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Patriarchal Violence in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Demystificatory Study

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani, one of the doyens of the Indian Drama in English has been whetting the research appetite of many a scholar like me. What distinguishes Dattani from other dramatists is the fact that he deals with compelling issues which are rooted in his milieu and displays courage of conviction in depicting innovative themes. So, my drive is to venture into the untapped area of Dattani's dramatic canon from the perspective of theatricalization of violence in general and patriarchal violence in particular. In this regard, this paper attempts a holistic study of the dramatization of patriarchal violence demystified in Mahesh Dattani's plays such as "Thirty Days in September", "Dance like a Man" and "Where there is a Will". I have endeavored to show how patriarchal violence has resulted in the organized deprivation of the sexuality of women for the use of the patriarchal autocrats, and how it has brought about the subjugation and subordination of women. Essentially, this study elucidates how Dattani's plays demonstrate patriarchal violence, the inherently wrong represented mostly as a trope for relationships of power and domination.

Keywords: Dattani, patriarchal violence, control, power, domination.

1. Introduction

In India, there are just a few nameable dramatists and natural critics. If Vijay Tendulkar invites, Girish Conrad threatens, and Sunil Upadhya inspires, he is none other than Mahesh Dattani who demands critical attention because of his "Playpen". As a theatre personality, Dattani is very actively involved in stage production and performing on stage. Apart from being a great playwright, he is an actor, dancer, producer, screenwriter, film-maker and stage director par excellence. In fact, he is the first Indian

playwright writing in English to have been conferred with the honorary Sahitya Academy Award in 1998. His dramatic canon is enriched with his treatment of diverse themes. One of the key themes articulated prominently in Dattani's plays is the theme of violence. The different forms of violence marked under the umbrella term "Violence" are societal violence, political violence, somatic violence/ physical violence, psychological violence, and sacral/ spiritual violence. The kinds of violence that can be put under the head of "Societal Violence" are patriarchal violence, domestic violence, marital violence in intimate relationship, and gendered violence. When it comes to his treatment of patriarchal violence, Dattani has excelled in his dramatic craftsmanship. So it is important to put it in perspective.

2. Patriarchal Violence: Putting in Perspective

It is commonly understood that "patriarchy" which is derived from the Greek *patriarchia* favours the ruling father, hence by extension, the male. That is why, in the patriarchal system, primary leadership, power, privilege and property are vested with the males who consider women and children as domestic slaves, properties, things and possessions. That is why, they dominate over them. So patriarchy and autocracy go together. Hence patriarchy is "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" and children (Walby 20). Perhaps, that is why, Steven Taylor links the patriarchal dominance with socially classified hierarchy and institutionalized violence. So in the philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle, women are considered inferior to men. That is why, in patriarchy, the woman is expected to be obedient and loyal to the patriarchal figures such as a husband or father. So as explained by Robert Filmer in *Patriarcha*, patriarchal authority is related to institutionalized control of the husband over his wife (wives), of the father over his child (children), of master over his slave (slaves). So, patriarchal dominations cause patriarchal structures of discrimination and oppression. In other words, the males are privileged in patriarchy, as a result of which, in this system, the females, the kids and the slaves are subjected to abuse, subordination, oppression, manipulation and exploitation. Hence, patriarchy is a system of oppression of women. Carrying forward this argumentation of power and oppression, Hartmann has discussed capitalist patriarchy in terms of the male hunger for and monopoly over power, in property, and the (re)production (1431-1436). That is why, the creation of patriarchy and its perpetuation through control, exploitation, violent subordination and exploitation do qualify the

rotteness of the hetero-patriarchal family that performs as a component in the rule of the patriarchal state that rules its inhabitants with the head of the family (Lerner 8-11). So male chauvinism and sexism, as allies of patriarchy, sanction a dominant status to males. Considering the facts stated above, patriarchy can be redefined in terms of powerlessness of women in a patriarchal social structure, mis(use) and devaluation of women as domestic slave and keepers, vulnerability of women to violence and abuse, disparity in the wages paid to the female in comparison with the ones paid to their male counterparts for the same work, exploitation of women, and misrepresentation of women within a patriarchal system.

It is therefore judicious to read and explain patriarchy together with and in terms of androcracy (a social system ruled or dominated by men), kyriarchy (social system built around domination, oppression, and submission), male privilege and hegemonic masculinity. So the American author and feminist bell hooks has defined patriarchy as a political and social system that maintains that males are inherently dominating and superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females. She further states that men are endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to uphold that dominance through several forms of psychological terrorism and violence (17-25). So if patriarchy is inevitable, violence in any patriarchal construct is also inevitable. The tree of patriarchy is rooted in the core principles of control, centrism and male dominance. Hence it is hard to untangle and remove. So patriarchy is one of the systems of oppression such as racism.

3. Patriarchal Violence in select plays of Mahesh Dattani

At the very outset, it is submitted that Dattani has articulated patriarchal violence in his plays such as “Thirty Days in September”, “Dance like a Man” and “Where there is a Will”. Hence in the subsections to follow, one after another, each of the aforementioned plays is critiqued from the perspective of patriarchal violence.

3.1. Patriarchal Violence in “Thirty Days in September”

Mahesh Dattani’s play *Thirty Days in September* can be studied from the perspective of patriarchal violence in patriarchal society. Here women like Shanta and Mala suffer a lot. They are victims in such a society that has unquestioned respect for patriarchal values. While unravelling the tangled web of patriarchal violence in this play, Dattani has theatricalized the issues of patriarchal violence which is organic to the plot.

That is why, he is able to bring home the horror and the pain associated with patriarchal violence. Since Shanta has had no moral courage to raise her voice against patriarchy, she has failed to defend herself and also her own daughter. Shanta and Mala, who have assimilated violence, have failed to resist and protest. The representatives of the oppressive patriarchal system have abused them. Dictating terms, MAN has commanded, “Lie down. Come on, quickly...Hold your frock up...Help me...put your arms up. Shut up!” (CP II 43). He makes Mala appreciate his patriarchal magnanimity, “See, I love you even though you are ugly... you are good only for this... Only for this...” (44). Hence it is obvious that what is good/ what is beauty, is defined by the abuser just because he is the manly lord or master having the right to be violent with Mala in her pubescence. At thirteen, Mala has become a whore only because of the “Male” perpetrator of violence. So Deepak is diametrically opposite to the patriarchal molester. Had Shanta questioned patriarchal dominance or had she had the courage to raise her voice against patriarchal violence, neither she nor Mala would have been exploited so ruthlessly. So Dattani has been conscious of the realities of commodification of women like Shanta and Mala in the patriarchal societies. That is why patriarchal violence in *Thirty Days in September* has caused sexual slavery of the female cracking under the burden of their own un-freedom and the power of older men over women and children. We find that patriarchal violence has resulted in the organized deprivation of the sexuality of Shanta and Mala for the use of the patriarchal autocrats. Really, patriarchal violence in this play has brought about the subjugation and subordination of women.

Delving still deeper into the heart of the matter, it can be felt that both Shanta and Mala, at least Shanta because of her age and maternity, must have spoken out much earlier and more confidently against the violence of men which passes off as love, against an eroticism which demeans them as mere properties or sex-toys in the patriarchal society. Having been molested by Vinay, her uncle, again and again, Mala has been lynched live. She feels that her mother has also not helped her in any manner. So she suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Syndrome, a behavioural disorder. Resultantly, she becomes a fragmented being, with a slain psyche. To her utter disappointment, her mother Shanta had kept some sort of studied silence. Consequently, Mala has buckled under the pressure of this ultimate betrayal. Infuriated, Mala becomes violent and aggressive. This is how the play *Thirty Days in September* is fit to be critically analyzed from the perspective of patriarchal violence.

3.2. Patriarchal Violence in “Dance like a Man”

Another play of Dattani *Dance like a Man* is basically about the consequences of patriarchal violence. It depicts how and why Jairaj has suffered & how and why Ratna vents her frustration on Jairaj and accuses him of being a jelly in front of his dominating father. Hence this play is all about the impact of patriarchal authority in a joint family, headed by a high-handed and headstrong patriarch. It is not a drawing room comedy even though it is anchored to the living room of the Parekhs. If it is a dark comedy or a grim tragedy, it is so because of the victimhood of Jairaj Parekh and Ratna Parekh, the dancer-parents of Lata, herself a dancer. The magic of dance has not any softening impact on the heart of Amritlal Parekh, a freedom fighter and social reformer. The patriarch has undervalued dance as a woman’s job and has not supported Jairaj, his son, in his ambitious efforts to learn and master the finer nuances of dance. Jairaj has been too spineless a boy to face the autocrat in his father. This “sethji of the city” (CP 405) has been really a megalomaniac father. In other words, he has obsessive desire for power. He has no soft feelings for that innocent aptitude of his own son, Jairaj. So there has been a lot of dislike and disregard between the father and the son. That is why Jairaj has been trying to remove all the memories of his father, including his gardening. Just because Amritlal has had the conceited idea that the *Bharatnatyam* is the “craft of prostitute to show off her wares” (406), he has not allowed his son to pursue this performing art. In his own conceited manner, he has concluded that no man does and should dance. So he has failed to appreciate his son's obsession for dance. Though she has agreed to have Ratna from outside his community as his daughter-in-law, Amritlal, the conservative and prudish man has no sympathy for and appreciation of dancers like Jairaj, the oppressed. So the play *Dance like a Man* is an account of not merely domestic violence, but also of the acts of violence committed by the head of the patriarchal family system.

The play is a harsh commentary upon the patriarchal family system. Hence Amritlal who upholds the patriarchal values is the perpetrator of violence and his son, Jairaj is the victim. That is why Jairaj has not had even a decent rehearsal in his father’s house. Amritlal has also been very dismissive about his daughter-in-law’s association with a *devdasi*, the temple-dancer. Though he boasts of educating and reforming the devdasis, he has not allowed them to practice their art. In contrast, Jairaj has been championing the causes of dance. He favours the efforts to give awards to the devdasis for preserving art, but for Amritlal, the devdasis are notorious sex-traps. He thinks that if the devdasis are encouraged to dance in the temples, the temples would be turned into

brothels. So for Jairaj, his father has been stubborn and narrow minded. Amritlal has, no doubt, converted his family library into a practice hall for his son Jairaj, but he has never inspired him to excel as a dancer. He has also tried to control the movement and conducts of Ratna. He insists that both Jairaj and Ratna should ask for his permission just because both of them are under his care. Hence both Ratna and Jairaj have been the victims of patriarchal violence in *Dance like a Man*. That is why they have left Amritlal's house / "fort"/ patriarchal bastion. Jairaj has declared, quite rebelliously:

We don't need anything fancy. (*Turns around and speaks defiantly.*) As from now we are no longer under your care. And will never be again. Never. (CP 424)

Jairaj and Ratna tries to carve out their own identity by breaking from the identity enforced upon them by the dominant forces in society. Finally, the play conjures up a vision of the dancer couple complementing each other as they dance in unison, not missing a step or a beat. The demolishing of the house, especially the older portion, envisages a possibility of bringing a new order which is less oppressive and less hegemonic.

3.3. "Where there is a Will": A Dramatized Account of Patriarchal Violence

When it comes to the play *Where there is a Will*, the victims are woven around the visible patriarchal violence. In fact they are not confrontational. In this play, Dattani has attempted to drive out the patriarchal violence. Hasmukh has been a worthy son of a worthy father. So he has not been excluded by his patriarchal father. Without his own choice or wish, he has been a happy shadow of his highly demanding and dictating father. So he has not failed the patriarchal system in ruthless supremacy in his life, both private and public. In this context, it can be said that Hasmukh, the son has never voiced against his father's desire for control. So his father is not resorted to any sort of violence against him. He is even not stooped to craft and deploy any act of machination to spoil his father's violent schemes ensuring his patriarchal power and authority. That is why, he has been very eager to enforce the rules of patriarchy in his own home. But when he has smelled that unless he teaches the lesson of patriarchy to his son Ajit, his daughter-in-law Preeti and his wife, Sonal, he can't perpetuate his father's patriarchal legacy, he resorts to intrigues. He has upheld the theorem that as he himself has made his father happy by listening to him, by working hard for him, he has wanted his son to emulate him. And so he has been eager to run the lives of his wife, son and daughter-in-law even

after his death. That is why he has made the will that appoints Kiran, his mistress as the executor of the will so as to rule over family members. Just because, Ajit has had the guts and shrewdness to disagree with him, to answer him back and has been more of his own individual self, Hasmukh, the patriarch has preferred Kiran to all of them including his wife Sonal. Even after his death, he has been, therefore, hard on her (Sonal), has upset her and on all others, too. He has expected all of them to take orders from Kiran as they have been doing in his life-time. Obviously, this patriarch is visible for his “bossy nature” (CP 501). He has imposed his will on all. So Kiran has declared that Hasmukh was intoxicated with his powers. He thought that he was invincible and hence could even rule from his grave by making that will.

Hasmukh has expected all of his “slaves” to “suffer silently” (CP 508). That is why, Preeti has revolted against him. She has tricked him to take “fake” medicine in the place of the right one, not because of the fact that she is absolutely evil, but of the fact that she has been quite impatient to get rid of her “bossy”, power-crazy father-in-law, who is inclined to harm her and others just to perpetuate his father's patriarchy. In the contrast, even after exposing Preeti, Kiran, exercising the patriarchal power entrusted to her by her married lover, is not violent with Preeti. She rationalizes:

You are low. I don't know what to do with you. I have the power to disinherit you. But that would affect Ajit too. No. I think the best thing would be to tell Ajit. Let him deal with you. He will hate you for the rest of his life. (CP 513)

Just because of her nonviolent employment and Gandhian/ Jain intonation to forgive even the guilty, she succeeds as a “keeper”. So it can be said that patriarchal violence is harmful or destructive. By giving no right, no authority to Ajit who he himself has appointed as the managing director of his companies, Hasmukh has himself ruined his own empire. He has himself incited Ajit to challenge father, to defy his orders, to protest, to “fight back” (501). So Hasmukh has really failed in his enterprise because Ajit has not been cowed by patriarchal authority.

4. Conclusion

With reference to the analytical discussion undertaken above, it is inferred that in the plays *Thirty Days in September*, *Dance like a Man* and *Where there is a Will*, Mahesh Dattani has dramatized patriarchal violence in terms of the multiple nuances of

the patriarchal wound enforced by the great masters or lords of patriarchy. In these plays, Dattani has showed how patriarchs like Amritlal, Hasmukh, and Vinay have become violent because of their fondness for domination. By becoming dominating, they have showed how not only patriarchy is inevitable but also how violence is inevitable in any patriarchal construct. Hence, the tree of patriarchal violence is rooted in soil/ sub-soil of male dominance, centrism and control.

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