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Family Matters: Silencing of Women in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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Abstract:

In any cultural system the institution of family plays a very significant role. Both males and females have their unique roles to play in a family that makes the family unit complete. If the role of a male person or the head of the family is that of a provider and supporter, the female person in the family bears the role of nurturing and care as well as providing comfort. However, the hierarchical structure in a family places the women community at the lowest rung. The subordination of women that is of primary significance in a patriarchal society is achieved in different ways like ideology, rituals and coercion. The plays of Mahesh Dattani manifest how the institution of family perpetrates subjugation and exploitation of women to maintain male superiority over females.

Keywords: Family, gender, subjugation, marginalization, power relations.

In Pre Vedic era the relative position of women was one of honour and significance. Women like Gargi and Maitreye were educated and involved in intellectual discourses as well. Thus women were not always the oppressed or 'second' sex. Even in the primitive society, which was the epoch of tribal collectivism, women were the equals of men and recognized by man as such. The downfall of women coincided with the breakup of the matriarchal clan commune and its replacement by class-divided society with its institutions of the patriarchal family, private property and state power. Thus the institution of marriage and the family to fix the legal ownership and inheritance of a man's property gained significance. Through monogamous marriage the wife was brought under the complete control of her husband who was thereby assured of legitimate sons to inherit his wealth.

The main objective of a Brahmanical society was to maintain caste purity and social order, which according to them was possible through the subordination and control on the sexuality of a woman. This was achieved, as Uma Chakravarti puts in *Gendering Caste; Through a Feminist Lens*, through the construction of ideology, religious rituals and coercion (Chakravarti 73-4). The notion of *Stidharma* (duties of a woman), which was further specified as *Pativrata* dharma (duties towards husband) for married women, initiated the pitiable condition of women in the family. Parallel to this are the religious rituals that are observed in a family that, according to LeelaDube helps in gender construction of unmarried Hindu girls and married women as well. (Dube WS 11-15)

Bravely Fought the Queen, *Final Solutions* and *Where There is a Will* are some of the plays of Mahesh Dattani that capture the plight of women in the institution of family. The institution of marriage that brings two souls together, also bring with it the ideology of 'pativrata' that are usually not enforced on women but they assume it as part and parcel of their life for a peaceful life and prosperity. Wifhood and motherhood are the two phases that dictate the life of a woman post marriage. *Streedharma* that becomes an essence of a woman's existence in a patriarchal society inculcates in them wifely values like chastity, submissiveness and complete devotion to her husband. Manusmriti elucidates a series of actions that help to define the *dharma* of a wife. He observes:

A wife should always be cheerful, clever at household affairs; she should keep her utensils well-polished. She should not be extravagant. She should obey the man whom she is married to. She should not violate her vow to him even when he is dead. A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, and is devoid of good qualities. She cannot perform sacrifices nor can she take a vow or fast without her husband. A virtuous wife should never do anything displeasing to the husband, when he is alive or dead, if she longs for her husband's world after death. (Manu V. 150-156)

Ironically it is in her family life and in her conjugal roles that mark the beginning of her oppression. The patriarchal construct of a woman drawn in the lines of Sita-Savitri are deliberate attempts to subjugate a woman in her varied roles in the married family. Thus, caught in the web of relationships, as a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law, as a care giver and nurturer of her new family, a woman struggles to meet all the expectations, often sacrificing her likes and dislikes, her life's goals and even her own identity.

Dattani symbolically depicts the unquestioned subordination of women to the patriarchal authorities of the family, through his innovative stage prop, bonsai. Lalitha, the wife of Trivedi brothers' employee, Sridhar, in her conversation with the Trivedi sisters on her hobby aptly summarizes the kind of repression and suppression that women face in a family. In a conversation with Alka about their hobbies, Lalitha, Shridhar's wife mentions:

Alka: You said you make bonsai?

Lalitha: Yes. I've got a whole collection.

Alka: How do you make them?

Lalitha: You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the root and bind their branches with wire and . . . stunt them. (Dattani 244)

The lives of Dolly and Alka as wives of the Trivedi Brothers, Jiten and Nitin respectively are reduced to that of a caretaker of the matriarch of the family, Baa. Dolly and Jiten's as well as Alka and Nitin's husband wife relationship is as dry as cactus and is based on treachery, misunderstanding and a series of secrets. Dolly is subjected to physical abuse and loneliness, so much so that even in her pregnancy, Jiten's violent kicking in her tummy led to the birth of a spastic child. Alka's marriage was a marriage of convenience, one in which she became a pathetic maltreatment by her homosexual husband, Nitin. In the context of the plight of the women in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Mandal observes:

The Trivedi brothers 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 a 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 practices systematic exclusion of the female subject from the economic nucleus. (Mandal 35-6)

Sonal in *Where There's a Will* is a typical *pativrata* wife, for whom the husband and his health is always a priority over all other things, "If anything happens to you they'll say I neglected my duty" (Dattani 465). She is a responsible woman who in the absence of their cook, cooks all those items that are favourite of her husband or son, "navratanpulaao, malaiKofta, baiganbharta, patties, not to forget the halwa and salad" (Dattani 465). Ironically her husband fails to admire her sacrifices, rather Hasmukh accuses her for 'wasting so much ghee and oil' (Dattani 465) on rich food and sarcastically criticises her salad that has only "carrot, cucumber and beetroot (Dattani 465) and says, "Make her eat the salad. I guarantee you she'll never make it again" (Dattani 465). Their relationship that is based on lack of understanding, love and appreciation reduces their relationship to as cold as stone.

Sonal has been kept away from the status of a wife in all respect. She had never been able to achieve the position of a friend and confidante of her husband, Hasmukh. Rather Hasmukh blames her for the failure of their marriage that in twenty five years have never experienced warmth and love. Unable to shower love and honour to his wife, he blames his wife and defends the substitution that he finds for his loveless life:

Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman to himself? No. There's more to it than that. What? Maybe he needs a faithful companion? No. If that was it, all men would keep dogs. No. No, I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name? Why did I marry? To get Ajit? Then I should be a very happy man. (Dattani 475)

He blames Sonal for giving birth to a son who fails to show maturity and respect for the huge property and wealth that his father has amassed. As a result of this, Hasmukh deprives the legitimate right of her wife from his property and keeps it in the custody of a trustee.

Daksha's life in *Final Solutions* is also one of abomination and humiliation. The moment she steps into her marital family, the repression of the young bride starts, though very subtly. Her parents-in-law change her name from Daksha to Hardika as a custom of their family, to match the name of her husband. By giving her a new name they not only try to mould her identity as per their requirements but also set prerequisites for her that she should endeavour to meet to reach the status of an ideal wife and daughter-in-law. Her life becomes more oppressive as her husband and parents-in-law stop her from visiting her Muslim friends and warn her not to show any inclination for Noor Jahan's music tracks.

Self sacrifice is considered as the highest quality of an ideal woman, both as a wife and mother. It is the duty and responsibility of a woman to nurture a relation and protect it from any kind of misunderstanding. Thus, when Daksha and her husband's relation face a rough patch, the *pativrata* instincts in her forces her to give up her sense of pride and dignity to please her husband. However, her hurt ego had to be repressed:

He beckoned me to lie beside him on the bed. And I did. And my cheeks went red again. Not with shame but with anger at myself. (Dattani 216)

The girls in Dattani's plays are subjected to a life that is equally depressing as that of the older women. Gender discrimination and gender construction by enforcing ritual observation on young girls can be traced in abundance in Dattani's plays like *Tara*, *Final Solutions* and *30 Days in September*. Tara in the play of the same name faces gender discrimination from the moment she is born. Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins conjoined waist down. The mother plans and successfully executes the difficult operation of the twins with the help of her rich and influential father and renowned medical surgeon, Dr. Thakkar.

Gender discrimination that the Patels subject their daughter reduces her to a marginalized state both in the family and in the society where mostly all lack compassion and empathetic feelings for female gender and especially the handicapped ones. Her doubly marginalized condition is best understood through the cold, cruel and indifferent attitude of her friends in school and in the neighbourhood. This aspect of the society is depicted by Dattani through the character of Roopa, Tara's friend in the neighbourhood, who calls them 'freaks' and shows abhorrence on their physically handicapped state.

The vulnerability of the marginalized women like Tara is best evoked through Bharati, her mother who initiated Tara into her journey as a victim of gender discrimination.

It's all right while she is young. It's every cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan.

The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you-but her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh God! (Dattani 348-349)

Mr. Patel, in his eagerness to give Chandan a better life neglects Tara, the one who is actually endowed with brilliance and intelligence to hold a position of repute. The gender discrimination that Mr. Patel practices in providing Tara and Chandan with opportunities for life is best expressed in Tara's words, "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going hunting while the women looked after the cave". (Dattani 328)

The gender discrimination that Tara faces is something that is quite rampant in Indian society and it has its seed in the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of a Hindu society. Altekar's observation on the significance of a male child sums up the practice of gender discrimination.

In ancient times, in all patriarchal societies, the birth of a girl gradually became an

unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the daughter. He was a permanent economic asset of the family. He perpetuated the name of the father's family ... As he grew old, he offered valuable support to his people either to defend itself or attack an enemy. The daughter, on the other hand, had no fighting value. (Altekar; cited in Chakravarti and Roy, WS 4)

Mala in *30 Days in September* is a victim of child sexual abuse in the hands of her maternal uncle, Vinay. When she tries to confide in her mother and seek protection, she mother turns deaf ears to her complaints. Mala laments that her mother instead of providing her comfort, tried to divert her attention:

Oh yes, you would remember that I always like alu parathas because that's what I got whenever I came to you, hurt and crying. Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food. I couldn't speak because I was being fed all the time, and you know what? I began to like them. I thought that was the cure for my pain. That if I ate till I was stuffed, the pain would go away. Every time I came to you mummy, you were ready with something to feed me. You knew. Otherwise you wouldn't have been so prepared. You knew all along that was happening to me...(Dattani 24)

Her mother, Shanta, would also try to chastise her, putting all the blame on her:

I have seen it with my own eyes. You enjoyed it. You were an average child but you had my brother and your cousins dancing around you. That is what you wanted. (Dattani 28)

Chastity and virginity of an unmarried girl are her greatest virtues. A woman once stigmatised of losing virginity before marriage is a victim of social abuse and marginalization. Shanta scared of the patriarchal values that are set as the yardstick of a girl's social reputation, maintains silence instead of raising voice against her brother. Unfortunately, Mala becomes prey of male authority and his power in the institution of family and had to bear it silently, till she grows up, becomes economically independent to raise her voice against her uncle.

The social power relations represented through the unit of family, forces on the mother-daughter duo onto a silence, a silence that distances them only to bring them closer with

Mala's realisation of her mother's situation. In an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, Dattani adds:

Though sexual abuse is at the core of my play, the mother-daughter relationship is equally important. The main protagonist, who has suffered at the hands of her uncle, feels a deep sense of betrayal that her mother did not stop the abuse and failed in her role as protector. (Lakshmi 33)

Final Solution is another play that registers very subtly the gender conditioning of a young girl that would help her become an ideal woman and mother. Aruna tries to control and mould her daughter, Smita, who shows love and affection for people of all religions. She even chastises her daughter for not showing faith exclusively on her religion. Smita does not conform to religious values and challenges the rituals her mother asks her to observe. Yet she enforces on her in such a way that Smita feels stifled with her mother's prescription of *stridharma* of an ideal girl.

Aruna's chastisement of her daughter who challenges the idea of an ideal girl conforming to the religious rituals those condition her for next phase of life, womanhood. Inside the four walls of their household, Aruna, the second generation woman of their family, she tries to control her daughter, Smita's sexuality by compelling her to observe religious rituals, which she thinks as an ideal mother would enable her to pass onto her children.

Explicit in this is Aruna's efforts to make Smita conform to the ideals of *Strrdharma* and become a perfect woman, carrying efficiently the role of a mother. However, implicit in this is her fear that if Smita's independence is not bridled at the right time, she might fail to become an ideal woman. Susan Starr Sered in her insightful essay, *Woman as Symbol and Women as Agents* (1999/2009), makes distinction between 'Women as agents' and 'Woman as symbol'. Further, she observes, "Women as agents can demand rights, enter negotiations, and protest unfair treatment...The second set of issues centres on *Woman*—a symbolic construct that conflate gender, sex and sexuality and comprises of allegory, ideology, metaphor, and fantasy." (Sered10)

In *Final Solutions*, Aruna, the mother, perceives Smita as woman as agent, potent enough to threaten, divert and challenge Hindu religious rituals and practices. She sees in her the threatening agent that tries to dissolve the margin that distinguishes two different religions; Hinduism and Islam. Therefore, Aruna tries to enforce on her the idealised image of a girl who has deep roots in Hindu *sanskaras* (practices). Leela Dube has emphasised the significance of ritual observation in Hindu families that help in the construction of gender in Hindu girls. Aruna by enforcing Smita to observe religious rituals endeavours to convert Smita from the image of 'women as agent' to the image of 'women as symbol'. Also ideal motherhood is looked up with reverence woman's success as an ideal mother measures her

social status. Aruna believes that if Smita has a good acculturation of religious values and is able to pass it on to her children she will be successful in her *dharma* as a woman.

The stifling condition in which a Hindu girl grows up in a brahmanical society is best voiced by frustrated Smita as she breaks down and pleads:

Don't please, mummy, don't try so hard! You are breaking me. Ever since I was small, you have been at me to go to the temple, make garlands and listen to you reading from the Gita. I love you, mummy, that's why I did that. I listened to you and I obeyed you. I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother. May be I should have told you earlier, but I'm telling you now, I can't bear it! Please don't burden me anymore! I can't take it! (Dattani 213)

A close analysis of the plays does prove that women live a gendered life from the moment of their birth. Though the words gender discrimination and inequity are not very regularly used by modern urban families, yet the ritual practices, the untold expectations and behaviour modifications in turn show that gender discrimination still exists though in a very subtle way and takes its form and shape within the smallest social unit called family.

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