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Feminism in Mahesh Dattani's Play: *Bravely Fought the Queen*

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Abstract :

The utopian socialist Charles Fourier coined the word 'feminisme' in 1837. Feminist political activists commonly campaign on issues such as reproductive rights (including the right to safe, legal abortion, access to contraception), violence within a domestic partnership, maternity leave, sexual harassment, street harassment, discrimination and rape. Men feminists today argue that feminism is a grass-root movement that seeks to cross boundaries based on social class, race, culture and religion. They also debate on certain issues like rape and incest. Themes explored in feminism include patriarchy, stereotyping, objectification, sexual objectification and oppression.

Mahesh Dattani's plays depict unarticulated, queer social issues associated with gays, eunuchs, the child sexual abuse, AIDS and the gender discrimination. He has written his plays with feminist approach. He has reflected the plight of the women and the violence inflicted on them through his women characters. Though his women are not mute sufferers like traditional women, they fall victims of male chauvinism and patriarchy. His women are modern, urban and endeavour to protest against exploitation, oppression done by the men. Dattani reflects many current issues as themes in his plays but this research paper intends to study the issues like gender discrimination, patriarchy, women's plight, their exploitation, sexual objectification and oppression reflected in 'Bravely Fought the Queen.'

Introduction:

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women's social roles, experience, interests, and feminist politics in a variety of fields, such as anthropology, sociology, communication, psychoanalysis, economics, literature, education, and philosophy. Feminist researchers embrace two key tenets: (1) their research should focus on the condition of women in society, and (2) their research must be grounded in the assumption, that women generally experience subordination¹. 'Feminism is the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.'(Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary – second edition, 2006)

Feminism is a theory that men and women should be equal politically, economically and socially. This is the core of all feminism theories. Sometimes this definition is also referred to as 'Core Feminism' or 'Core Feminist Theory'. This theory does not subscribe to differences or similarities between men and women nor does it refer to excluding men or only furthering women's causes. 'Cultural Feminism' theory supports the notion that there are biological differences between men and women. For example, 'Women are kinder and more gentle than men' leading to the mentality that if women ruled the world there would be no wars. 'Radical Feminism' was in existence from 1967 to 1975. It is no longer as universally accepted as it was then, and no longer serves to solely define the term, 'Feminism'. It views the oppression of

women as the most fundamental form of oppression, one that cut across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. This is a movement intent on social change, change of rather revolutionary proportions. It attempts to draw lines between biologically- determined and culturally-determined behavior in order to free both men and women as much as possible from their previous narrow gender roles. 'Amazon Feminism' focuses on physical equality and is opposed to gender role stereotypes and discrimination against women based assumptions that women are supposed to be, look, or behave as if they are passive, weak and physically helpless. Amazon feminist believe all women are as physically capable as men. 'Separatists' are often wrongly depicted as lesbians. These are the feminists who advocate separation from men; sometimes total, sometimes partial. The core idea is that separating (by various means) from men enables women to see themselves in a different context².

The utopian socialist Charles Fourier coined the word 'feminisme' in 1837. Feminist political activists commonly campaign on issues such as reproductive rights (including the right to safe, legal abortion, access to contraception), violence within a domestic partnership, maternity leave, sexual harassment, street harassment, discrimination and rape. Men feminists today argue that feminism is a grass-root movement that seeks to cross boundaries based on social class, race, culture and religion. They also debate on certain issues like rape and incest. Themes explored in feminism include patriarchy, stereotyping, objectification, sexual objectification and oppression³.

Mahesh Dattani's plays depict unarticulated, queer social issues associated with gays, eunuchs, the child sexual abuse, AIDS and the gender discrimination. He has written his plays with feminist approach. He has reflected the plight of the women and the violence inflicted on them through his women characters. Though his women are not mute sufferers like traditional women, they fall victims of male chauvinism and patriarchy. His women are modern, urban and endeavour to protest against exploitation, oppression done by the men. Dattani reflects many current issues as themes in his plays but this paper intends to study the issues like gender discrimination, patriarchy, women's plight, their exploitation, sexual objectification and oppression reflected in 'Bravely Fought the Queen.'

'**Bravely Fought the Queen**' is a stage play by the modern Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani. It was first performed at Sophia Bhava Hall, Mumbai on 2nd Aug. 1991. The play depicts the picture of women from affluent families of urban set up- the suburb of Bangalore. They are fighting against patriarchal dominance as it prevails in India. Baa, Dolly, Alka, Lalitha and Naina Devi all are oppressed by patriarchic system at different levels. They are weighed under the burden of exploitation, oppression, gender discrimination and physical tortures. They are marginalized and treated as secondary in the family and the society.

'Women in Mahesh Dattani's plays are not victims. They are marginalized but they fight back. 'Bravely Fought the Queen' depicts the plight of modern educated Indian women'⁴. 'The play looks closely at the politics of the Indian joint family as the setting, it constantly points at the gender divide and the dominance of the one over the other, the rupture between the world of men and the women'⁵.

The play is divided in three acts. The Act One is named as 'The women' that dramatizes the world of women. The emptiness, pain and trauma in the lives of Baa, Dolly, Alka, Lalitha are reflected. The Act Two entitled as 'The Men' depicts the Trivedi brothers - Jiten, Nitin and their employee Sridhar who works for Trivedi's advertising agency, now working for Re Va Tee campaign. The structure of the play itself indicates the split between men and women. The Act Three is titled as 'Free for All'. It is a free flow of emotions and passion, anger and hatred, blaming and counter blaming.

Dolly and Alka are sisters married to Jiten and Nitin Trivedi. Baa is always visible and pesters her daughter -in-law Dolly by shouting or ringing the bell. Her character creates tension and the air of authority in the house. The playing of thumri of Naina Devi pervades right from

the beginning to the end of the play. It has also got symbolic significance. Naina Devi was a great queen, but she loved to sing thumris which was practised by the whore (tawaif). She had strong urge for singing love songs. She did not care the social criticism of the patriarchal system. Her husband supported her. She was mistaken for a tawaif. She is a paradigm of heroism. Eventually she is recognized as the queen of thumri. The title of the play is used in an ironic way showing domestic struggle of the women in Trivedi house. Dolly and Alka remember the popular poem in Hindi about Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, a valorous queen who fought against the Britishers to get freedom. Thus Naina Devi and Rani Laxmibai are symbol of women's craving for valor, love and freedom. Thus they attempt to wipe out gender inequality. These are examples of **Amazon Feminism**.

According to Sridhar the women are unsafe in the world as **Lalitha** tells Dolly: 'But we live in R.T. Nagar. The other end of the world. Sridhar thinks it is unsafe for women to move about alone at night. I hate to admit it, but he is right.'⁶ Dolly is indifferent towards Jiten's business. She says to Lalitha: 'I'm afraid I don't know much about my husband's work'.⁷ On the other hand Lalitha takes interest in her husband's work. She grows bonsai plants. She gives bonsai to Dolly as a present and guides her. **Lalitha**: 'You just stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire...'⁸ The bonsai is the metaphor of familial and social restrictions laid down by male dominant society. Dolly becomes ready to go for the party she is assured by her husband but it is cancelled.

Exploitation, oppression and domestic violence inflicted on Baa, Dolly, Alka are past events but the scars remain alive in their psyche. Baa is mercilessly beaten by her ruthless demon like black husband. **Baa**: 'You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on hit again. The children should see what demon you are..No! No! Not on the face!'⁹ Alka is severely beaten by her brother Praful. The neighbour's son brought Alka on his scooter from the school. Praful saw it and dragged her to the kitchen, lit the stove and pushed her face in front of it. He burnt her hair. **Alka**: 'I can still smell my hair on fire. Nitin was right behind us. Watching!..Praful said 'Don't you ever look at any man'¹⁰. Thus Alka is a victim of patriarchal social codes and trimmed like bonsai. She is ill treated by her husband and brother. She pours out her wrath in the following words: **Alka**: '...I can't forget what they did to me! Our brother is a cheat! He lied about our father to them. And he lied to me! He lied to me.'¹¹ Despite this Dolly considers Praful as a very ideal person. It is learnt that Praful and Nitin were close friends since their college days. They had gay relationship. Nitin also treated her badly by driving out of house for some time. Alka has no children so she is treated with inhuman ways. She states her bitter experience in her own words to Baa. **Alka**: 'I have been cursed because I don't have children. That's what you want to say.'¹² Baa encourages Jiten to beat Dolly and throw her out when she comes to know that Dolly's and Alka's mother was second wife of their father. Alka reveals the fact that their mother did not know about his first wife. **Baa**: 'Your mother is a keep...a mistress! My sons have married to the daughters of a whore!' 'Jitu throw her out as well. Whore!' 'No! Jitu, hit her on the face but not on the ...stop it Jitu!' ¹³ Thus Baa is a party to her sons' crimes and the violence inflicted on her daughters-in-law. Jiten kicked and hit her on her stomach when she was pregnant. So their daughter Daksha was born two months premature. She is born disabled and she is given physiotherapy. They tell others that she is taught dance at special school at Ooty. All these women are living in the present with the bitter experiences of the past. They are colonized subordinate section of male dominant Indian society. Thus the women of this play are treated brutally and meted out injustice at the hands of their male counter parts.

Sexual objectification of women: 'Re Va Tee' is Mr. Sharma's firm of women's nightwear named after his wife Revathi, mispronounced as Re Va Tee by the French. Sridhar has prepared an advertisement for this firm. The model is lying on a bed and the signature is 'Light his fire with Re Va Tee'. He has a market survey from about a dozen of women. Sridhar tells some of

their adverse comments on the advertisement to Jiten. Sridhar: 'They said we haven't understood women. Why would a woman go in for something expensive if she is going to wear it only at night? Primarily for sexual reason. Nitin: 'That is what our campaign is geared towards sex.' The women found the advertisement offensive¹⁴. Jiten replies to this. Jiten: 'Men would want to buy it for their women!...and they have buying power. There is no point in asking a group of screwed up women. They'll pretend to feel offended and say, 'Oh, we are always being treated like sex objects.'¹⁵ Through jiten ,patriarchic world treat women as sexual object and think that they are economically dependent on men.

No carnal gratification of women: As Nitin is a gay, he is not interested in his wife. So she is childless and Baa blames to Alka for her childlessness. Alka is addicted to alcohol and always sinks in drinks to forget her sorrow. Praful and Sridhar bring prostitutes to their shop and betray their wives. Alka and Dolly are deprived of sensuous pleasure they anticipate from their husbands. So they create the world of fantasy of Kanhaiya.

Women's protest against patriarchy: The women in the play are not constant sufferers. They fight back. They are colonized by men in the past but now they try to give outlet for their suppressed feelings just like queen Laxmibai of Jhansi who fought bravely against the colonizers to get freedom. In Act Three men and women confront each other. The women express, assert, and move freely. There is a ball organized for Re Va Tee. For dance they have to wear different costumes. Lalitha suggests Dolly to dress as the queen of Jhansi but Alka wants to be the queen. Dolly would like to dress like a tawaif and Daksha would wear a splendid dance costume. Alka goes out in the rain, slips in the mud and dances. She is heavily drunk. They celebrate their freedom. Alka boldly tells Dolly: 'Dolly I feel sorry for you. Having a lech for a husband. A saint for a brother.'¹⁶ When Jiten asks Lalitha and Sridhar to go out, Dolly sarcastically says: 'My husband! So civilized and courteous!' Jiten: 'What's the matter with you? I'm not throwing you out!' Dolly: No. You won't. You can't'¹⁷. Dolly expresses her rage over the past cruelty inflicted on her by Jiten. Dolly: 'No! I will not let you get away so easily! They were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me! It's in your blood to do bad!'¹⁸

Dolly, Alka and Lalitha enter the Kanhaiya fantasy. Dolly plays the thumri and Kanhaiya, the teen ager cook comes to the kitchen to have romance with her. The story is associated with the theme of thumri. Kanhaiya doesn't exist at all. Lalitha: 'What! If Kanhaiya doesn't exist, Who did the auto driver come to...'¹⁹ Alka also takes interest in this fantasy. Thus these women endeavour to search love they have been deprived of by their husbands.

Conclusions:

In this play Dattani tries to highlight the women's strength and willpower to fight back the injustice, exploitation, violence, oppression inflicted on them by the male power. They fight like queen of Jhansi. Dattani explores the marginalization of women and also their attempt to articulate their voices against the patriarchal politics that subjugates the women and makes them worth for nothing. The play can be considered as the dramatist's protest against the domestic oppression and exploitation of women in terms of physical, emotional and finance within the periphery of familial relationship. The women try to decolonize the patriarchal system and establish gender equality.

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