

Gender Discrimination and Homosexuality in Bravely Fought the Queen

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is one playwright who is not afraid to work within a relatively conventional society and to tell a story that is bold and powerful. He does not hesitate in mirroring the issue of sexuality, both heterosexuality as well as homosexuality, and presenting it to the audience. Dattani once said: You can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian, that doesn't happen here.

Dattani boldly portrays homosexuality in his plays, and many of his plays like *On a Muggy Night* in Mumbai, *Do the Needful*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen* deal with the issues of gays. Dattani's motive in writing such plays is to force society to think about issues that it may not want to deal with because they are shaking and disturbing to the routine thinking. Mahesh Dattani's lively and provocative play, *Bravely Fought the Queen* portrays the emotional, financial and sexual intricacies of a modern day Indian family. In an ardent appeal for acceptance of shifting Indian values, this play portrays the clash between traditional and contemporary cultures that has created a new social scenario.

Keywords: Conventional, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Shaking, Provocative, Acceptance

Bravely Fought the Queen was written by Dattani in the year 1991 and it was performed at the Sophia Bhabha Hall, Mumbai on 2nd Aug. 1991. The play was subsequently performed in 1996 at the Battersea Arts Centre, London, under the aegis of Michael Walling's *Border Crossings*, UK. Michael Walling while commenting on the British production of *Bravely Fought the Queen* says.

Post-colonial Indian and multi-cultural Britain both have an urgent need for a cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of Eastern and Western influences can take place (*Collected Plays*, 46). *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a different kind of play, much more dark, starkly serious and violent. A powerful domestic tragedy, this play highlights the circumstance of a woman fighting against all the odds that the forces of patriarchy have piled up against her.

This woman is of course the 'Queen' referred to in the title of the play, a title which in itself is an intertextual derivation sourced from a translation of Hindi poem about the indomitable Rani of Jhansi. Dolly Trivedi is a woman who has to fight battle against a violent and unfaithful husband, and against a tyrannical mother-in-law who rules over her sons and daughters-in-law with the weapon of her wealth even from her paralytic bed. The technical accomplishments of Dattani in this play also deserve mention, for what we have here is an extremely suggestive utilization of the stage as a multilevel space in which time itself is correspondingly layered.

The stage-set is conceived in such a way that the mother-in-law's bedroom is placed at a level higher than the rest of the stage. *Some of the action of the play is enacted on this upper level, occasionally in*

flashback. But what is really innovative on the part of Dattani is that this space is not only used to locate and to focus on action that is conceptionally taking place at the same time, but also features enactment that runs simultaneous to the action proceeding on the main stage level. The result is a complex theatrical experience on the part of the audience, a performance in which time frames are collapsed¹, settings telescoped, actions visually played off against each other in a sort of theatrical equivalent of the split screen technique sometimes used in films and in television.

The play opens on the view of the plushy fashionable but ill maintained living room of Jiten and Dolly Trivedi. The two focal points of this set on the mainstage level are a well stocked bar situated upstage centre, and a music system on which is playing a Thumri as the play begins. The action starts with the arrival of an unexpected visitor-Lalitha- who says that she had been asked by Jiten Trivedi, the boss of her husband Sridhar, to meet Dolly that very evening. Immediately, thus, is one of the basic issues of the play broached-that of the lack of communication (and worse) between husband and wife, for not only was Dolly ignorant of Lalitha's visit, but she was actually getting ready to go out for the evening in the company of her husband, his brother Nitin, and his wife Alka who is also Dolly's younger sister. Lalitha, it gradually emerges, has come to Dolly on the instruction. of Dolly's husband to discuss details about a masked ball to be held as an event launch for Re Va Tee.

Lalitha: Did Mr. Trivedi at least tell you why we were meeting? Dolly: Engaged. (Dails again.) Hmm? To be frank with you, I had even forgotten all about it. Lalitha: We are supposed to discuss the masked ball ²

Lalitha (takes out a book or list): Sridhar came up with this fabulous idea.... (Giggles.) I guess I should be more modest about my husband's work but, anyway-Sridhar had this fabulous idea of a masked ball to launched Re Vaa Tee. We invite all the big shots and the press, and at midnight we reveal the model for our ad campaign. The best part about the ball is everyone will be in costumes! And will have masks on!

Dolly: Wonderful. What is ReVa Tee?

Lalitha: It's a new range of colour-coordinated nightwear and underwear for women. Very exclusive stuff. Now this is extremely confidential-we haven't as yet bagged the account. They are doing what is called speculative campaigning.

Dolly: And what are we supposed to be discussing tonight? Lalitha: Oh, sorry, here's the list of invitees. Mr. Trivedi said you know most of the Tablers' wives. (Hands over the list to Dolly.) You are supposed to suggest costumes for all of them.

It is a new range of colour coordinated nightware and underwear for women, the advertising account for which Lalitha's husband Sridhar is hoping to acquire for the agency jointly owned by the brothers Jiten and Nitin Trivedi. Then, as the play proceeds, we get to know a little more about Dolly-that her sister, Alka, lives next door in a house identical to her own, built by the two brothers right in the middle of nowhere, that Baa, their old widowed and paralyzed mother-in-law lives with them by turns, and that Dolly has a daughter named Daksha who is evidently in a school away from home.

In the next sequence of action, the two conversing women are joined by Dolly's sister Alka who too clearly expected to be taken out for the evening, since she has dropped in all dressed and make up for their planned outing. Alka, we notice, is an alcoholic who helps herself to liberal quantities of rum.

Alka quickly rushes to the bar and opens a bottle of rum. (off.) Where's the switch? Alka (shouting): To the left of the back door! Shut the door and you will find it! Alka takes a large gulp of the rum and replaces the bottle just as the kitchen light goes off.

*It is hinted further that the two sisters have a secret lover in Kanhaiya, the nineteen years old grandson of a friend of the vacationing cook who stays in the servants' quarters outside the house, and who comes for clandestine trysts in the kitchen.*³

A recurrent theme is Lalitha's obsession with bonsai, a sample of which (a tiny tree with miniscule fruits growing on it) she has brought as a present for Dolly. And, oh yes, I grow bonsai plants I've been growing them for years. I do a bit of creative writing as well. You know, poetry and stuff like that. Nothing great hut.

Also, there are significant references in Act I to Praful, the brother of the two sisters who Baa keeps calling for, but whom Dolly and Alka regard differently, Dolly as a loving brother whom she misses, but Alka as a patriarchal tyrant who had burnt her hair on a lit stove to punish her for having been dropped off at home from school by a neighbour's son on his scooter. She says to Dolly.

Alka: (sarcastically) For you, he is the descendant of a saint! A saint! (Laughs hard.) Like my husband. Such close friends! Friends from College. (Dolly gives her a look of warning.) I didn't tell you. That time when you came home to.... (Pours herself a drink.) Nitin and Praful were home, talking. I came home from school with the neighbour's son on his scooter of walking with you. I told him to drop me before our street came. He didn't understand and dropped me right at our doorstep. Praful saw. He didn't say a word to me. He just dragged me into the kitchen. He lit the stove 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. Nitin was right behind us. Watching! Just... Praful said, Don't you ever look at any man.

We also come to know of an incident that had taken place two years ago, when Alka, under the influence of alcohol, had asked her mother-in-law whether her two very different looking sons had the same father, and had been thrown out of the house.

Dolly: And then you say some nonsense. What was it you said to Baa? In that deliberate slur! Your sons are so different from one another. They are both pretty like you, hut otherwise... And then you wink at her and ask. 'Do they have different fathers?.'

And finally in the first Act, we are also told of the presence of an old shriveled up beggar woman in the courtyard who just refuses to be driven away.

These several strands of action and insinuation make up the first Act of *Bravely Fought the Queen*. What emerges from this Act is no clear-cut thrust of direction, but a mysterious and brooding concatenation of circumstance and implication. Entitled *The Women* this act plays off the three Trivedi women-Baa, Dolly and Alka-with and against each other in the presence of a fourth woman, Lalitha, the outsider who represents a kind of normality which the other three do not possess. And the basic picture that emerges is that of an isolated woman, Dolly, locked in a loveless marriage with a uncaring husband and a slightly demented mother-in-law who constantly intrudes into her personal space with her insistent demands for attention, her compulsive ringing of a loud electric bell to call her daughter-in-law to her room.

*The bell rings sharply. Baa (off) Dolly! Alka. There's one person who is dead sure she isn't going out. Dolly. Go see what she wants. Alka. She is calling for you. The bell rings again, a little longer Alka covers her ears. I'm coming!! (Moves towards the staircase.) God should fix her arms as well so she can't ring that wretched bell! Two things she fights us all with. That bell and her loud mouth! (Exits to Baa's room.)*⁴

Act II, titled *The Men*, is set of Jiten and Nitin Trivedi's office. The characters featured here are quite literally the counterparts of the women we have already seen in Act I, being Dolly's husband Jiten,

Alka's husband Nitin, and Lalitha's husband Sridhar. In a quite striking bit of theatrical business, Mahesh Dattani presents the action of this Act as if it were a replay of the same segment of time over which the events of Act I had unfolded, only with a different cast and a different location.

We are privileged to witness, in other words, the action that had been playing out in the brothers' office during the same period of time their wives had been waiting for them at home. Hence, while in Act I we had heard Lalitha, Alka and Dolly's side of the telephone conversations they had had with their husbands in the office, in Act II we get to hear the men's words spoken during the calls. Having been given the opportunity of seeing the wives in their domestic sphere, we are now shown the men in their milieu, the workplace. Only, there is a feature common to both the locales-the presence of Baa in her higher-level room at the back of the stage. As and when this space is illuminated, we get to hear the words of the conversation the old lady had with Lalitha and her daughter-in-law in Act. Also common to the settings of both Acts is the bar from which Jiten helps himself to drinks, and like Alka in the previous Act, gets more and more drunk as the night wears on.

Act II opens with Nitin going through the company's accounts, ruing the fact they are Always in the red. No matter how much money we earn. His elder brother Jiten, also present on stage from the beginning, comes across as belligerently indifferent about the fate of their business and as a boozier who can think only of borrowing a large sum of money from Praful, their brother-in-law, whom, incidentally, both the brothers appear to hate.⁵

It is Jiten too who prevaricates and stops Praful from meeting his sisters at their home, even if he would have liked to do so. Then, in later on-stage discussion it emerges that the Re Va Tee campaign has run into rough weather since the audio-visual advertisement conceived for it is rejected as 'tasteless and degrading' by all the women it had been tested on and even by the Board of Directors of the manufactures. Jiten however threatens Sridhar with dismissal if he does not sell the ad and later, more drunk, goes to the extent of ordering Sridhar to pick up a prostitute for him.

Then, in Sridhar's absence, he raises the issue of selling Baa's ancestral house, which we now hear from Nitin has been willed by their mother to Daksha, his daughter. Immediately, he pressurizes Nitin to throw out his wife, this time permanently, so that Baa will be pleased and sign the property away to her sons. And finally, Sridhar enters, and to him are given the last words of Act II, uttered about the prostitute he has brought for his boss: "Sridhar: (shouting) She's young and fresh! (Under his breath) And she is great. I had her on the back seat. You can have my leftovers.

Just as Act I of *Bravely Fought the Queen* had shown up the cracks and fissures of tension underneath the façade of the well regulated lives of two upper middle class women, so in Act II we are given an insight into the deeper emotions that seethe within the psyches of the men of the Trivedi family. Nitin's 'sensual' description of his brother's near-violent encounter with an auto- rickshaw driver with a 'strong black arm', his evident unease over Sridhar's having seen an auto-rickshaw parked outside the office, and his complaint to his brother about call girls, Why did you say we both pick them up? all gestures towards the fact that all is not what appears to be, at least where he is concerned.

Between the two brothers, Jiten comes across as both violent and given to unpredictable mood-swings. Nitin however appears to be more quiet and balanced, even if more submissive and weak as person. Yet, it is Baa's character which is most interesting and revealing, for in a series of flashbacks is revealed her tragic past of having been married to a dominating and violent man who had not only prevented her from singing in public, but also used to beat her up regularly and ill treat her sons.

Baa: You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see

what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! (Jerks her face as if she's been slapped.) No! No! Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? Not on the face. I beg you! Hit me but not on... aaaah! (Covers her face weakly as her scream turns silent and the light on her fades out.)

It is made clear too that Jiten has taken after his father, while Nitin is like Baa, in appearance at least. At the same time, we are given another insight into Baa's character when it is revealed through her dialogue with Alka that she has never quite let go of her sons, and rules over them still Nitin in particular, to the extent of stopping him from having children.

Act III of the play, headed Free for All! is set in Dolly's living room once again. It is raining as the action starts, and we remember that it had rained too on Baa's wedding day. In the room, the sisters talk about Kanhaiya, and Lalitha wonders if Daksha too 'hints it off' with her mother's lover. Naina Devi's thumri is re-played on the stereo all over again, and Dolly tells Lalitha all about this 'queen of thumri' who had dared to 'sing love songs sung by whores', even though she was occasionally mistaken for one herself. The story of the singer reminds Lalitha of a poem she had learnt at school-a poem about the Rani of Jhansi, some lines of which had run: we'd heard her praises sung so often,/So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi, I So bravely fought the manly queen. And immediately we are reminded of Baa who had been stopped from singing by her tyrannical husband, and of Dolly and Alka's mother who too had "tried to be a singer. When she was young.

The flow of conversation in this Act, of reminiscence and speculation, is broken however by Alka's impulsive desire to dance and to get wet in the rain outside. It is clear enough that this impulse had been triggered off in the drunken Alka's mind by her sister's teasing earlier in this Act.

Later while really dancing in the courtyard, Alka slips and falls and gets all covered in mud, just as her brother-in-law and husband come back home with Sridhar. What follows is Jiten's insistence that his brother tell his wife about their decision to throw her out, but Nitin, more sympathetic and gentle, refuses to do so right away. Alka reveals too that her brother Praful had phoned her, and that she knows that it was Jiten who had had stopped him from coming to pay his sisters a visit. Next, from a sequence of dialogue exchanged between Baa and Nitin in her room on the upper level, we hear Nitin asking his mother: Baa... will you give me the house if I send her back for good this time? They again talk on this subject:

Nitin: I will listen to you now. Baa: I don't want her in this house! Pause.

Nitin: Will you be happy if she.... Wasn't in this house? Baa: Yes.

Send her away. To the neighbour's house.

But then the ghosts of the past intrude into the present as Nitin's voice changes to a child's and he regresses into infanthood and hatred for his father who would not have his mother alone.

Back in the main action of the drama, Alka gets more and more intoxicated, even as Dolly stands by her as a support, both literally and figuratively, and as Jiten insinuates that Alka must be having a secret love affair with someone. And then as Alka exits to bed fantasizing about going to the ball dressed up like the Rani of Jhansi, Baa's area on stage is lit up again and we learn that Baa had nominated Praful to serve as the trustee to the property she has willed to Daksha. This revelation makes Nitin burst out in anger and indignation:

What have I done to deserve this? Oh God! All my life I have listened to you and obeyed you. Only once I have gone against your wishes, and you punish me for that? But he is to blame. Praful tricked me into marrying her! If you want to hate anyone, hate him. I hate him now! Do what you with the property

but don't let him run my life! He's out to get us! Alka can stay here, or go away, or drink herself to death, I don't care. It doesn't care. It doesn't make a difference to me! But get him out of my life!.

More complications follow in the action as Jiten insults Lalitha, and Sridhar fights Jiten over this. Lalitha notices an auto- rickshaw parked outside the house; and when Sridhar goes out to try and hire it to take them back to their home, she sees the auto-rickshaw driver climbing over the compound's wall. This surreptitious visitant she takes to be Kanhaiya's friend-and perhaps another of Dolly's secret lovers. Jiten, having entered at this point from the kitchen where he had gone to fetch some ice, has a confrontation with his wife, now, Dolly crises out that in all sixteen years of marriage, she had won out against her husband only once, and that was when she had become a mother. The revelations that fall out through both Dolly's anguished dialogues and through Baa's confessions at the other stage level are that Praful had concealed from the Trivedi's the fact that his and Dolly and Alka's mother has been (as Baa puts it) a keep...A mistress...a whore, and that urged on by Baa, Jiten had beaten up his wife even when she was pregnant with Daksha. And finally, the shocking truth tumbles out that Daksha is no danger at all, but a spastic child who had been born two months prematurely as the consequence of the beating Dolly had from Jiten. The play does not end here, however, for Dolly's furious taunting outburst: No! oh 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! It's in your blood to do bad.

Literary forces Jiten to run out of the house and in an act of compulsive violence to run over the old beggar woman again and again with his car. On her part, Lalitha convinced that Kanhaiya is waiting in the kitchen, enters that room only to be puzzled by the fact that no Kanhaiya actually exists. And finally, all the other characters having left the stage but for Alka who sleeps in a drunken stupor on the living room sofa, the last dialogue in the play, a kind of soliloquy or confessional monologue is delivered by Nitin in an address to his sleeping wife. And all the mystery is ultimately cleared up as we hear that Nitin is a homosexual who had fallen in love and had been seduced by Praful, and we watch him go out to the auto-rickshaw driver with the 'Powerful arms' who waits for him in the outhouse.

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