

Study Material

The University of Burdwan

B.A. Hons (C.B.C.S.)

Course Title : INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

Course Code : CC III

SEMESTER-2

Course Credit : 6 Full Marks : 75

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The main female characters in *Bravely Fought the Queen*.

Mahesh Dattani's plays mirror the contemporary Indian society. His play *Bravely Fought the Queen* employs a multi-layered thematic technique to shown to show how the patriarchal society oppresses women on the basis of their gender. Needless to say, all the female characters in the play are victims of patriarchy. Dolly, Alka and Lalitha are the three women in the play whose frantic efforts to escape the shackles of an essentially male-dominated world form the core of the play. Alka with her alcoholism, Dolly with her fantasy about Kanhaiya and Lalitha with her obsession about bonsais present various aspects repressed womanhood. Equally interesting is the character of Baa who is both a victim and a patron of patriarchy.

Dolly's ennui and frustrations are results of her loveless conjugal life with Jiten Trivedi. Jiten's fondness for prostitute women is indicative of the fact that he treats women as commodities, objects available in exchange of money. A reflection of this can be seen in his attitude towards his wife too. In the society where Dolly belongs a woman's in-laws' house is considered to be her real house. Yet for most of them such a house becomes a synonym for prison. Dolly is no exception too. In spite of her apparently comfortable life in wealthy household she is actually a prisoner in her household where her wishes, desires, emotions and feelings are deliberately denied any recognition. Additionally she is forced to physical and

mental violence. Jiten beats her up frequently under active encouragement from Baa. The in-laws question the sanctity of her birth and she has to bear it for no fault of her own. Her movement outside the house is restricted and she is forbidden to say anything about it. She is kicked brutally in her pregnancy and her child Daksha gets born as crippled and yet she is expected to keep silent about it, and she indeed maintains that. The pain of a mother becomes suppressed by the more powerful impulse of maintaining family dignity. Dolly, therefore, becomes the more ideal wife- one who takes the blame on herself and hides the ugly secrets of her household. Such is the convention of patriarchy that it rejects a woman's voice and kills her individuality. What is more ironic is that while denying a woman her deserved freedom patriarchy also justifies these wrongs as normative feminine responsibilities.

To consider Dolly as a passive, non-reactionary sufferer in the hands of patriarchy is, however, a grossly erroneous attempt. She also shows potential for a revolt against the existing gender discrimination in society. The cracks in her mud face-pack form the metaphor for those openings through which her real face-her real self- comes out. A closer look at the change in her dressing style is also indicative of her potential to come out of her cocooned self. Jiten is indifferent at best and cruel at worst towards her. When she comes to term with that sad reality of her life she creates her own space for relaxing her troubled soul- she invents Kanhaiya. Her nocturnal escapes to Kanhaiya may not real, but to her this is a way to live her life which has long been denied to her. By creating Kanhaiya in her imagination Dolly silently (and perhaps unknowingly) throws a challenge to patriarchy- she creates a world of her own, however secret and unrecognized it may be; and by doing so she proves wrong the patriarchal belief that married women cannot have separate individual existence apart from their husbands. The seed of transformation that had been lying dormant in Dolly for long finally germinate as she does come out of her prisoned existence to claim her presence, to voice her grievances and to ultimately question the tortures that had been inflicted on her for so long.

Dolly's predicament is shared by her younger sister Alka, who gets married to Nitin, the brother of Jiten. If Dolly's married life has been spoiled by Jiten's indifference and/or tortures, Alka's conjugal life is further complicated by Nitin's homosexual tendency and his alliance with her brother Praful. Praful lets Alka get married to Nitin for the simple reason of keeping in close contact with Nitin and does so by virtue of his excessive command over her

sisters because of his gender. Praful had always been very cruel to her as she recounts how once he had burnt her hair for returning home on a neighbor boy's scooter instead of walking with Dolly:

He lit the stone and pushed my face in front of it! I thought he was going to burn my face! He burnt my hair. I can still smell my hair on fire. (Dattani. 2000:257)

The result of the marriage is catastrophic for Alka because Nitin never pays due attention to her- nor does she get the pleasure of the company of her own child. In this he is encouraged by none other than Baa. This leads to her loneliness and frustration and she feels cheated both by her brother and her husband. Yet such is the rule of the society that any open confrontation against the injustice done on her results in her being driven away from the Trivedi house. Nitin promises Baa to throw Alka out of the house not only for Alka's alleged arrogance, but also to please Baa to get her property. This gives a glimpse of a woman's real position in her in-laws' place. She has no rights in it, but only responsibilities which she must carry out by looking after the well-being of the in-laws. Any infringement of the norm would earn her the reputation of a bad woman. Alka is, therefore, the bad woman in the family who is unhesitant about expressing her mind. Unlike Dolly she tries to convince Nitin for a romantic outing with her when the party gets cancelled. She never feels guilt-stricken when Praful stops visiting her house and is equally happy to admit how she creates a ruckus in a party.

Alka's means to escape the banalities of her everyday existence is alcohol. Reserved for the men in the house the bar is a forbidden place for Indian women. Yet Alka's frequent consumption of alcohol from their own in-house bar is indicative of her keen attempt to venture into the men's world of forbidden pleasure. Intoxication lets the Medusa in her come out of the shell and she distinctively voices her grievances that have stemmed from the gender discrimination practiced at large by the society. Alcohol takes off her restraint and we get to see the real Alka- a powerful, strong-willed woman fighting against the problems of her womanhood.

Like Alka, Lalitha too is a free-spirited woman. She is talented, educated and employed. In contrast to Dolly and Alka, Lalitha is considerably free and yet in no time the audience understands that her freedom is a farce. Her husband drops her at her workplace, and

she does not leave the place until Sridhar comes to pick her up. No doubt Sridhar is much more liberal about her wife's way of life and he defends her respect much more sensibly than the Trivedi brothers would do for their wives. Yet through Sridhar Dattani tries to show the pervasiveness of dirty patriarchy. Even Sridhar cheats Lalitha by visiting prostitute quarters and sleeping with them.

The deep-rooted dissatisfaction inside Lalitha can only be understood through the metaphor of her greatest obsession- the art of creating bonsais. The stunted trees are emblematic of her own restricted growth, and their dead shoots are metaphors for her own dead dreams. But at the same time making bonsais makes her an artist and a creator- a domain typically reserved for men in a patriarchal society.

Perhaps the most complex of all the female characters in *Bravely Fought the Queen* is Baa. She is at once a victimizer and a victim. She provokes her sons to abuse their wives. She accused and shames Dolly and Alka of low birth though her two daughters-in-law had fault in this. She makes the young women's lives miserable by her incessant calling and ringing of bell. She is the reason Daksha is born crippled. There are so many things that make Baa look like a tyrant. Yet one does not fail to notice the pity in her life.

Like Dolly and Alka, Baa had also been a victim of patriarchy. The memories of her husband beating her up still haunt her and even in her delirium she recalls the pain that she had from her husband. Yet it is paradoxical that such memories have not made her sympathetic. Instead she has been more cruel and torturous towards her daughters-in-law. An explanation of such a behavior, again, can be found in the nasty patriarchal policies which have created a comprador class within the women by using all patriarchal agencies, by teaching these women about the normative nature such policies. Baa is a perfect example of how patriarchy uses women against women to maintain the existing gender hierarchy.

In the end it can be said that Indian women are still under domination and oppression. The long sustained patriarchy is still a reality from which we have no chance of escape in near future. The subjugation, the torture of the way our women suffer may be different but the age-old system of dominance over women by men will never end and they are, and will

always be victims in our chauvinistic society. Mahesh Dattani pens the pains and sufferings of Indian women in his plays through the various female characters.

Work Cited

Dattani, Mahesh. *Bravely Fought the Queen*. New Delhi, Penguin India: 2000.