

*Madwomen in the Attic: Deconstructing Power
Dynamics and Urban Space in Mahesh Dattani's
Bravely Fought the Queen.*

Suraiya Sultana

ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault analyses the changing scenarios of penalty from public domains to the constant surveillance in carceral system. However, Foucault's analysis involves the creation of docile bodies and minds through the application of disciplinary tactics. In Indian society, the revolution in business and technical spheres brings about myriad alterations in traditional families, where women's bodies are either exclusively imprisoned in domestic space, or displayed in commercial spaces for advertisement and pecuniary benefits. Mahesh Dattani, a famous Indian playwright, voices practical social concerns through his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* where he puts a contrast between the space of men and that of women of his time. The present paper will examine how the attitudes of Indian men create submissive bodies of women who are incarcerated in familial space for a long time. Nonetheless, Dattani through his theatrical performances, deconstructs the power dynamics in postcolonial Indian society, thereby opening new spaces for the women to construct their identities in groundbreaking ways.

Keywords: Docile bodies, power, carceral, disciplines, family.

INTRODUCTION:

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault identifies a change from overt, physical punishments to covert, invisible control of a soul. He explores the production of certain types of epistemology, organizations and professionals facilitating the creation of subjects. For Foucault, modern society constructs the identities of people through the binary of normal/abnormal and healthy/diseased. He holds that power relations govern the movements of human body. New power structures target the body, and new discourse is generated around the use of corporeal tactics. For him, a body is “docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”(136). Foucault examines the ways disciplinary measures shape human behavior and gestures. In this way, the body becomes a vehicle for invisible forces. As he says, “Disciplinary power has...an individuality...natural and organic”(Foucault 156).

Foucault claims that the technique of subjection creates a new object - the natural body which is prone to specific operations guided by order, internal conditions (155). Human body undergoes the useful training in such way that natural requirements and functional restraints come from it. Thus, the body enters the relations imbued with power. Therefore, paradigms of power are found not only in prisons, military camps and hospitals, but also in family.

Urban space has undergone innumerable structural changes in present time. It foregrounds not only the power difference between the wealthy class and the poor in myriad forms, but also that of men and women. Urban space is the arena creating multiple opportunities for women in the labour markets. In many cases, women's freedom is increased. On the other hand lies the issues of safety of women. It is supposed that women can enjoy greater facilities of life in the city. Henri Lefebvre says that spaces are produced out of necessities and that the connections of human beings and the spaces are inseparable. For Lefebvre, social space is embedded with two types of relationships

– a) reproductive relations (sexuality, family) and b) productive relations (division of labour and its social hierarchy). Since the two relations are complementary, they always work on the urban space to foreground power dynamics. The distinction of power between men and women is one crucial factor which must be analysed in the context of family relations. Indian society is ridden with power politics and domination of men over women. The female body is controlled by the operations of patriarchy. Women are made submissive through the different levels of power in familial space. Mahesh Dattani in *Bravely Fought the Queen* shows the repression and submissive conditions of the Trivedi wives for two generations. Baa, Jiten Trivedi's mother, is oppressed by her husband whose despotic attitude imposes a strong impression in her mind. Dolly and Alka Trivedi are oppressed by Baa who never gets rid of her old memories.

DOCILE BODIES AND POWER

The play is set in a suburban area of Bangalore. Baa suffers from a stroke and becomes bed-ridden in her old age. The story centers on an upper class family where the women's freedom is restricted by the tyrannical males. Baa was forced to repudiate her singing habit by her husband. She mournfully looks back to the past, "He asked me before marrying him if I will sing!" (BFQ 57) Baa remembers her husband as a dark figure due to his violence and anger. Baa says, "The children should see what a demon you are" (BFQ 47). Her husband hits her face and spends the money inherited from her father. It is evident in Baa's speech, "Mine! Every paisa is mine! Mine from my father!" (BFQ 47). Baa has left her hobbies of public singing because of the strong disapproval from the autocratic husband who constantly tortures her. Baa is afraid of her husband who is "as black as night!" (BFQ 42). Baa cannot change her wounded psyche and dislikes her daughters-in-law and their trips outside home. She harshly treats them and orders Alka to rub her back. She consoles herself temporarily because she is blessed with two sons. She can be a good mother but never a good

mother-in-law. Alka blames Baa for not having a child, "You won't let us! You want him to hate me!" (BFQ 54)

Dolly, wife of Jiten Trivedi, seldom gets the chance of outing with her husband for recreation. After a long time she becomes joyful at the prospects of outing. She puts mud musk on her face to become beautiful. Dolly and Alka are entirely ignorant of the official activities of their husbands. Naturally, a lack of communication between husband and wife prevails within the family. Dolly listens to thumri in order to overcome the boredom. Alka, wife of Nitin Trivedi, is equally neglected by her husband. Alka drinks wine to forget her bad marriage "discovering the pleasures of alcohol" (BFQ 25). The Trivedi brothers have twin houses "Right in the middle of nowhere" (BFQ 8). Neither they have neighbours, nor they have supportive family members. The women are confined and isolated within the apparently complacent houses. Alka censures Dolly for her reserved nature, "...you just sit in a corner sipping your lime juice and speak when spoken to" (BFQ 17). In this context, Cisney and Morar affirm,

"Foucault notes that domination occurs in myriad ways, at all levels of society: not just between de facto political rulers and subjects, but between lovers, spouses, parents and children...in all relations of life" (Why Biopower? 2)

Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* delineates the confinement of Bertha in the house of Rochester. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic* alludes to the character of Bertha Mason, thereby reinforcing the dichotomous roles of women either as angels or monsters. Being ignored by her husband Nitin, Alka learns to be apathetic by allowing distractions. The inmates of the Mettray, as Foucault argues, learn the skills of the prison through the techniques imposed on the body (294). Similarly, the wives of the Trivedi brothers induce within themselves a mode of behaviour which strengthens the clarification of Foucault – "a soul to be known and a subjection to be maintained" (295).

Jiten and Nitin Trivedi intend to launch a new brand of women nightwear. Their motives are entirely guided by mercenary pursuits. Female body is commodified for catering to pleasures of the male. Henri Lefebvre claims that connection of a human being to space or society indicates relations to his or her body. "Social practice presupposes the use of the body: the use of hands, members and sensory organs..." (40). Bodies are represented with combination of ideology. Bodies' relations with surroundings are significant because of the intervention of culture through a variety of symbols. People become signs in this context where women are not makers, rather bearers of meaning. Therefore, the female sex is bounded by a symbolic order in which the men play their fantasies and thrust the image of woman. This is the way in which the disciplinary power has invaded all spheres of human life. It is similar to what Michel Foucault says in *Discipline and Punish*,

"Discipline...had its own type of ceremony...the subjects were presented as objects to the observation of a power that was manifested only by its gaze" (188).

For Foucault, the will to exercise power defeats the egalitarian views, thereby positing the marginal figures as irrational. Just as the lawyers, doctors, and the influential figures establish dominant discourses in society by marking criminals and patients respectively, images of women are constructed and maintained for long years in patriarchal discourse. Jiten, a robust representative of patriarchal society, possesses a dominating attitude. Being a lecherous man, he views the women as nothing but sexual entities. For him, men possesses value in society for their earning abilities. That's why he discards the opinions of women customers and orders Sridhar to focus on men for market survey. His own desire is evident when he states, "... they have the buying power"(BFQ 45).

Not only Jiten oppresses women, but also he abuses men. He manipulates the amiable nature of his brother-in-law Praful and treats the latter like "a crap...nothing" (BFQ 37). Jiten plans to sell the old house whose value is one and half crore in the present market. He calls

Nitin 'sentimental fool' for his unwillingness to sell it. He persuades Nitin to throw Alka from his house and to divorce her. While driving recklessly, Jiten knocks down an auto parked on the road and bullies the auto driver. Apart from this, Jiten's conversation with Sridhar is dubious. It shows the power dynamics of individuals residing in urban space. Jiten, albeit a hypocrite, possesses wealth and upper hand over Sridhar. Sridhar suggests Jiten to change the campaign for its offensive nature on the women clients. But Jiten threatens him to sack from job. Thus the commercial relations assume the form of social existence through relational nexus (Lefebvre 120). Jiten insists Sridhar to bring a prostitute in his office and boasts of the advantage of his office on Grant Road, "No checking"(BFQ 56).

Mahesh Dattani poses contrast to the Trivedi family through the conjugal relations of Lalitha and Sridhar. Lalitha, albeit unemployed, is a lady of independent thinking and writer. Sridhar, an advertising employee of the Trivedi brothers, shares everything of his working life with his wife Lalitha. In order to buy a dwelling place, Sridhar works diligently in the office of the Trivedi. Lalitha informs Dolly of the impending ball dance where the model "will wear a black cloak and mask which she'll remove at midnight to reveal the Re Va Tee nightwear" (BFQ 21). Lalitha busies herself with lots of activities. She collects saplings of any tree and shapes the branches by pinching and trimming them. By nurturing bonsais, she becomes so deeply connected with them that she refuses the tour to Goa. Lalitha says, "I just couldn't imagine leaving my bonsais with the neighbour...I can be quite stubborn" (BFQ 22).

Body represents the space of society. Through the paralysed body of Baa, oppression of the women are highlighted. Henri Lefebvre holds the body as a spatial body, "A body...is immediately subject to the determinants of that space: symmetries, interactions and reciprocal actions..." (195). The office of Jiten Trivedi is decked with a large photograph of a seductive model. Through the advertisement of

the new product, sensuous themes are presented to demean the status of women. As Foucault notes,

“We are in a society of sex...the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life...Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species...power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality... it’s insidious presence, the fact that it was everywhere and object of excitement and fear at the same time” (*The Foucault Reader* 269).

Within the suburban homes, the women negotiate their roles as caregivers. There is no way of communication with the neighbours. Like the disciplinary practices of the school and correction house, they are obliged to maintain the domestic chores, such as caring the sick mother-in-law who calls them to massage her body. One of the distinct characters of the prison, as Foucault identifies, is the denial of individual liberty (*The Foucault Reader* 215). The female members of the Trivedi family are bereft of personal independence. Apparently, there is no redress of their plights. Being female, they have abandoned the pleasures of lives to satisfy the requirements of the males who have locked them in cells and rendered them passive. The prison serves the place of surveillance of the inmates’ demeanour. Jiten is familiar with the behaviour of Dolly, especially her tailoring habits. The house of Jiten symbolizes the carceral regime where the females undergo penitentiary practices and Baa persistently intercepts the autonomy of the Trivedi wives. Despite the ordeal, the women of the Trivedi family are neglected by the husbands. That’s why Dolly makes an amorous affair with the young cook Kanhaiya and Alka consumes drink (whisky, rum) to forget the misery of marriage with a homosexual. Even before marriage, Alka was punished by Praful for riding the scooter of a male friend.

The twin houses are embodiments of what Lefebvre calls the predominance of visual-spatial regimes. Although Lalitha appreciates the beautiful house where Dolly resides, the houses are situated in an inconvenient place, quite distanced from the din and bustle of the city. Alka affirms, “...living so far away from the city, we have learnt to be

sort of...” (BFQ 29). Lefebvre holds that the city and the house have qualities of memory. For him, emotional intensities of human beings can be expressed in street violence, in buildings and in the homes of the well-offs. Lefebvre further claims that bourgeois homes express covert sexuality and that the construction of building is imagined in terms of a family which reproduces (315). Therefore, the houses of the Trivedi brothers replicate the patrimonial authority and connote a space where voices of the female counterparts are subdued. It is the house which shelters the crippled child like Daksha. Overall, the Trivedi house produces a masculine space which functions to replicate the values of the powerful. It does not permit any other space (feminine) as it is characterized by insolence and callousness.

CONCLUSION

Postmodernists argue that discourse is not only a means of controlling individuals, it often goes beyond them. A society is imbued with discourses from top to bottom. The more dominant a discourse is, the more natural it seems to be within a society. People incorporate the subordinating norms within themselves. Nonetheless, it implies subversion of dominant discourses. In this context, Foucault claims that how much terrifying a system may be, there lies the probabilities of opposition and resistance (*The Foucault Reader* 245).

However, stereotypical roles are questioned by Dolly. Like Nora, in *A Doll's House*, Dolly resists the patriarchal discourse in Act III of the play. Thus, stereotypes are deconstructed and challenged by Dattani's women characters in the final Act. Dolly exposes the cause of Daksha's premature birth. Jiten with the instigation of Baa severely beats pregnant Dolly and she suffers. As Dolly says, “They were your hands hitting me!” (BFQ 82). Dolly is overwhelmed by the passion of Naina Devi for singing love songs. Naina Devi married “into royalty... could have lived her life comfortably in royal grace” (BFQ 65). Naina Devi's husband supported her to cherish her dreams by defying contemporary social norms. In her time, the lower class women

sang thumri to entertain the mass. However, Naina Devi became the queen of thumri overcoming all the familial and societal obstacles. In contrast, Dolly is deprived of love and affection from her husband. Lalitha suggests a poem celebrating the bravery of the Queen of Jhansi in the Sepoy Mutiny. Dolly destabilizes the power dynamics of the male through her emotional outburst. She reminds Jiten of all his misdeeds and injustice and vehemently opposes his control. She gathers her strength and bravely asserts (to Jiten), "What will you do? Kill me? Then you will have to kill Daksha as well!" (BFQ 79)

Like the first person narrator in *When I Hit You*, Dolly boycotts the male domination by uttering the bitter truth. Furthermore, Alka discloses the representation of power by cursing Praful who gets rid of his responsibility by marrying his sisters to the wicked men. In Act III, Alka shows indifference towards the slandering remarks of Jiten. She subverts the traditional rules by drinking rum in front of Jiten. Dattani indicates the collapse of patriarchal supremacy through the assertion of the women's voice in the final act. Dolly and Alka resist the normalisation of patriarchal violence in familial space. Thus, the Trivedi house becomes a dynamic space opening new possibilities for changing roles of women. It is the new space where servitude of the women would no longer be continued.

Works Cited:

- Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics, 2006.
- Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2002.
- Cisney, Vernon W., and Nicole Morar. "Introduction: Why Biopower? Why Now?" *Biopower: Foucault and Beyond*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015 <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/books/91>
- Manna, Adrita. *A Companion to Mahesh Dattani's Bravely Fought the Queen*. Book Valley, 2019.

- Driver, F. "Power, space and the body: a critical assessment of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 1985, Issue 3, pp. 425-446.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Worldview Publications, 2000.
- Hurley, Robert, translator. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. By Michel Foucault. Random House, 1978.
- Kandasamy, Meena. *When I Hit You: A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Atlantic Books, 2017.
- Pile, Steve. *The Body and the City: psychoanalysis, space and subjectivity*. Routledge, 1996.
- Rabinow, Paul, editor. *The Foucault Reader*. Vintage Books, 2010.
- Smith, Donald Nicholson, translator. *The Production of Space*. 1974. By Henri Lefebvre. Basil Blackwell, 1991.
- Sheridan, Alan, translator. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. By Michel Foucault. Vintage Books, 1995.