devised by subordinating the female and downplaying her interests. R. Indira explains, "The family, be it the parental or the marital home, constructs 'ideal types' of women that are actually internalized by men and women. By upholding such traits as 'self-denial' and 'submission' to male authority as virtues that a woman must imbibe, families prepare women to not only expect male violence but also tolerate it. Women are so deliberately socialized to believe that the family is a private domain that must be kept away from the public sphere. By glorifying the notion of 'family honour', the family creates the feeling that it is the woman's prime responsibility to protect their honour even if she has to lay down her life for it" (Shirwadkar 273-4). Family allows patriarchy to control women's sexuality, it regulates male control over property and functions as an institution which reinforces patriarchal values. These are the reasons it becomes extremely difficult to call this structure into question. Women are socialized in a way that they themselves ingrain the patriarchal values and strive to live by them. "Women in their day-today life understand violence against women as emanating from biological determinism..... this leads them to believe that they are naturally the have-nots, therefore they must bear their fate.....The natural and social justification and rationalization of violence against women makes it a long haul for any woman who wants to resist or fight back" (Dave 188). These are the very reasons the women characters in the play who act as representatives of the women in society suffer many a times an unjust and undeserved violence at the hands of the males in their families. The patriarchal division amongst women ensures that they would not be able to come together and protest against it. Nevertheless, by the end of the play in the second act dramatis gives us hope through the response of two women characters against the violence.

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