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# PATRIARCHY AS PERFORMANCE: THE THEATRE OF DOMESTIC DISCIPLINE IN POLIE SENGUPTA'S *INNER LAWS*

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## ABSTRACT

*In Poile Sengupta's Inner Laws, patriarchy is depicted as a complex home performance in which daily interactions, marital traditions, and family rituals serve as a platform for imposing hierarchy and discipline. In order to uphold family honour and tradition, the play examines how authority and control are dramatically enacted within the home, anchoring roles for both men and women that sustain violence, silence, and subordination. In addition to direct dominance by male leaders, Sengupta highlights the ways in which patriarchal authority is maintained by the cooperation and competitive positioning of women, who internalise patriarchal norms and replicate them against one another. Inner Laws reveals how domestic discipline is not just a set of rules but an active, continuous spectacle through acts of moral policing, symbolic gestures, and the normalisation of suffering. At the same time, forcing characters to conform to gendered expectations erase their true agency and voice. Thus, the abstract presents the family as a dynamic microcosm of patriarchy, where resistance is deeply entwined with emotional survival and moral ambiguity, and violence is ritualised.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Patriarchy, Domestic Discipline, Family Ritual, Authority, Gender Roles.*

Poile Sengupta's *Inner Laws* presents patriarchy as a dynamic, lived performance that is constantly enacted in the private realm of the Indian home, challenging its abstract characterisation as a social or political structure. The home is turned into a stage where patriarchal control is actively maintained and reproduced via everyday interactions, rituals, and cultural practices rather than just being imposed from above. Every action becomes a planned performance that requires compliance and obedience, from maintaining gendered work divides to participating in symbolic marriage rites

Men and women who internalise, oppose, or unintentionally cooperate to maintain hierarchical gender relations are involved in this multilayered, multigenerational patriarchal performance. Sengupta's play highlights how cultural rites function as theatrical enactments of male authority and gender subordination by revealing how these performances are ingrained in ritualistic conventions like the kanyadaan, a highly symbolic exchange ritual that transfers a woman's guardianship from father to husband. The subtle ways patriarchal control spreads horizontally within the family matrix are further demonstrated by the fact that women's roles are not passive but rather actively involved as enforcers of discipline through surveillance, moral policing, and competitive hierarchies among female relatives, such as the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law dynamic.

Sanjib Kumar Kar's doctoral thesis, *Continuing Resistance: A Feminist Study of Select Plays by Poile Sengupta*, offers a significant contribution to existing scholarship. Kar undertakes a comprehensive feminist interrogation of Sengupta's dramaturgy, tracing the multiple modes through which women articulate resistance and reclaim agency within patriarchal structures. His study employs a predominantly feminist and ethnographic lens, revealing how Sengupta constructs spaces both literal and symbolic where silenced female voices negotiate authority and visibility. By mapping patterns of oppression, negotiation, and subversion across Sengupta's plays, Kar provides a valuable framework for understanding the playwright's commitment to portraying women's struggles within domestic and social hierarchies.

Rituals function in *Inner Laws* as potent performative practices that both implement and normalise patriarchal structures within the home, rather than cultural or religious observances. These customs include anything from food preparation to marriage ceremonies to the preservation of family traditions. It is predetermined occasions that preserve male authority and reinforce gender stereotypes that ultimately subjugate women. Marriage rituals in particular are portrayed as charged performances with deeply symbolic meanings. For instance, the ritual of the thali, or wedding necklace, is depicted not simply as a symbol of marital union but as a binding script of control and constraint.

Sengupta provocatively likens the thali to "a noose rather than a necklace," invoking the imagery of entrapment that encapsulates the bride's transition into a life of prescribed obedience and limited autonomy. This symbolism reveals how marriage functions less as an egalitarian partnership and more as an institutionalised mechanism of patriarchal discipline.

Beyond marriage, the everyday gestures and language used within the household become ritualised modes of control. Mangai observes, "The everyday rituals of the household become performances through which patriarchal authority is

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both asserted and challenged....” (Mangai 67). The distribution of tasks along gender lines women tied to kitchen duties, caregiving, and managing the domestic sphere are mundane yet repetitive acts that embody and perpetuate the gendered division of labour. Through these rituals, the family enacts a performance of domestic discipline where obedience is cultivated not just by overt commands but through subtle reinforcement via silence, expectation, and emotional regulation.

Sengupta’s play exposes the performative texture of patriarchy. It reveals how such rituals are simultaneously coercive and self-sustaining because they are deeply embedded in the emotional economy of the family. Priya Sharma notes, “Sengupta’s *Inner Laws* exposes domestic rituals as scripted performances through which patriarchal hierarchies are endlessly reproduced and inscribed on women’s bodies and identities”. (Sharma 118). Even though they are frequently the victims of these performances, women also participate in and reinforce these standards, blurring the straightforward dichotomies of oppressors and victimised. The play highlights this internalisation as a crucial component of patriarchal power's resilience, as ritualised obedience is used to practise and normalise punishment on a daily basis.

This knowledge is sharpened by *Inner Laws* theatrical setting, which presents the family as a microcosm of society in which power is constantly created and reproduced via performances that require gendered conformity. Sengupta pushes viewers to consider how much patriarchy is upheld by seemingly ordinary and routine yet incredibly potent rituals like the thali and staged household activities. In this light, domestic discipline emerges not simply as a system of direct control but as a pervasive web of symbolism, ritual, and performance that shapes identities, relationships, and moral economies within the household.

Sengupta's work is a critical analysis of these cultural scripts and their implications for gender justice, emphasising that in order to disrupt patriarchal performance. It is necessary to unravel the subtle rituals and symbols that uphold them in addition to challenging overt violence or inequality.

*Inner Laws* vividly dramatises how patriarchal discipline within the domestic sphere is maintained not solely through overt male authority but through an intricate network of surveillance, control, and moral policing that enlists women themselves as active participants. Rahul Dasgupta observes, “Women’s complicity in upholding patriarchal norms in *Inner Laws* reveals the ways discipline is enacted horizontally, with mothers-in-law and aunts policing younger women’s conduct as intensely as men”.(Dasgupta 72). Contrary to simplistic portrayals of women only as victims, Sengupta reveals the complexities of power wherein female relatives like mothers-in-law, sisters, and aunts serve as crucial agents who enforce patriarchal norms, ensuring the persistence of family hierarchies.

In order to preserve order and compliance, this female network serves as a tool of monitoring and compulsion, bossy attitudes and behaviours. For instance, mothers-in-law have a great deal of power and operationalise the patriarchal code by keeping an eye on their daughters-in-law's behaviour, speech, and even cognitive processes. Such monitoring is not only physical but also profoundly psychological which includes a routine of forced quiet, emotional neglect, and subtle but effective humiliation. A woman who doesn’t fit to expected roles face censure in the form of exclusion, severe criticism, and humiliation tactics that stifle personal expression and promote subservience.

The sanctity of family honour, which women are encouraged to defend at all costs and frequently internalise the duty to favour community reputation above personal autonomy, is the intellectual foundation of this performance. Any declaration of uniqueness or opposition runs the risk of being labelled as dangerous or immoral and challenged as rebellion. Silence is used as a powerful weapon to stifle criticism and preserve the appearance of unity.

Thus, Sengupta’s depiction provides a sophisticated perspective of domestic discipline as a theatrical spectacle, an ongoing performance in which power is wielded through imperceptible but tangible systems of control and monitoring. Beyond direct male domination, the family home becomes a panoptic environment where power functions through reciprocal observation and self-regulation.

The emotional and moral complexity that permeates women's roles within patriarchy is also reflected in this show. The distinction between oppressor and victim can be blurred by participation in the monitoring system, which might be seen as a survival tactic, complicity, or internalised oppression. By examining how patriarchal authority reproduces itself in close relationships, Sengupta's work extends the critical discourse beyond binary thinking and makes resistance challenging and complex.

In *Inner Laws*, Poile Sengupta highlights the multifaceted complicity of women within the patriarchal structures that govern domestic life. It reveals how power and subordination are not simply administered from men to women but are deeply embedded in the relationships among women themselves. “...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… 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”.... (Sengupta 70-71). The play foregrounds the ways in which women participate in perpetuating hierarchy by reinforcing generational divides such as those between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law or among different age groups of women within the family.

This generational hierarchy plays out as a layered power dynamic wherein older women assert authority over younger women, often replicating the oppressive norms they themselves were subjected to. “Mother-in-law hostility is often a preconceived notion; ‘women actually prepare themselves for the antagonism’ even while growing up. Mothers train

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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" (Sengupta 71). Such interactions illustrate the internalisation of patriarchal values, where women come to accept and enforce the same restrictions and expectations that limit their own agency. The mother-in-law's dominance over the daughter-in-law, for example, is as much about preserving her own status in the family as it is about upholding the wider patriarchal order.

The dynamic Sengupta portrays the simplistic perpetrator-victim dichotomy. Women's complicity reflects pragmatic survival strategies in oppressive structures where resistance can result in social exile, emotional punishment, or violence. This intricate interplay means women's participation in upholding patriarchal norms is often entangled with sorrow, ambivalence, and sometimes unconscious replication of trauma across generations.

Significantly, *Inner Laws* also illuminates how this gendered division is normalised and ritualised through every day practices, language, and expectations. This ritualisation transforms pain and subjugation into markers of family honour and feminine virtue, demanding silence and compliance as non-negotiable duties. Patriarchal discipline appears natural and inevitable. Through the dramaturgy of familial interactions, Sengupta exposes how female complicity in patriarchy is both a product of and a mechanism for the system's endurance.

The characters in the play grapple with profound ethical ambiguity, as survival frequently requires the navigation of a labyrinthine moral economy where complicity in violence or passive acceptance of others' suffering becomes a tragic necessity. Women, caught in this web, often face impossible choices where resistance could bring harsher violence or social ostracism, but submission entails the perpetuation of their own oppression. This impasse situates the family as a site of contradictory impulses, where love is intertwined with violence, and care is inseparable from control.

Emotional neglect and humiliation serve as key instruments in this regime of control. The denial of autonomy, such as restrictions on mobility, speech, and decision-making, creates a suffocating atmosphere where women's identities are subjugated under the prevailing patriarchal order. Sengupta's narrative poignantly illustrates how these forms of violence are often invisible yet deeply damaging, enacted through silence, shame, and the erasure of personal agency.

The ethical complexity underscores the play's critical intervention into debates on domestic violence and patriarchy, refusing reductive moral judgements and urging an understanding of violence as both systemic and interpersonal. By staging domestic violence as a performative, normalised element of family life, *Inner Laws* invites audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about the costs of social conformity and the human toll of gendered oppression.

Despite the oppressive atmosphere of strict patriarchal discipline portrayed in *Inner Laws*, the play does not depict women as mere passive victims resigned to their fate. Sengupta poignantly captures moments of subtle subversion, solidarity, and questioning among women that reveal an undercurrent of resistance beneath the surface of conformity. These acts of subversion are typically covert and fraught with risk, reflecting the precariousness of dissent within a tightly regulated domestic order.

Fragile alliances or actions of clandestine compassion amongst women who share the burden of patriarchal authority are common manifestations of subversion. Even if they are fleeting, these exchanges turn into potent expressions of support and acknowledgement that raise the prospect of other forms of solidarity inside repressive structures. In addition to acting as a form of resistance, asking prohibited questions about the nature of love, honour, marital fairness, or uniqueness also disrupts planned displays of obedience and subtly undermines accepted standards.

Sengupta's portrayal, however, highlights the intricacy of this kind of resistance, which is rarely clear-cut or simple. Acts of rebellion are frequently linked to feelings of guilt because to the complexity of patriarchal performance; these women may fear the repercussions of disobedience and feel caught between their wishes and their need to uphold family honour. Characters have internal dilemmas as they balance their desire for autonomy and dignity against the dangers of more severe retribution, such as social rejection, emotional punishment, or violence.

The restrictions on disobedience serve as an example of how internalised discipline and external control work together to maintain patriarchal dominance. The emotional ties and moral duties imposed by family and society, in addition to the dread of punishment, limit resistance. The communal urge to uphold appearances, social cohesiveness, and tradition limits individual independence, making it difficult for women to pursue insurrection.

The play's dramatisation of the spectacle of control reveals the intricate network of surveillance and moral policing through which patriarchy is maintained horizontally among women and vertically through male authority. "The mothers-in-law have mostly assumed liberty to terminate arguments with rhetorical complaints or satirical criticism… Mrs Pandu: Bas! Bas! That will do. We can't let our bahus rule over us like this. Ye bahut hi bad baat hai. Mrs Dasarath: You are right. After all, honesty is only…." (Sengupta 71). Women's complicity born out of survival, internalisation, or necessity complexifies the dynamics of oppression, showcasing how patriarchal power is self-policing and emotionally enforced. Violence in its overt and covert forms, along with enforced silence, humiliation, and emotional neglect, becomes normalised as an element of domestic discipline, blurring the lines between care and control, love and subjugation.

Sengupta depicts delicate moments of female unity, hidden resistance, and prohibited questioning despite the system's

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overpowering rigidity. These subversive moments are important because they show the boundaries of patriarchal dominance and the moral dilemmas that women face as they balance guilt and autonomy, resistance and compliance. The play's realistic representation exposes the emotional and social complexity that limits genuine resistance in domestic theatre, challenging oversimplified victim-oppressor dichotomies.

Thus, *Inner Laws* offers a comprehensive criticism of the ritualised performance of patriarchy in Indian families, emphasising that change necessitates the destruction of both explicit dominance and the emotional, symbolic, and habitual performances that uphold female subordination. Sengupta's work highlights the urgent need for feminist interventions that address both structural power and everyday lived experience by encouraging critical thought on the cultural scripts dominating family life.

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