

**PATRIARCHY AND FAMILIALISM IN DATTANI'S *BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN***

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**Abstract**

Conscious of the patriarchal tenets and tangents of hegemony and power inequalities on the one hand and the state endorsed authoritarian demands of heterosexual normativity on the other, Dattani's theatre predominantly identifies the Indian family as the prime locale that sustains and perpetuates the politics of marginality – be it for the woman who is denied agency or for the gay who must remain closeted. The present article analyses Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) to elucidate the ramifications of heteropatriarchy *vis à vis* familialism that stunt Dolly and Alka and relegate Nitin's homosexuality as redundant. The “fringe-space”, as Dattani puts it, of the nation/society/family that control and constrict the lives of such characters, as the article shows, would either compel them to endure the traditional modes of existence or make them grope for alternate spaces where they can truly be (qtd. in Bhatia 7).

**Keywords:** patriarchy, familialism, agency, homosexuality

Patriarchal subjugation of woman is a gnawing concern in Mahesh Dattani's theatre for, as he admits, man will not give up his “privileged position” and as an inevitable fallout, “woman is still marginalized” in the Indian society (Chanana 127). Simultaneously, Dattani is also aware of the fact that the “discourses of hegemony and power inequalities” that beset the nation besides relegating the woman as the oppressed also aim to contain sexual alterities by sanctifying “compulsory heterosexuality” as an unassailable trope (Mukherjee, “Introduction” 20, Butler xxxi). Since Dattani's dramaturgy crystalizes around the “struggle[s]” of the fringed individuals against the repressive “societal demands or inflictions”, as he states, central to his creative index is his bid to stage such collisions/collusions which have the potential to disrupt the normative center despite being unleashed from the periphery (Banerjee 166). The present article analyzes Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) to expose the machinations of

heteropatriarchy that exclude women and repress the “non-normative sexual practice[s]” which consequently remain closeted in the prevalent mainstream culture (Butler xiv).

Patriarchy in Dattani’s is a prominent locus identifying, at its basis, a social system in which maleness and masculinity confer a privileged position of power, a trope that illustrates the systematic difference in the cultural, economic and social position of men in relation to women. The tenets and tangents of patriarchal hegemony as can be discerned in historically and culturally specific forms of male dominance form the centre against which characters ranging from Kiran (*Where There’s a Will*) to Mala (*Thirty Days in September*) collide/collude to grope for, what Dattani phrases as, their “fringe-space[s]” (qtd. in Bhatia 7).

However, even as Dattani was to write his first play *Where There’s a Will* in 1988, he was aware that the ideology of patriarchy was increasingly critiqued for its monolithic construction of men and masculinity as the exclusive progenitor of gender-bias. He was conscious that patriarchy encourages a rather constricted conceptualization of gender relations, as occurring only between men and women and in so doing, automatically under-acknowledges, for instance, the relationships between same sexes. This becomes evident from Dattani’s almost simultaneous attempts to decentre ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ in characters including Nitin (*Bravely Fought the Queen*), Alpesh (*Do the Needful*) or Kamlesh (*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*). Yet Dattani’s theatre identifies patriarchy as one of the potent forces of repression precisely because he is convinced that patriarchy, in spite of its reductionist tendencies, could well capture the intractability of a massive structure of social relations, a structure that involves not only culture and communications but also kinship, child-rearing and sexuality in a typical Indian family.

The reason why Dattani chooses the urban Indian family as his primary locale in order to explore the subterfuges of patriarchy is not difficult to comprehend for, in the light of “economic restructuring through WTO and IMF-led policies and the globalization process,” the family indeed emerges as a critical institution in terms of “production and replenishment of human capital from generation to generation” (Patel 29). Also by centering his dramatic idiom on the institution of family, Dattani wishes to explore familialism as a dominant ideology that arms the existing sociological discourse on the Indian family and its corollary institutions with a gamut of potentially exploitative machinations. The significance of the family emerges as “an inherent feature of social and human capital” when gender and power relations in various ambits of culture are re-evaluated (Dasgupta and Lal 13). This is the dominating perception of the time-tested functioning of the Indian family within the matrix of patriarchal structures whereby the family simultaneously “envelops and unfolds the ideal and normative on the one hand and actual behaviour on the other” (Patel 31). The family mirrors the nation too for it is seen as embodying “the smallest democracy in the heart of society” and with globalization and the accompanying drive towards privatization, as “severe cuts” are administered in the “welfare expenditure” of the nation, the family also manifests the reorganization of living arrangements in accordance with the changing times (Desai and Thakkar 84-5). The family becomes the chief mediator in tangibly percolating the national ideology to the Indian middle class translating it into a site symptomatic of a collective Indian identity and “Indianness” for, as Nabar aptly opines, “[t]he middle class world view may be defined as broadly ‘Indian’. Commitment and responsibility to both are an essential part of this view, and both in turn are visualized in the context of tradition” (49). And it is this ‘tradition’ which being “broadly negative to women” renders the imaginary ideal of

familialism to an actuality that is far from being democratic (49). The infinite variability of interpersonal relationships within the Indian family, which is essentially about power relations and emotional commitment, requires the wife, for instance, to “be glad to sacrifice personal aspirations for the larger ‘good’” and that marital relations become cemented between spouses primarily through the wife’s volition to the patriarchal mores (Dasgupta and Lal 13).

In fact, in 1991, when Dattani was writing *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the fallout of the “Indian government sponsored report *Towards Equality* (1974) was still generating heated interrogations of myths and icons” about the “selfless woman’s role playing” in a family (Dasgupta and Lal 18-19). This meant breaking through the image of the ideal Indian woman as “accommodating, self-sacrificing, and devoted to serving her family” (Forbes 244). Much of Dattani’s texts thus come to explore the dynamics of conjugal relationship in contemporary middle-class India and voice the need to accord it legitimate space in the contemporary urban, social and familial environment. Such texts document how the conjugal bond is “fraught with anxiety and even conflict as women seek to ‘adjust’ to their marital partners in situations that are definitionally asymmetrical ... It is as though the new and hesitant privileging of conjugality has at the same time constructed the marital bond as a site of conflict between the sexes.” (Uberoi, “Family, Household, and Social Change” 392) In plays such as *Where’s There a Will*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and the like Dattani thus explores the micro politics of conjugal relationships to show how patriarchal mores being evidently repressive intend to subjugate women into conformity.

If familialism in *Tara* (1990), for instance, is explored within the domain of a nuclear family, in *Bravely Fought the Queen* Dattani turns to a joint family – a trope which has “inevitably been the site for challenges, changes and compromises” (Dasgupta and Lal 12). But unlike *Where There’s a Will* and *Dance Like a Man* the “despotic” family in *Bravely Fought the Queen* is headed by a female – Jiten and Nitin Trivedi’s decrepit mother, Baa (Sen, “Economics and the Family” 454). And here it is she who is to unleash the authoritarian stipulations on the Trivedi family as Dattani explores an equally pertinent patriarchal tenet that prompts even a woman to betray her own sex in order to sustain patriarchal regimentation in the Indian family system.

Baa may be “bedridden” all along *Bravely Fought the Queen*, as the stage direction puts it, but Dattani’s stage-craft purposefully locates her zone “[o]n a higher level” and she is “visible through the screen wall when it is back-lit” so that her presence and, by extension, her influence on the family members can never be annulled (Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* 233). Her positionality draws impetus from that of Dr. Thakkar’s in *Tara* who too was placed “on a higher level” to “assert his God-like presence” on the lives of Chandan and Tara (Dattani, *Tara* 323). In “A Note on the Play,” Michael Walling is apt in interpreting Baa as “the living embodiment of the past” for she is a mother-in-law who in her day having suffered terribly in the hands of her husband is now benightedly taking it out on her daughters-in-law, Dolly and Alka, thereby perpetuating patriarchal domination in the family (230). To accentuate her control over the family, she has transferred her property to Dolly’s spastic daughter Daksha so that the joint family does not split come what may. Her wielding control over her sons’ credos is so complete that Jiten, on her promptings, can physically abuse pregnant Dolly impairing his child in her womb and Nitin, is forbidden to have a child without his mother’s consent, as Alka confirms: “You know why I can’t have children. You won’t let me. That’s why! ... [Nitin] needs your

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permission to have children and by God, you won't give it to him" (Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* 284).

The idealized picture of joint family that, for instance, Anderson and Sabatelli etch, citing the crucial roles and responsibilities of family members as a linked entity in "an independent group of individuals who have a shared sense of history, experience [and] some degree of emotional bonding", is contested by the play's action (qtd. in Dasgupta and Lal, "Introduction" 11). We rather witness strategies of exploitation that belie any sense of compassionate sharing:

BAA: Rub my back and I will tell you something.

ALKA: I don't want to hear your nonsense.

BAA: If you don't, I will vomit and you will have to clean it.

...

*Alka starts rubbing Baa's back.*

BAA: Rub harder.

ALKA: Why is it you pick on me the most?

BAA: Not so hard.

...

BAA: Tomorrow I will be in your house.

...

ALKA: You know and you are waiting to give me hell!

BAA: I don't forget bad deeds. It is in your blood to do bad!

...

ALKA: You can win so easily with me because you have two sons to protect you. (Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* 283)

Manipulations and self-interests vitiate relationships in *Bravely Fought the Queen* to reveal that the "family, household and community have been, and are, spheres of inequity, constraint, oppression, even violence, embodying interests and power relations differentiated by gender and age" (Palriwala 49):

NITIN: Who's the joker?

JITEN (*blows a smoke ring*). Praful.

*Pause.*

NITIN: Like I said, nobody does anything for nothing.

JITEN: He is different. He's a sentimental fool.

NITIN: No fool makes big money overnight.

JITEN: When it comes to his sisters, he can't think straight.

NITIN: No.

JITEN: I know what you are thinking. Alka will never let you forget this. Right? (*Nitin nods.*) And this is Praful's way of showing that he is better human being than us. We insult him and treat him like a piece of shit but he, when his turn comes, actually helps us out. (Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* 267)

As power and powerlessness contest within a shared space, there is however a decided refusal to address the confrontational issues, for the Trivedi household prefers to don the garb of "upper-class hypocrisy" to preserve the status quo evident in the gamut of familial stipulations that entwine Dolly and Alka and compel them to conform to the restrictions of their marital

home (Ghosh 190). They are denied agency primarily because of the fact that they are dependent on their husbands' earnings to sustain themselves. Ghosh hits the crux of the issue in stating that:

A woman cannot partake of her husband's assets, his rum, his lifestyle, the amenities his money buys for her as [Jiten and Nitin] buy for Dolly and Alka, and resist his sadistic domination at the same time. This is not to claim that all housewives are victims of male torture, but economic dependence of the wife on the husband and addiction to the soft life that a rich husband's money provides are definitely tools of oppression that women hand over to men. (190)

The bar at the centre of the Trivedi drawing room accordingly becomes a symbol of male domination and female enslavement – the alcohol is bought with the husbands' money – as Alka gives in to alcoholism and Dolly colludes by playing a surrogate mother to her sister. Since Indian women are traditionally expected to be, what Kakar phrases as, "good women" dedicated to conformity *vis-à-vis* "domesticity" and "self-effacement," Alka's taking to rum laced with Pepsi, might apparently presage a gesture of defiance of the culturally designated feminine roles (71-72). But it is hardly so for both Dolly and Alka are predominantly reconciled to their status of being "passive recipients" (Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* 222) of the lifestyle that their husbands offer as they occupy themselves prattling over, for example, a qualitative assessment of their respective conjugality:

DOLLY: You were bragging that Nitin talks to you about ...

ALKA: I wasn't bragging. Why should I brag to you?

DOLLY: You're always implying ...

ALKA: You said bragging first and now ...

DOLLY: I don't wish to go through all that now,

ALKA: Then why did you bring it up?

DOLLY: I didn't. It was only ... (*Angrily.*) All right, I will say it! You're always implying that you have a better deal than me! (*Mimics.*) Oh, didn't Jiten tell you that? Nitin told me a week ago! Or, Nitin told me all four of us were going but Jiten changed his mind!

ALKA: But that's true! There's no need to imply anything, it's a fact! At parties, you just sit in a corner sipping your lime juice and speak when spoken to. You refuse to mix, you refuse to be interesting. You are just not ... an interested party. That's why they don't take us out more often. (Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* 247)

That Dolly and Alka's primary concern is to secure a "well-being" and not a striving for "agency" (Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* 221) is understandable too for bereft of substantial avenues to genuinely expand their limited spaces, Dolly can, at the most, "pretend" to "walk out" (Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* 309) on her lecherous and wife-bashing husband, Jiten, while Alka has to stick to the "security of marriage" (314) despite Nitin not being conjugally "competent" (300). They are both aware that their lives are not self-sufficient, rather they are like the bonsai which require regular tending – "the roots" should not have "enough space to spread" (295) else the bonsai becomes a "grotesque" specimen (246).

Complicity to the constrictions of the Trivedi family, however, cannot subdue the surfacing of disquietudes that Dolly and Alka manifest. In this regard the "*thumri sung by Naina Devi*," (233) with which *Bravely Fought the Queen* opens, offers crucial significations that underpin Dolly and Alka's contestations. The 'thumri' is simultaneously a listener's delight – as Dolly hums and Alka listens intently – and a prototype of "the feminine voice in Indian music"

articulating “female desire” to which they invariably feel drawn (Rao 476). The interpellation of the non-conforming biographical details of Naina Devi further accentuates the role of ‘thumri’ in the play as it dovetails to interrogate patriarchy despite being “in consonance with its representation in patriarchal society” (476):

DOLLY: How wonderful it must be to sing like that! (*Sits down on the sofa.*)

LALITHA (*enjoying the thumri*): This is the first time I’ve heard Naina Devi.

DOLLY: Do you know Naina Devi is not her real name? She was a queen!

LALITHA: A queen! You mean – royal?

DOLLY: She married into royalty. Imagine. She could have lived her life comfortably in royal grace and become a rajmata. But she wanted to sing! She wanted to sing songs of love. Thumris sung in her days only by twaifs. The queen wanted to sing love songs sung by whores! (*Dattani, Bravely Fought the Queen 295*).

If the “creative encounters” that ‘thumri’ offers, enables Naina Devi to break free from the traditional notions of family honour and wifely duties, the absence of any such means limits the lives of Dolly and Alka considerably (Rao 475). Nevertheless, aspirations to by-pass the conventional family codes are seldom discarded by them. Interestingly, in her analysis of the thematic focus of ‘thumri’ in contradistinction to “khayal,” Rao states: “The endeavour of khayal is to guard its thresholds and gates, watch all points of danger, allow for no transgression of the purity of the raga. Thumri on the other hand – like the female body – is entirely open (492). And it is this propensity towards openness inherent in ‘thumri,’ that can be deciphered in Dolly’s endeavour to reorient her sexual life by incorporating a liaison with the temporary cook – Kanhaiya. In contrast to the commodification and the consequent denial of autonomy of the ‘female body’ in the ReVaTee lingerie advertisement, Dolly’s liaison with Kanhaiya or Alka’s dance in the rain, revealing her “bra and choli,” thus can be read as attempts on their parts at expunging the normative demands of feminine modesty through a deliberate foregrounding of their sexualities (*Dattani, Bravely Fought the Queen 274, 292*). The fact that ‘thumri’ was traditionally associated with the “tawaifs” also translates into Dolly’s settling upon the masquerade of a courtesan for the masked ball (Rao 476). And since the ‘tawaif’ entertained “not only musically but sexually as well,” Dolly’s wish to impersonate the courtesan emerges as her attempt to reclaim an effrontery which would validate her otherwise immoral relation with Kanhaiya (477). Yet, at the same time, by locating Dolly’s fantasy exclusively in the imaginary realm of her psyche and by dramatizing the rationale that renders the masked ball unlikely to occur, Dattani astutely exposes the gap between Dolly’s heartfelt desires and the lacerating denials that enchain her to the normative roles of a housewife and a mother. Just as the “desire” expressed in the ‘thumri’ “masks a deeper, more fundamental desire, a desire that seems to have no object,” Dolly’s fantasy too, in the ultimate analysis, remains unsubstantiated (492). All she is allowed is the venting of her exasperations through her demonstration of the spastic Daksha’s “dance” steps – “uncoordinated arm and neck movement with her eyes dilated” – which makes Jiten “hysterically” rush out “running the car over a beggar woman” (*Dattani, Bravely Fought the Queen 312-13*).

Simultaneous to Dolly’s subjugation to the conforming norms of patriarchal hegemony evident in her admission to Jiten – “You win. Again” – (309), Dattani’s portrayal of Alka’s duress charts an identical pattern. Alka’s internalization of the gender stereotypes is distinct, for instance, in her seizing upon the offer of attending the proposed masked ball as the “manly

queen” – the “Rani of Jhansi” (296). As Lalitha recounts the lines of her childhood poem, “We’d heard her praises sung so often/So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi/So bravely fought the manly queen” and Dolly inquires about the interpellation ‘manly’, Alka instantaneously makes it synonymous with bravery – a simplification that equates the popular glorification of the ‘Rani of Jhansi’ for her masculinity (296). Absorbed in the “manly valour” of “*swishing the imaginary sword*,” she hardly realizes that she is endorsing the gendered notion that the only way by which a female can obtain esteem is by adopting the valorized masculine virtues (296). Such an imbibing of patriarchal praxes also undercuts the ramifications of liberation that suffuse Alka’s dance in the rains. For if her dance epitomizes an expansion of her constricted familial world, her subsequent admission that she “look[s] indecent” because she has danced in the rains, jolts her back into the very confines that her dance had rarefied for her (299). Her conformity to the assigned status of a housewife in the Trivedi family becomes conclusive as she regresses into a blind dependence on her husband and thanks him for “being on [her] side” (300).

If the exploitative ambit of heteronormative marriage compels Dolly and Alka to stunt their selfhood, it simply erases Nitin’s homosexuality by rendering it invisible. Significantly, Dolly’s sexual fantasy centering on the non-existent Kanhaiya and Nitin’s homoerotic musings on the autorickshaw driver coalesce semantically as well as thematically in Dattani’s dramaturgy. The semantic resonance of the “powerful black arms” of Kanhaiya that clasp Dolly in her imagination is unmistakably vibrant in the “strong black arm” of the autorickshaw driver that eroticizes Nitin (262, 281). The confluence of the synecdochical ‘black arm’ not only blurs the boundaries between Dolly’s fantasy and Nitin’s reality but also minoritizes their identities by relegating them as transgressors – Dolly by being adulterous and Nitin by being gay. If heterosexual normativity contorts Dolly to lull her sexual libertinism in the “[e]mpty space” (313) of her imagination, the same discourse criminalizes homosexuality and terrorizes Nitin to conform to its precincts. Consequently, Nitin closets his sexual orientation as Dattani has him soliloquize while his wife sleeps:

NITIN: But now, you will have to sleep. You mustn’t wake up, while I ... while I ... I mustn’t keep him waiting ... (*He moves towards the kitchen.*) The office is not a good idea ... too many people passing by ... but here – the outhouse. Perfect. Yes. Don’t wake up. Stay drunk. You mustn’t watch ... those powerful arms. (315)

Familialism in *Bravely Fought the Queen* thus emerges as an extremely potent authoritarian discourse that ruthlessly insists on a complete subservience to the normative strictures of patriarchal diktats. By humbling the confrontational interventions of Dolly, Alka and Nitin, the status quo of the Trivedi household has been preserved. However, the play’s action also endorses the fact that despite their conformity, the dissidents reveal a unique propensity for resistance even as they succumb for Dolly has not given up on her Kanhaiya just as Nitin has not partaken to any guilt feeling for being gay. Hence to read their succumbing as including defeatism would be, to quote Dolly, “half-truth and nothing but the half-truth” (293).

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