

MALE VS FEMALE OR MALE AND FEMALE ? — A READING OF DATTANI'S BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN

—PRASANTA BHATTACHARYYA

In the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Mahesh Dattani is taking up issue with the individual fate as shaped up by the institutional agencies of coercion. The story concerns the lives of individual members, both male and female, of an upper class North Indian family living in a posh suburban area of the city of Bangalore . Dolly and Alka are two sibling sisters married to two sibling brothers, Jiten and Nitin Trivedi who have an aged and paralytic mother, Baa actively overseeing the domestic affairs from her bed-ridden position of physical passivity. In this traditional nexus of familial relations, everybody is apparently stuck to his or her role as approved by the joint family structure. But as the action unfolds, we get disturbing peeks into the seething interiors of characters who only struggle to maintain a reasonable façade while braving the different sets of unhappy conditions binding their lives.

The play runs for three acts, named respectively as *The Women*, *The Men* and *Free for All !* Other than being suggestive of a neat structure, in enacts the possibility of one set of feminine values being played off against its male counterpart in the first two acts while the third and concluding act looks like a climactic meeting ground where a face off takes place between the opposite sets — male versus female, mother against son, brother-in-law against daughter-in-law, employer and employee, and so on. But within each act, the unease in interpersonal relations and the domestic fracas bring out the essential vulnerability of every character, especially the two brothers,

who despite or because of their privileged position as males in a patriarchal society, feel all the pressure of a situation that puts a premium on the performing act of an Indian man. He is the traditional bread-winner who reaches out to the outside world in a bid to earn the subsistence for the whole family. The two brothers run an advertising agency but are hard put against the potential failure of their recent promo on women's lingerie in the brand name of ReVaTee — a queer mix of a household female name that is commercially syllabed to develop an angle to the upmarket clientele who are supposed to shop women's undergarments tagged for the wealthy, beautiful and sexy. However, the board members of the manufacturing company are least impressed by the audio-visual presentation and in the words of Sridhar, the accountant cum office-secretary, "They said we... haven't understood women" (Act II, p.51). Sridhar also gives us the details of the video footage chiefly aimed at a hard-selling of sex :

... You've got the model lying invitingly on a bed and the signa-
ture is 'Light his fire with ReVaTee.' In the storyline for the video
commercial, you have the model looking out of the window and she
sees that her husband or her lover has come home. She quickly
rushes, opens a box, removes the new ReVaTee bra, panties and
nightie. Cut to her dressed in them. She lets her hair loose, piro-
ettes and lies down on the bed, just as the door opens. Freeze. Sig-
nature 'Light his fire with ReVaTee. (Act II, p.52).

This advertisement is a pointer to the way the heterosexual male
Jiten sees the essence of women. He behaves like a head-strong,
snobbish and highly patriarchal boss who trashes the warning of
Sridhar as if it is of no serious consequence. Sridhar has already
conducted a survey among the well-to-do and educated women as
'most of them used one word to describe it - offensive' (Act II, p.53),
and we have good reason to believe that this is his own opinion also
camouflaged in the supposedly neutral opinion poll conducted among
a section of women who are well off. This employee of the Trivedi
brothers is sensitive to the deserving dignity of the other sex and his
general behaviour with his wife Lalitha bears this truth out. But very
depressingly, albeit truthfully, Dattani shows Sridhar to be an ineffec-
tual angel who can fret and complain though he can hardly alter the
rude reality. His support for the vulnerable women in general is
rendered toothless because of his dependence on the Trivedis for
economic wherewithal. He is simply threatened by the swaggering
Jiten with loss of job if he persists in his dogged opinion of the ad

32

Bravely Fought the Queen

commercial being done in bad taste. A male patriarch like Jiten Trivedi
can never tolerate any opposition, especially if it concerns the female
gender. The machismo that informs the identity of the eldest male in
a joint family structure is the exertion of brute force learnt from a
father who regularly savaged the mother. Baa therefore remains cold
and distant as a mother for Jiten who resembles her deceased hus-
band, and it is one good reason why she reared up the younger boy
Nitin on a diet of resentment and hatred for the father. But either
way, the outcome is disastrous : Jiten looks at women from the per-
spective of a privileged male who has got every natural right to
trample, violate, exploit and enjoy the female. So he entraps his wife
in a loveless marriage, keeps her confined within the four walls of
domesticity, and can kick and beat her when she is pregnant. His
male sexuality can take violent turns and he feels no qualms whatso-
ever while shamelessly forcing Sridhar to procure a prostitute for
him as a way of getting relief after a hard day's schedule. Nitin's
weak protest to his brother's wayward pleasure-hunt may make him
look like a morally sanitized foil to Jiten. But our final discovery of
his hidden identity as a homosexual - partly resulting from his mother-
fixation and paternal hatred combined with a sneaking admiration for
a powerful father and his later exploitation by the dissembling Praful,
another homosexual and brother to Dolly and Alka who arranges a
marriage between him and Alka as a social decoy on the false assur-
ance of common knowledge of the consenting spouses - leaves us in
a tizzy and in an important sense forces us to go for a rethink of our
initial assumptions. Nitin grows into a weakling and a psychologically
troubled homosexual who hides under the comfortable cover of role-
playing as a husband while maintaining secret rendezvous with the
ambiguous Kanhaiya who is initially thought to be a paramour of
either or both the sisters married to the Trivedi brothers. The shat-
tering knowledge of various secret realities that we only come to
know at the end of the play functions as a conduit along which we
reach down to the subconscious level of facts that lie embedded in
a tissue of social lies, subterfuge and skulduggery.

Sridhar is meant to play the conscience-keeper but, as noted ear-
lier, he is a weakling who is easily tucked into the patriarchal ma-
chinery and is even rendered an unconscious agent of a discursive
pattern that forces its way into the value system of an individual. For
example, he loves and perhaps admires his wife Lalitha, but his con-
tinual adoration of the bonsai trees, generated and nurtured by his

33

Bravely Fought the Queen

Bravely Fought the Queen-03

spouse, bespeaks of his incipient chauvinism that can tolerate a brand of femininity that is adequately domesticated and therefore is likely to have suffered the usual opposition that may stymie her growth upto her full individual potential. The nourisher of the bonsai herself remains like a human one from within who cannot fully come to her own because of a social imbalance that is heavily tilted in favour of the male sex. Moreover, when he is bulldozed into the demeaning business of a panderer who must get a prostitute as a way of compulsory service to his master, Sridhar comments that :

✓She's young and fresh ! (Under his breath.) And she is great. I had her on the back seat. You can have my leftovers. (Act II, p.72)

In all probability, it is a pathetic aside that shows his impotent anger. But at a literal level, the words uttered by Sridhar show the same disregard that the privileged male is likely to show in his dealings with the 'weaker' sex who is often treated like a commodity. A sex worker is indeed a commodity in the flesh trade, but the actual point lies in Sridhar's secret game of revenge where the female is a pawn in the hands of two warring, contending males. If we take Sridhar's utterance at its face value, then we are also struck by his absolute lack of compunction while engaging in illicit sex 'on the back seat' of a car before presenting the whore as 'leftovers' to his headstrong master. According to common morals, a prostitute is never 'pure', she is already 'touched' in that way. However, this whole business of presenting a whore to a threatening employer as a 'used' thing implicitly raises questions about the viability of Sridhar's image as a dotting husband. Dattani is merciless in his exposé and spares none : even the so-called minor characters are brought under the scrutinizing gaze and the social veils are torn apart in an honest, sincere attempt to dig below the surface niceties.

Baa's paralysis and Daksha's physically challenged state have a shocking and shared commonality. Baa's passivity might have been hastened by her aging, but it points to her crippled womanly self that suffered a lot in the hands of a savage husband. It was at her instigation that Jiten kicked and battered his pregnant wife who ultimately gave birth to a handicapped daughter. The psychologically unhappy wife and mother in Baa give rise to a tyrannical and monstrous authoritative figure in her who, in the commonly known role of an Indian mother-in-law, unleashes a rule of control and terror partly through her status as the matriarchal (although functioning in

a highly patriarchal manner) guardian and partly as the present legal owner of all the Trivedi property. Jiten and Nitin thus have a serious interest in keeping her in good humour because they need the house and other belongings as a way of funding their dwindling business. But implicitly, Baa feels more akin to her granddaughter because of the sameness in their physical condition, and more so because Baa had an invisible but active role to play in bringing her present disability. Baa's way of loving and conferring all the property to Daksha to the utter dismay of her two sons is a psychological way of embracing her own personality with all its concomitant debility. The male presence proves to be a brute force that causes the physical maiming and psychological crippling of the female whose bruised image comes from the past face of Baa and continues to an uncertain, tragic future of Daksha's troubled physicality. Temporally speaking, the persecuted femininity of Dolly, Alka and Lalitha stems from a disturbed tradition in the past which has its story manifest in the figure of Baa and the iconic image of Naina Devi whose thumri songs regularly played in the present dramatic setting usher in a sad tale only transcended at a level of tuneful, aesthetically satisfying public performance. Daksha's beginning as a handicapped child points to a bleak future that bears out no hope for the present group of women. The present is effectively hedged in within an ambit of past and future which are all seen in terms of a perpetuation of trouble and persecution for the women.

If Baa and Daksha remain as disturbing symbols of male power and patriarchal hegemony, they look as much a product as also a source of the male consciousness. If Jiten's father battered his wife into apparent submission, his identical son equally batters his wife and unknowingly produces a handicapped daughter. The brute male may badger and maltreat the female in his life while the female plans her sweet revenge. Baa systematically turns the younger Nitin against his father while Dolly keeps reminding Jiten about the unfortunate birth of Daksha as a cruel jibe to his sense of guilt. In the office room episode in Act II, Dattani's use of a double-tier set up that fantastically splits the whole stage into two separate blocs with different focuses albeit having a bearing upon each other reveals him as a brilliant craftsman. Baa's shadowy, larger than life figure projected onstage makes her look like almost a ghostly presence whose undeniable bearing on her sons' action is thus symbolically ensured. Her aged condition and her paralytic state rendered her as a marginal

shadow and yet her emotional and material status, indelibly imprinted in the psyche of the male progeny, makes clear her centrally important role in everything they think and do. The heterosexual and homosexual males are begotten and controlled by the one single mother and their psychologies are influenced and permeated by her troubled sensibility. Likewise, the disempowered females embrace the image of a heroically powerful and warring queen in the image of the historic ruler of Jhansi whose battlefield exploits transform her into a 'mardani' with her male bravery couched within the biological reality of a female body. The title does not fully look like a statement that points to the heroic way these women are putting themselves up against the stark realities of their existence. Rather, it is only being meaningful as a fancy-dress party where a woman can re-enact the role of the Queen of Jhansi betrays the lack of actual conviction that inheres in such an otherwise potentially challenging and rebellious action. The victory they aim at looks like a pyrrhic victory and the gender conflict never gets successfully resolved through such dreaming about power. Rather, Dattani seems to be aiming at a more complex culture and psychological tangle that points to a reality of mixed ontology where the male and female remain inextricably interwoven. It is not always happy – even far from being a story of merely happy and peaceful coexistence, *Bravely Fought the Queen* actually manages to say more about the societal inheritance as a mixed bag where the carefully demarcated areas of male and female often clash and overlap in an attempt to have the elusive control over the other. Patriarchy remains a major and dominant pattern in the text and yet the woman remains an amorphous essence whose formation does not necessarily follow an identity marked for her by the ruling male. Despite the domination she suffers, her voice, with all the accompanying senses of bewilderment and confusion, still comes out clear. Dattani does not write a thesis play, and so we can hardly expect any solution to the problems raised in the text. The dramatist rather makes a visceral search and a cruelly honest analysis of our nicely held social and familial positions. With him we can perhaps go for a sincere attempt to grapple with the unpalatable realities of life and try, in increasingly sophisticated and urbane manners, to come to terms with the seemingly unending series of sufferings that middle, even upper middle class family life throws in our ways of living it.

Note : All the textual quotations used in this article are taken from the Penguin Books India (2006) edition.