

INNER LAWS: A CRITIQUE OF FEMININE BONDING

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Abstract

The present paper intends to study Poile Sengupta's *Inner Laws* as a feminine play that mockingly presents female frivolities in a bid to encourage the audience/reader to reflect, criticize and in the end actively attempt to transform the perceived human behavior towards more congenial relationship and a better social order.

Drama has emerged as a more potent and serious tool of self expression and exploration in the hands of women playwrights. There are certain familial relationships which men can, at the most, only observe but only the women can live and experience. Poile Sengupta's *Inner Laws* explores such a touchy relationship between the mother -in-law and the daughter-in-law, in the Indian context. The Indian television soaps and female gossips are replete with portrayals of complex love-hate relationship amid them. The reasons for this intricate relationship seem rooted in the shared past.

The playwright very effectively stretches the span of the narrative between the far-fetched shared past of mythological names adapted in the play and the immediate contemporality of the present depicted through appropriate characterization. She has chosen names of her eight characters from Sanskrit texts; "the Bhaagavatam, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Rugmini is Krishna's wife and so daughter -in-law of the Queen Mother, Mrs Vasudev. Radha is Krishna's childhood sweetheart and so has Mrs Nandan as mother -in-law. Chitra or Chitrangada marries Arjuna, the son of Pandu, and Urmila is the daughter -in-law of Dasarath who does not accompany her husband, Laxmana, when he opts to be exiled."¹ So Chitra and Urmila have Mrs Pandu and Mrs Dasarath as their mother -in-law. All these characters created with mythological association represent the conventional harsh affiliation between mother -in-law and daughter -in-law. The only characters, who do not possess mythological/historical association, are Laavanya, meaning grace and Hrimaan, meaning modesty. These two names also have their origin in Sanskrit. They signify optimism regarding healthier daughter-in-law, mother -in-law relationship.

The play is divided into two acts. It appears to be inspired by Alexander Pope's mock-heroic epic poem, *The Rape of the Lock*. It satirises the follies of womankind, more specifically

in the Indian context. The playwright avers “I have tried, as Pope did so effectively, ‘to just hint a fault and hesitate dislike’” (71). The play has a cast of all women characters. Five mothers-in-law and five daughters-in-law positioned against each other as conventional rivals, in the mock heroic style. They fight over such trivial things as non-stick frying pan and casseroles. But the real bone of contention between the two is the son of the house. The rivalry is extended till the very near end of the play wherein the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law encounter (fight) each other with their specific skills, as weapons, in cookery, fashion, beautification, knowledge about television-soaps, psychological examination, interpretation of law as police and judge, etc. “The play exposes the traditional hostility between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law ... where two women, usually strangers to each other, are forced to share a home, a kitchen and in a sense the affections of the same man” (71).

The characters represent the assumed psychological traits of their namesakes from the mythologies. Mrs Vasudev, ie; Devaki, was imprisoned by Kans. Mrs Vasudev, in the play, has a fantasy that she will be arrested on charges of smuggling and the jailor -“a cross between Superman drunk and King Kong sober” (77) - will try to assault her modesty. Rugmani, Mrs Vasudev’s daughter-in-law, mimics her mother-in-law and mentions how she spoils her son’s shirt by pretentiously sobbing. “If this bad man comes anywhere near me you will rescue me, won’t you? You won’t let him do anything bad to me? You promise, you promise? You promise you won’t leave me in the jail? Say promise” (77). The reference to the rescuer and the abducted caged princess has allusions to the Ramayana story. Again a son who will go to any extent to keep his promise also hints at the same narrative. The mother here Mrs Vasudev likes herself to be called a ‘Barbie’ and even her son has to address her as Barbie (76). The dramatist very effectively merges the different mythological narratives and the modern symbol of doll, seamlessly, interfacing different topographies and periods. Urmila, Laxman’s estranged wife calls it “(t)he Sita syndrome” (77). A peculiar ting of the typical Indian feminine domestic rivalry becomes evident when Rugmani refers to her mother-in-law ruining her husband’s shirt whilst crying and again when Urmila refers to her mythological sister-in-law, Sita. The daughter-in-law alludes to the mother son relationship mockingly where the mother-in-law vies for position by trying to grasp her son’s time and sentiments. Such seemingly mundane incidents on constant repetition become a routine that converts the mother-in-law, daughter-in-law relationship into an unending, fragile and tense competition. The son, like a prodigy, promises to save his mother.

RUGMANI: Dear darling son, like all dear darling sons in soap operas, then promises that he will personally take a Rolls Royce to the above mentioned jail and rescue her with his own bare hands.

RADHA: Putra uvacha! The son speaks...

RUGMANI: O mother mine! My darling one and only progenitor...

URMILA: ... You are the guilt complex I adore ...

CHITRA: ... For you will I fight and shed villainous blood ...

RADHA: ... So don’t be crying anymore ...

RUGMANI: Anymore ...

CHITRA AND URMILA together: An...y...m...ore..!

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This portrayal of the caged mother and the rescuer son mockingly leaves the wife as the wicked other in the house. That it is a common complaint in majority Indian households is suggested by all daughters -in-law coming together as chorus to vent their frustration with the last ‘An...y...m...ore..!’ above. The D.I.L. club formed by the daughters -in-law is a forum to vent their innermost feelings.

It stands for freedom! For liberty! It is our call to sisterhood! ...
join us all you newly wed girls with mothers-in-law ... join us
... join our call ... say it with me ... Down with reactionaries!
Away with our suppressors! Our repressors! Our oppressors!
Our depressors! ... Our mothers -in-law (78-79).

The revolutionary zeal with which the daughters -in-law unite is not absent in the mothers-in-law. Though, comparatively, a little less agile, considering their age and ailments, the elderly women also meet and discuss their daughters-in-law. When Mrs Hrimaan asks Mrs Nandan: “Are you alright ...?” She replies, “How can I be alright? I live with my daughter-in-law,” (85). They all share complaints about their daughters -in-law. Mrs Nandan thinks that her daughter-in-law wants to kill her. In spite of knowing that she is a chronic diabetic patient the daughter-in-law asks her as to what sweet will she have? The mock exaggeration is evident when she says “My doctor has said that even if I look at mysore pak, I can die” (86). She complains that the daughter-in-law behaves well in the presence of her son but in his absence she wants to kill Mrs Nandan so that she can have the non stack frying pan. The absurdity and exaggeration, in both the cases, is inspired by the burlesque caricatures, perceptible in social conversations.

Even other mothers -in-law have similar complaints about their daughters -in-law. Just as the daughters -in-law parody their mothers -in-law, the elderly women are a no less a match. They also imitate and make fun of the mannerisms of their daughters-in-law. Mrs Dasarath mimics her daughter-in-law, Urmila, who is an IPS officer.

Samajhti hai that the whole world has to go her rule ke mutabik. (*Stands up, demonstrates.*) Mother -in-law, left, right, left, right, mother -in-law ... dayee mudh... mother -in-law ... eyes right ...mother -in-law ... halt ... ek do teen ek (88).

Mrs Vasudev blames her daughter-in-law for eloping with her son.

Do you know what mine [daughter-in-law] did? He said he was going on a tour for two days, and after two days he comes back with this girl and says they are married. She eloped with him, can you imagine? Eloped! What kind of a girl is she? What is her family background? (*Sobs.*) (89).

The blame of making the world wretched has constantly been thrown upon the daughters -in-law. The Mothers -in-law have mostly assumed liberty to terminate arguments with rhetorical complaints or satirical criticism of female folly or fickleness, ambition or cruelty, extravagance or lust, ascribed to the daughters -in-law. Mrs Nandan complains:

... What a good son, I have. He is a parmatman, a god Why I agreed to his marriage with the she devil.... They used to play together as children ... she got her hooks into him when they were in LKG (88).

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Whether it is a love marriage or an arranged marriage, the mother-in-law always finds a reason to blame the daughter-in-law for her son's supposed misfortune in marrying her. She behaves as the matriarch of the family enjoying power positions by depicting her son as naive and herself as the martyr. Mrs Dasarath explains the epic in the modern context blaming Urmila for Laxman's plight in his voluntary exile. Mrs Dasarath complains:

I am so simple ... I am like mother Teresa actually, a people's person. Do you know why I welcomed my daughter-in-law when I first saw her Because when I first saw her cousin, who is married to my sister's son, is such a sweet girl. Such a sweet girl. She has gone to Africa with my nephew. To the bush, you know. She said if he had to sleep on thorns, she also would sleep on thorns My son has gone with them too. He's a sociologist you know.

.... But did my daughter-in-law go with my son? No, she did not. She stayed here sleeping on a foam mattress and eating good food (89).

When the names of these characters are linked to their namesakes, from the epics, the satire evolves into a hilarious ridicule. The son is presented as an innocent victim bewitched by the cunning wife. Though the humour in the satire makes one laugh and move on but it goes without saying that the strife between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is due to the man they share as a son or husband. Incited by their common interests they venture to consider this universal grievance, vehemently venting the clamor of their distress, as all the apparent confidence of justice and all the indignation of injured virtue seem, entitled to equal regard. The revolutionary resolution of the daughters-in-law is equally matched with the clarion call of the mothers-in-law.

MRS PANDU: Bas! Bas! That will do. We can't let our bahu rule over us like this. Ye bahut hi bad baat hai.

MRS DASARATH: You are right. After all, honesty is only a policy.

MRS NANDAN: So what should we do?

MRS PANDU: Make plans! We will teach them a accha lesson. So they will keep their mouths shut. Give us some izzat (90).

Poile Sengupta uses satire to expose the little ironies of life. The mother-in-law, daughter-in-law hostility is often a pre conceived notion, "women actually prepare themselves for the antagonism" (71) even while growing up. Mothers train daughters to stand up to their future mothers-in-law. Daughters are generally made to believe that no matter what they do they will never be able to measure up to their mother-in-law's expectations. The distinction between daughter and daughter-in-law is easily evident in the play *Mangalam*. The daughter-in-law Revathy complains to her husband Mani that his mother has given away many gifts to her daughter. Mani sides with his mother and sister and says that she had every right to give things to her daughter. She gave those gifts because she did not want her daughter "to be humiliated like she used to be in her husband's house (3). When Revathy questions "What about my being humiliated in my husband's house?" (3) Mani has no answer and he tries to dodge by alleging

that women have no better work than to talk about petty things. Revathy does not relent. She says “Yes, that is what you always say when it comes to your wife. But what happens when it is your sister? Then everything changes” (3-4).

The mother-in-law, daughter-in-law relationship is the most critical relationship in any Indian household. But the tit for tat attitude, when dealing with other women, is an equally typical. Mrs Vasudev’s son had eloped and married his sweetheart, Radha. This made her so furious with her daughter-in-law that she did not organise a party for the newly-weds. But this set a trend and other mothers-in-law followed suit. They too did not arrange a reception for their son’s marriage only because they did not want to invite those who had not invited them. And similar blow for blow attitude is perceptible in the mother-in-law, daughter-in-law relationship where every response is intended as an equivalent and befitting retaliation to an action. Mrs Nandan’s words replicate common utterances by women in such trying conditions, when she says, “... My mother always said when one woman will not trust another woman, then kali yuga has come... (127).

The complex relationship that women share with each other is mockingly presented to capture the various shades in the prism of the spectrum called family life. The various moods of the women portrayed here, both as mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law or even simply as women are presented mockingly as spontaneously impulsive. Laavanya and her mother in law Mrs Hriimaan assemble all the mothers in law and daughters in law at their house. The initial chaos when their identity is revealed to each other soon turns into a bonding where they all strive to help one another. The purpose of the play; hinting at female frivolity is achieved and the play ends with an optimistic note of a better tomorrow. When there used to be a perceived dearth of substantive female roles, in the Indian context, Poile Sengupta presented an all female cast of ten familiar character roles that define familial identity and female roles. It brings out the awareness of women as women. It not only upholds a mirror to reflect the perceived follies of female frivolity conditioned by the socio-political and cultural structures inherited but also gently hammers the mirror to wield out enhanced images of the woman self. The play challenges the reader/audience to think about the inherited social structures and stereotypes. It is not a study of human nature but a study of human relationship, more precisely, woman relationship. It encourages the audience/reader to reflect, criticize and in the end attempt to transform the perceived human behavior towards more congenial relationship and a better social order.

ⁱ Sengupta, Poile. *Women Centre Stage*, Routledge: New Delhi, 2010. P 70-71. Print. All subsequent citations from this collection are from this edition and henceforth page numbers are mentioned in parentheses.