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The Prevailing Issues On Contemporary India In Mahesh Dattani's Bravely Fought The Queen

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of most important playwrights who is readily willing to work along with a comparably good society and to tell a story that is powerful. Dattani boldly deals with themes like feminism, politics in academic institutions, bribery in governmental sectors, child labour, etc. Dattani's aim in writing this enkindling play is to make the society to think about problems that it may not want to deal with because they are disturbing to the usual thinking of the general public. Mahesh Dattani's lively play, *Bravely Fought the Queen* portrays the feelings of the individuals, who are confused financially and sexually in the contemporary modern India. The play is about an extreme appeal for acceptance of shifting Indian values. Also, the play openly reveals the conflict between traditional and contemporary cultures that have created a new social plot.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Familial Issues, Solving Issues within the Family Set up, Homosexuality, etc.

1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) discusses homosexuality, a hitherto untouched subject in our Indian literary scene. The play was performed in 1996 at the Better Sea Arts Centre, London under the support of Michael Walling the co-director of this play. Walling reacts to *Bravely Fought the Queen* saying thus:

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)

He has written many plays like *Where There is a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps around the Fire* (1999) and *Thirty Days in September* (2001). One among his admirable plays is *Bravely Fought the Queen*. It deals with the problems of gays.

In India, *Bravely Fought the Queen* was first performed at the Sophia Bhava Hall, Mumbai on 2nd August 1991. The play speaks of various kinds of issues -- dark and violent. The play takes on the most powerful domestic tragedy. This play highlights the scenario of a woman, Alka the protagonist fighting against all the odds that the strength of patriarchy has piled up against her. This woman is surely referred to in the title of the play a title which in itself is an inter-textual foundation sourced from a translation of Hindi poem about the impassable Rani of Jhansi. Dolly Trivedi is a woman who has faithless husband, and fights against a cruel mother-in-law with the tool of her wealth even from her paralytic bed. The system of accomplishment of Dattani in this play is a highly suggestive usage of the stage as a multiple space in which time itself is correspondingly matched with scenic setting. The stage-setting is realized in such a way that the mother-in-law's bedroom is placed at a level higher than the lower level of the stage where Dolly is given her place. Some of the action of the play is enacted on this high level, at random in flashback. But what is honestly innovative on the part of Dattani is that this space is not only used to locate and the attention on action that is conventionally taking place elsewhere at the same time, but also the enactment that runs contemporary to the action proceeding on the main stage level. The issue is a complex theatrical experience on the part of the audience-reader, a performance in which time frames are crashed, setting telescoped, actions, and visions are played against each other in a kind of theatrical equivalence of the intention.

The action begins with the arrival of the forced visitor Lalitha, who says that she had been asked by Jiten Trivedi, the boss of her husband Sridhar, to meet Dolly that very evening. This is one of the crucial issues of the play that discusses the lack of communication between husband and wife, for not only is Dolly aware of Lalitha's visit, but she is actually getting ready to go out in the evening in the company of her husband, his brother Nitin, and his wife Alka. Lalitha constantly emerges and has come in terms on the directions of Dolly's husband to discuss details about a masked ball to be held and launched for Re Va Tee:

LALITHA: Did Mr. Trivedi at least tell you why we were meeting?

DOLLY: Engaged. (Dials again) Hmm? To be frank with you, I had even forgotten all about it.

LALITHA: We are supposed to discuss the masked ball.

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 launch ReVaTee. 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 ReVaTee?

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. (236 -- 237)

Lalitha's husband Sridhar is hoping to obtain the agency jointly owned by the brothers Jiten and Nitin Trivedi. In the act of proceeds we get to know much more about Dolly, that her sister Alka lives next door in a house 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 twists. Dolly has a daughter namely Daksha who is plainly in a school away from home.

In the next part of action, the two chatter women are joined by Dolly's sister Alka who too expects to be taken out for the evening. Hence she has dropped in all dresses and made up for their decided outing. Alka is an alcoholic who helps herself to flexible quantities of rum.

Alka quickly rushes to the bar and opens a bottles 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. (242)

It is indicated further that the two sisters have a secret lover in Kanhaiya, the nineteen years old grandson of the friend who stays in the servant's quarters outside the home, and who comes for secret trysts in the kitchen. Often the theme is Lalitha's obsession with bonsai, a type of which (a small tree with miniscule fruits developing on it). She has brought as a grant 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 but..." (243). Also, there are importance references to Praful, the brother whom she misses, but Alka as a patriarchal giant who had burnt her hair on a lit stove to penalty for having been dropped off at home from school by a neighbour's son on his two-wheeler. 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 instead 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. Ever'. (256)

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

These multiple strands of action and hints make up the first Act. What arises from this Act is no clear-cut thrust of idea, but an uncertain and brooding chain of circumstances and implications. Entitled "The Women" -- the three Trivedi women -- Baa, Dolly and Alka-- are opposed to one another and quarrel among themselves in the presence of a fourth woman, Lalitha, the stranger who represents a kind of normality which the other three do not possess. And the primary picture that arises is that of a solitary woman Dolly who is locked in a loveless marriage with a careless husband and a slightly demented mother-in-law who always intrudes into her personal space with her forced demands for attention, her conscription ringing of a loud electrical bell to her daughter-in-law to her room. As the youth concerned playwright writes:

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! (Exists to Baa's room). (249)

Act II titled "The Men" is about the characters specialty who are quite literally the counterparts of the women, Jiten and Nitin. We have already seen in Act I Dolly's husband Jiten, Alka's husband Nitin and Lalitha's husband Sridhar, in a quite strike-up part of theatrical business. Mahesh Dattani presents the action of this Act as if it were a proper response of the same portion of time over which the events of Act I had expanded only with a various cast and a various location. We are offered to witness, in other words, the action that had been playing out in the brother's office time the same period of duration their wives had been waiting for them at home. In Act I, the reader-audience perceives Lalitha, Alka and Dolly's side of the telephone talk they had with their husbands in the office. In Act-II we hear the men's words spoken. Having been given the chance of seeing the wives in their domestic round, we are now visible to the men in their milieu, the workplace. There is a common aspect to both the locales at the time of Baa in her higher-level room at the back of the stage. When this space is lit, the audience set to hear the words of the conversation the old lady had with Lalitha and her daughter-in-law. Also, common to the surrounding of both Acts is the bar from which Jiten helps himself to drinks, and similarly Alka gets much drunk as the night closes on.

ActII deals with Nitin going through the company's accounts. The facts in the accounts are ruined "Forever more in the red. Nothing how much money we earn." His elder brother Jiten comes beyond as hostilely indifferent about the fate of their business and as a person who drinks a large quantity of alcohol by borrowing a large sum of money from Praful, their brother-in-law whom both the brothers appear to hate. It is Jiten who unclears and stops Praful from meeting his sisters at their home. The ReVeTee campaign has run into rough weather since the play of audio. Visual advertisement assumes importance for it is rejected as "tasteless and degrading" by all the women it had been tested on and even more by the board of directors of the produce. Jiten, however, has horrible in condition: he decides to dismiss Sridhar if he does not sell the ad and later, and orders Sridhar to pick up a prostitute for him.

Sridhar increases selling Baa's old woman in house. Nitin has been willed by his mother to Daksha, his daughter. In right way, he insists that Nitin throws out his wife, this time perfectly so that Baa will be pleased and sign the asset away to her sons. In the climax scene, Sridhar enters and is given the last words of Act-II. Nitin says his satisfaction with the girl Sridhar 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" (291).

Even though Act I of *Bravely Fought the Queen* has had visible cracks and cracking of tension underneath the façade of the well regulated lives of two high-middle class women, the Act II gives an insight into the in-depth emotions that is seen within the psyche of the men of the Trivedi family. Nitin's 'Sensual' explanation of his brother's near-violent encounter with an auto-rickshaw driver with a 'robust black arm,' is a case in point. His evident unrest over Sridhar's having seen an auto-rickshaw parked outside the office, and his complaint to his broker about the 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 respective. Nitin appears to be much more quiet and balanced and of more modest and weak as a person. Yet, it is Baa's character who is the most enthusiastic. In a series of flashback is shown her tragic past: having been married to a dominating and violent man who had not only disallowed her from singing in public, but also used to beat her up regularly and ill-treated her sons. As the dramatist describes:

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.). (278)

It is made evident too that Jiten has taken after his father, while Nitin is like Baa, in spectacle at least.

Act III deals with the play's caption "Tree for All" is fixed in Dolly's living room. In the room, the sisters talk about Kanhaiya, and Lalitha. Daksha too "Hints it off" with her mother's lover. Dolly tells Lalitha all about this, 'Queen of Thumbri' who had courage to 'sing love songs sung by prostitute' even though she was rarely mistaken for one herself. The story of the singer again reminds Lalitha of a poem she had learnt at school, a poem about the Rani of Jhansi some line of which had run!

Lalitha. The poem was.... Let me see.
 Alka (interested). 'Jhansi Ki Rani'
 Lalitha. Yes, but how did it go? (Remembers and recites.)
 'We'd heard her praise sung so often
 So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi
 So bravely fought the manly queen.....,
 Alka. 'Khoobladimardani who to.....' (295-296)

And promptly we are reminded of Baa who had been stopped from singing by her heartless husband, and of Dolly and Alka's mother who too had "Tried to be a singer. When she was young. We never heard her sing" (297).

The action of conversation is broken however by Alka's impulsive wish to dance and to get wet in the rain outside. It is clear enough that this propulsion had been temptations off in the drunken Alka's mind by her sister's playful. Afterwards while really dancing in the yard, Alka slips and falls and gets all protect in mud, just as her brother-in-law and husband come back home with Sridhar. What proceeding is Jiten's emphasis that his brother tell his wife about their ending to throw her out, but Nitin, much more feeling and gentle depriving to do so right away. Alka shown too that her brother Praful had phoned her and that she knows that it was Jiten who had stopped him from coming to pay his sisters a attendance. Then, from an alignment of dialogue exchanged between Baa and Nitin in her room on the high-level we hear Nitin asking his mother Baa, will you give me the house if I send her back for good this during? They reminds take 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. (302)
 But then the devil of the past unwelcome into the present as Nitin's voice changes to a child's (302).

And he regresses into subsequently and hatred for his father who would not have his mother isolated.

Back into the most important action of the drama, Alka becomes intensively unconscious, even as Dolly stands by her as a support. Jiten suspects that Alka must be having a covert love affair with someone. And then as Alka drops out to bed imagination about going to the ball dressed up like is lit up again and we learn that Baa had proposed Praful to serve as the trustee to the property that is willed to Daksha. This surprises Nitin who bursts out in anger and is provoked:

What have I done to deserve this? Oh God! All my life I have listened to you and obeyed you. Only once have I gone against your wishes and you punish me for that? But he is to blame. Praful tricked me into marrying her! If you want with the property but don't let him run my life! He is out to get us! Alka can stay here, or go away, or drink herself to death, I don't care. It doesn't make a difference to me! But get him out of my life! (305)

Jiten is hostile with his wife, and now Dolly cries 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 surprising that fall out through both Dolly's suffering dialogues and through Baa's prosecution at the other stage level are the praful and hidden 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 incites on by Baa. Jiten had beaten up his wife even when she was pregnant with Daksha and finally, the shocking fact tumbles out that Daksha is in no danger at all, but is affected by muscle spasm child who had been born two months prematurely as the consequence of the beating.

Jiten runs out of the house and in an act of irresistible violence, he runs over an old beggar woman with his vehicle. Upon her part, Lalitha believes that Kanhaiya waits in the kitchen and enters the room only to be confused by the fact that no Kanhaiya actually exists there. All the other characters having left the deck, Alka sleeps in a drunken stupor on the living room sofa. Towards the end of the play, a kind of confessional monologue is delivered by Nitin in an address to his sleeping wife. And all the secret is ultimately disclosed as we hear that Nitin is a homosexual who had felled in love and had been attracted by Praful. The auto-rickshaw driver is seen with two more "Mass energy arms" who wait for him in the outhouse.

Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a finely constructed play. This portrays multiple social issues. Dolly is apparently confused over the name and location of the school where Daksha studies. The reason behind Alka's calling her brother a liar and cheat is the irony concealed behind Alka's comment. She says: "She doesn't tell anyone that her daughter is training to be a dancer!" (259). All these are multilayer ironies which become clear only in the end.

Jiten in *Bravely Fought the Queen* corresponds to his father in appearance and in nature. Jiten, with Praful represents the darkest face of patriarchy --prejudice, hatred, dominance --passions all referred by inner self due to lack of protection and complexes of guilt and fear. Praful is the worst offender in this honour. There is much more than a tendency toward sadism manifest in his action of intentionally lighting a stove. Before force Alka's face is close to the flames so that her hair would catch fire. In his making of Nitin shy of himself after every act of sex with him, and in his craft of both Alka and Nitin keeping them in the dark reveals each other's sexual relationship.

Accurately the fall out of patriarchy taints the women in this play too. They are not only refuse personal space but also victims and exploited Baa, the physically and emotionally abused women is casting counter led to reject the son who resembles her husband and to possess the one who looks and to isolate him from his father.

It is the most powerful weight of patriarchy which turns Alka into an alcoholic and which heaps failure after failure on Dolly. Only Dolly is a Rani of Jhansi in her own right a fighter having the ability of confronting and humbling the patriarchal man would run her life.

Dattani's play challenges society's constitutions of man and woman identities. The most important point of awareness is viewed in the phrase about the Rani of Jhansi: *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The impact is that a woman has to be 'manly.' But in the inset story of Naina Davi we are introduced with another, different picture of heroism. This is that of a woman inspired enough to do what she wants to do even in the face of patriarchal defiance is ultimately acknowledge being a queen through her opposition will. All the female roles in *Bravely Fought the Queen* set examples of exploitation prevalent in educated rural families and also they exemplify that women will fight back in they are not heard. As Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* perceives and comments thus:

The position that women occupy in the society is comparable in many respects to that of racial Minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute

numerically at least half of the human race. (45) Thus we see that women are not sinners nor victims.

As Mahesh Dattani says in an interview to Lakshmi Subramanyam:

I am not sure I have portrayed the women as victims in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. I see men as victims of their own rage and repression. This has serious consequences on the lives of women. (130)

Mahesh Dattani has always been very separate about the correct portrayal of his women roles and he has no biases against them. He says to Lakshmi Subramanyam:

They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I focus on is the powerlessness of these people.... And I am not going to charge my sensibilities for political correctness either. My only defense is to say that I am not biased against women. (131)

Dattani clearly shows in the liberating voice of Alka. This dance of Alka implies the sense of freedom from the secured society. She seems to be getting prepared to fight back with fantasies swinging in her heart for all that she has afflicted.

2. Conclusion

The play is clearly a reminiscent of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. In its harshly stripping of the layers of real till the ugly and painful reality about each is revealed. Still as it takes the describe of Nick and Honey to bare the truth about Martha and George, so Lalitha and Sridhar are useful in helping us penetrate into the layers of fiction that the roles have used to cover their real selves. George Bernard Shaw's proposition that English man are free to do whatever the law and public idea lets them is a pointer towards an understanding of man's need for social permission and it is pertinent in the context of Dattani's plays as any other. Michael Walling, who co-directed with Dattani himself, speaks of the role in the play "living through fictions" (67)

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