

**FAMILY AS A DYSFUNCTIONAL UNIT: READING MAHESH DATTANI'S
WHERE THERE'S A WILL (1988), *DANCE LIKE A MAN* (1989) AND
BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN (1991)**

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the award of the degree of

Master of Philosophy

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled *Family as a Dysfunctional Unit: Reading Mahesh Dattani's Where There's a Will (1988), Dance Like a Man (1989) And Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)* submitted by Ms. Anjali Chaubey, Centre for English Studies; School of Language Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, under my supervision, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is the candidate's original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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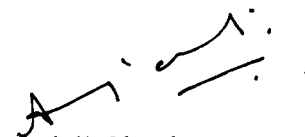
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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled *Family as a Dysfunctional Unit: Reading Mahesh Dattani's Where There's a Will (1988), Dance Like a Man (1989) And Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)* submitted to the Centre for English Studies, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.



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my guiding angels

for the blessings they continue to bestow on me

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Family: A Social unit, where the father is concerned with parking space, the children with outer space, and the mother with the closet space. (Evan Esar)¹

The Family, that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor in our innermost hearts never quite wish to. (Dodie Smith)²

The medium of theatre/performance appears the most apt way to represent the way in which various identities of an individual are constructed in family/society and the ways in which one goes on to perform/ enact those roles consistently. Just like an actor who as a part of the narrative of a play has to imbibe her/his role and perform to perfection likewise an individual is born in the existing social discourses which have to be imbibed and performed. After several performances and rehearsals the actor performs her/his part with great ease (depending upon the skills of the actor). Likewise the individual learns to play her/his character and becomes at ease with the given role (again depending upon the skills of the actor!). The theatrical discourse as also the societal narrative is designed to meet a set agenda. However the actor moves

¹ <http://www.quotegarden.com/family.html> accessed on 12th February 2010.

² <http://www.basicjokes.com/dquotes.php?cid=28> accessed on 12th February 2010.

on from one role to another, depending upon the choices and options available to her/him, but the individual who is trapped in the societal narrative is doomed, for there is hardly any scope for alternative roles/ existence. Dattani's plays bring out an exposition of what happens as a consequence of such entrapments which do not provide for an individual's choices and preferences.

He limits his scope to the unit of family for it's here, the socialization/ conditioning of the individual begins and also forms the initial ground for resistance. Family forms the basic unit of society and what gets enacted here is representative, and also reflective of larger narrative of nation. The dichotomy between public and private spaces, like other constructed discourses are hugely problematic and its premises can easily be questioned. What happens in the larger narrative of public space/ nation changes and affects the private spaces/ family in a major way. Therefore, in no way can this space be underestimated, for this is a fertile ground to analyze the resultant effect of various contestations with hegemonic discourses. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) in *Gender and Nation* rightly argues that the construction of nationhood involves specific notions of both 'manhood' and 'womanhood'. She has examined the contribution of gender relations to key dimensions of nationalist projects - the nation's reproduction, its culture, citizenship - as well to national conflicts and wars. Homi K Bhabha in "The 'Nation' as an ambivalent construction: Some definitions of 'A Nation'", discusses the 'ambivalence' that surround in creating the idea/narrative of nation. He quotes Hannah Arendt's view, "the society of the nation in the modern world is 'that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance' and the two realms flow unceasingly, and uncertainly into each other..." Clearly political and personal are coalesced together through the

cultural wagon. For the playwright, what happens at the local level, as a consequence of larger political/social discourses holds more importance and this consistently remains his area of inquiry.

These plays are an exposition of lives under the dominant hegemonic discourses and the ways these ideologies influence ordinary, everyday existence of the characters. Beginning with an apparently comfortable setting of 'home', his plays penetrate the façade of 'normalcy' and expose the power politics at work. His focus is the urban, middle/upper middle class joint family setting where at least members from three generations are putting up with each other. The dominant patriarchal ideology is at work in these families which works through coercion and repression. The ways in which family members try to live with the dominant forces, the survival strategies, putting up of appearances and pretences, all get replicated in his plays. These plays offer crucial insights into day to day acts of conscious and unconscious role playing, which becomes a way of life for the characters. All this is done to bring his point home that like all other social spaces, this is a political zone where there are contestations for power, subversion, resistance and attempts to gain authority. There is battling of ideologies and continuous efforts to bring a shift in the power equations. The other aspect of such analysis is to bring to the fore the socio-political realities of our time and the ways in which the lives of people are shaped and affected through socio-historical forces. The plays present the everyday struggle of the characters with the rigid, hegemonic discourses which operate through guised and visible coercions. In our common uncritical perceptions the unit of family holds reverential position - a unit which is free from any political motifs and supposedly thrives on love, providing a sense of belonging, of making one feel at home literally! However the attempts of

the playwright is in the direction of looking beyond the professed comforting notions, and presenting the lived realities of his characters, which by extension would give a peep into our own realities. The entrapments which are not overtly visible and exist in the most comfortable of surroundings leading to serious alienation of the characters from their surrounding becomes the focus of the dramatist. In Prasad's words, '...families are about rules and hierarchies, power and obedience, rewards and retribution'³, and these are the angles through which Dattani has critiqued this space.

Through his plays the dramatist aims an exposition of this power play at work in the seemingly apolitical unit of a family. The onus of construction of individual identities conforming to the social mores and hence, the creation of a normative order rests on this societal unit i.e. family. It is incumbent on the family (through patriarchal figures, codes) to reinforce the set images, stereotypes, gender divisions, permissible sexual behaviour on its members. The contestation which happens in this space is the focus of the dramatist and his plays bring out the conditionality inherent in formation of relationships here. The foundation of this social unit rests on the institution of marriage- which is described as 'social union' or 'legal contract' between individuals. The very conception of this institution is to create a normative world order, to channel the sexuality of individuals and allow it to be performed in a contained manner especially for women. Establishing the 'fatherhood' of the child is an intriguing area and the family lineage has to be established with certainty given the onus laid on ties of blood. Sexuality, which is so multifarious in nature becomes taboo outside the realm of marriage and a matrix of discourse surrounds its expression. The rules

³ G.J.V. Prasad, "Terrifying *Tara*: The Angst of the Family", in Mahesh Dattani: Critical perspective. Ed. Angelie Multani, New Delhi: Pencraft International. 2007:138.

governing the sexual mores for men and women are laid forth from the point of progeny, and strict regulations are in place to check any 'lawlessness', deviations, or transgressions. As only heterosexual mating would result in reproduction, this was made the norm, and any other form of sexual behaviour was considered redundant or non-existent. Thus the heterosexual, arranged marriage set up⁴ is the norm against which any other form of sexual expression is categorized. What is important here is this heterosexuality is not only aimed at biological reproduction but also at 'cultural reproduction'. The general phobia and aversion towards homosexuality is mainly stemming from the need of the conservatives to maintain and reproduce the status quo.

Clearly, in this arrangement there is enough room for men to indulge in excesses for the task of reproduction rests on women. Therefore, the rules have been quite loose for men from the very beginning. Curbing men's sexuality was not the target here to begin with, for they are to be known for their sexual prowess, their machismo was to define their 'manhood'. The rhetoric for women's sexuality eulogized all the opposite traits- subdued, prudential, and acquiescent to men's needs. Evidently, this dichotomy between man - woman sexuality is ridden with serious flaws as also the arrangement of marriage which treats women only as reproducers. Dattani's lens is focused on these problematic elements of our social system which have been deeply ingrained in the thought process from over years of conditioning. "Men and women are the biggest stereotypes in the whole world"⁵, says the playwright. Blurring the distinction between biological category of sex and

⁴ Arrange marriage set up was most suited for 'preserving' the best blood/gene in the clan.

⁵ Dattani quoted in Lakshmi Subramaniam. Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre. New Delhi: Anand Publications, 2002: 20.

sociological category of gender, his plays depict the helplessness of individuals caught in this labyrinth. He projects varied characters with different sexual orientations, personal motivations and in complex situations which are not considered to be the mainstream elements of our society. The marginalized section of the society- women, homosexuals, transgender, disabled individuals are shown to be caught in relationships of self denial, continuous fear of persecution, guilt, resulting in low self esteem. The lives of these individuals become a ceaseless struggle against the hegemonic doctrines and yet they are unable to create a space for themselves in this unyielding structure. However, as Dattani has projected, this unit of family does not serve for even the mainstream individuals, even in the most 'happiest' of families its members are in a perpetual strife to lead life as per their choice.

In the depiction of scars of communal hatred perpetuated through generations in Ramnik Gandhi's family in *Final Solutions*, or in presenting patriarchal violence (in almost all his plays), Dattani emphasizes on how the consciousness and psyches of the characters are shaped through the forces of the past. In the unit of family resides the residue of angst/prejudices that the previous generation/family/society held, but how far is it justified in deciding the present course of action is the moot point here. The characters are simply caught in dealing with these demons of the past in various forms - Javed and Bobby's precarious position vis-à-vis the communal history of the nation, tampering of Smita's personal relationship (like her grandmother's) due to this inherited past (*Final Solutions*), Dolly and Alka bearing the consequences of their father's licentious relationship, Jiten and Nitin in enacting the prejudices held by their mother, are all caught in a similar web. The agony of Chandan (*Tara*) is as much from the separation from his twin sister Tara as from the guilt of depriving her of the shared

leg which naturally belonged to her. The decision taken by their mother creates the never ceasing guilt ridden atmosphere in which the characters are stuck forever. Kiran's thoughts reflect the lived reality of all these characters: "Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?" (*Where There's a Will* Act II Scene II)

The way our society has embraced modernism is full of contradictions. In order to create a 'progressive' image we have selectively embraced new concepts, and comfortably rejected the ones which appeared to pose a threat to the dominant conservative ideology. The spirit of inquiry, the space for questioning age old beliefs, critical acceptance of existing 'values', faith in individual capabilities, the need for revisiting the traditional notions with a fresh outlook etc, which characterize modernism are missing here. Instead there is a struggle to accommodate the new ideas selectively within the existing patriarchal structure. As with any other movement/reformation, women have to bear the main fallouts or are at the receiving end of such experimentations. Modernity pushes the woman out of the four walls of domesticity and instils in her the spirit of independence. However she is expected to absorb the new worldview selectively. Again the limits of permissible and non-permissible behavior are shoved upon her and she is compelled to abide. Balancing two opposing ideologies, she has to be modern in a traditional way and the dominant patriarchal discourse would always restrict any deviation.

Along side the modernity discourse women have to suffer for the non-adjustment of the male counterparts with this newly conceived world. As in the traditional role, a woman in the modern avatar has to put up with the frustrations,

failures, and desperations of men in their lives. In the newly formed arrangement she would have to live up to the image of educated, independent woman at the same time she has to belie all the freedom that comes along with it. Ramaswamy aptly sums up this phenomenon:

The working woman in the modern nuclear family bears unbelievable burdens as she struggles to balance the desire for economic independence with the yearning for the presumed security her mother enjoyed within the home. The oppression and violence practiced in overt and covert forms in many educated middle class home stem from deep-rooted prejudices and well-entrenched patriarchal social structures that continue to operate alongside the pursuit of modern life styles.⁶

Staging the violence perpetuated in middle-upper middle class households and the way educated, 'independent' women continue to live with this is an important concern of the dramatist. In presenting the slices of modern life styles he is commenting on the apparent progress made by the society and the status of women herein. Nearly all his plays have women characters who undergo violence and abuse (mental as well as physical) in the hands of men as also by female custodians of patriarchy. Baa in *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) is regularly beaten up by her husband, her sons perpetuate similar violence on their wives on her behest; Alka and Dolly continue taking the burden of abusive relationships and lack of financial

⁶ Radha Ramaswamy, "Contemporary Indian Drama in English". Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives. Ed. Angelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007: 42.

security may be a reason for resigning oneself to such fate. How deeply entrenched is this structure that women who have undergone the pain continue to be a major exponent of the same oppressive discourses?

As with women, so are the men subject to the dictates of dominant ideology. Patriarchy is as dominant on men as on women, even their survival depends on adhering to set roles associated with being a man! The whole system is so rigid, every kind of behaviour already stratified that there is hardly any room for deviation. These plays projects individuals borne out of various degrees of absorption of these phenomena and their resultant consciousness. In *Dance Like a Man* (1989), Amritlal readily agrees to let his son Jairaj marry outside his community, for he went about as a 'liberal-minded' man, but is unable to come to terms with his son's passion for dance. He was a 'freedom' fighter and is excessively proud of what they have achieved through the struggle for independence. But within the purview of his home his son is fighting a losing battle to chase his dreams. As goes the logic, it does not behove a man to pursue a career in dance, so he is asked to give it up:

Amritlal. I have always allowed you to do what you have wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is *expected* of you. Why must you dance? (emphasis mine) (Act II)

Amritlal colludes with Jairaj's wife to make a *man* out of him. In this tussle between individuals and unchanging attitudes, society is going to produce mere bonsais of individuals. Denied the space for self expression, non recognition of individual specific needs, the characters in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are shown to be

choking under such constricting atmosphere. Dattani's interest appears in laying bare such casting molds by rendering characters who are living in non conducive environ with thwarted desires, repressed sexuality and minimal say in the affairs concerning them. His characters are grappling for space to be themselves - some of them are totally resigned to their fate, some successfully defy attempts at normalization while others after their initial resistance succumb to social norms. Ajit in his vehement opposition to his father's orders finds himself caught in the double bind of the Will left by his father. Ultimately he resigns to obeying his father's will, for the monetary comfort that the Will offered. Jairaj too leaves the house of his father along with his wife to pursue his dreams on his own, but comes back within a few days failing to cope with up the initial trials. Dattani could have shown his protagonists doing well outside the sphere of family but this may not have suited his purpose. Clearly he is staging the fact that it is impossible to evade family ties and therefore there is a serious need to rework the existing structure to create room for individual voices and preferences. He is trying to look for solutions within this space by presenting the irreparable damage that such unbending structures do to individual psyche.

Another major contestation which is operative in all these plays is that of tussle between parents over the life of their child. Again this happens at multiple levels/ motivations. Baa (*Bravely*) fills her son Nitin with hatred for his father in order to revenge herself of the violence perpetuated on her. The progeny appear to be a convenient means to retaliate, settle scores, prove the point to which one was holding on for long. "Maternal love becomes an instrument, not a natural state of being, or even an end in itself"⁷. Ratna (*Dance*) despite being a good dancer is unable to

⁷ GJV Prasad, "Terrifying *Tara*: The Angst of the Family", in *Mahesh Dattani: Critical perspective*. Ed. Angelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007: 142.

achieve the heights she had aspired for in her career. In the dance career of her daughter Lata, she sees the opportunity of materialisation of those dreams. Although she has used all her contacts to give Lata the exposure which would give her acclaim and recognition, she credits all the success solely to herself.

The much hallowed love of parents is shown to be motivated with personal interests. Dattani is questioning the apparent unconditional mutuality of these relationships and shows how every act is driven with a self-suiting purpose. Often, in battling out the personal differences, parents resort to showering excess love or attention to their child in order to establish a 'better' relationship which would feed their respective egos. Prasad in his analysis of *Tara* aptly sums up the phenomenon of ongoing, continuous struggle between the family members for power and authority over each other's lives:

If the play is about motivations of individual characters, and about the construction of gender identity, it is also about the battlefield of the family. While I have already said that this is a dysfunctional family, Dattani's question (and this is a recurring motif in his plays) is which family isn't? All family life is complicated, family values are a sham made up of compromises, and middle class morality is only a façade [...] there is always a power structure within families, and also struggles for power. The past exerts as much power on the family as the present. The parents fight turf wars over their children. This is a normal behaviour! (Prasad, "Terrifying Tara" 142)

The parameters of success or failure of an individual depends on the extent to which one assumes various societal roles expected of her/him. There already are fixed qualities and behavioral patterns for different categories. Starting from assuming the role of being a girl or a boy, and subsequently a woman or a man, the chain of conformity is ever widening. While adopting the societal roles, conforming to the set patterns of behaviour - of individual identity, sexual preferences etc. - the individual is deprived of the chance to realise her true potentials and live her desires. In an interview to an online journal, 'Gaytoday' Dattani say:

Modern Indian society is just as narrow-minded and un-accepting of differences as traditional Christian or Islamic societies. People talk about the Kamasutra and its celebration of sexuality but how celebratory of sexual expression mainstream Hindu cultures were in the past is anybody's guess. It would be simplistic to put this denial of sexual expression down to Victorian mores. I have a feeling we, as a culture, have become too boring! (Raj Ayyar, "Indian Cinema Comes of Age")

Be it the wave of modernity or post-modernity we still have to fight the tendency of the system to strait jacket the individual within its fold. Dattni's plays highlight the hypocritical existence of our society and expose the nuances of power we have made ourselves comfortable with. Angelie Multani (2009) aptly sums up the thematic engagement of the play *Dance Like a Man* in the following words:

Dance Like a Man (1989) centres around the theme of how classical art forms like dance are contaminated by the politics

of the art world, ill-defined by the narrow, constrictive beliefs of the conservatives, and reduced to facile constructions of gender-based realities by thoughtless traditionalists. While women are often recognized as the oppressed or the marginalized, this play unfolds how the prescription of a certain kind of socially acceptable behaviour for men oppresses and marginalizes them. (71)

His play on the titles of the plays clearly aims at such discussions. Can there be any scope for a 'man' to 'dance like a man'? Jairaj could never regain his self esteem and confidence for he had chosen to dance like a woman (a career in dance) while the social system wanted him to dance like a man (behave like a 'man'!)? Can a 'woman' 'fight' at all? If yes will she still be called a 'woman' or that would catapult her to the exalted position of 'man'?! Dattani is quizzing the 'gendered nature of performing arts' and tinkering with the possibility of subversion. The way we perceive 'bravery', we can only associate it with men, and hence in the folk lore the Rani of Jhansi will always be appreciated for her manly valour and not just as a brave queen. For there are divisions between male and female 'bravery' and there is no overlapping between these separate categories.

The three plays have been discussed independently in the three chapters of my dissertation. Apart from my reading of the play, I have hugely benefited from the scholarly essays and compilations by Angelie Multani. Her collected volumes on Dattani have made available some very erudite writings on the author and his works. Some of the writers who have been extensively cited and contributed to my analysis

are: G.J.V. Prasad, Michael Walling, Multani, Payal Nagpal and Subir Dhar. Some edited volumes which have been referred to are - Amar Nath Prasad edited *The Dramatic World of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Exploration* (2009). Two edited volumes by Angelie Multani - *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives* (2007) and *Final Solutions- Mahesh Dattani: Text and Criticism* (2009) and R.K. Dhawan and Tanu Pant edited *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response* (2005). These volumes were extremely helpful in providing various perspectives on the plays and laying the ground work for further analysis. Some of the interviews of Dattani published in the mentioned collected volumes provide some insightful introspections by the dramatist which have facilitated my understanding of his works. Mention must be made of the conversations with the author by Multani and Lakshmi Subramaniam who have dug out some interesting bits regarding his creative process, scope/limits of his writings, future and possibilities in Indian drama in English etc.

In a response to Angelie Multani's question, "You (obviously) write your plays so that they can be performed. Then, as an inevitable fallout of academic acceptance, those plays are taken out of the performative context and analysed, with all sorts of motivations, politics and philosophies being attributed to them and to you. What is your reaction to this kind of academic analysis?" Dattani says:

One hopes that the academic context includes the performative one. Yes, one aspect of academic analysis is the content, but the form and content need to be studied together.
 ("Conversation with Mahesh Dattani" 168-169)

The playwright's apprehension over academic analysis as mine which solely

relies on textual study and criticism is well founded and I do realize the limitation of my work. The genre of drama is obviously performance oriented and any concentrated study of the content has to be coupled with the performative analysis. However, given my thematic occupation with the playwright's representation of the family unit, and 'performance' as a way of living in the rigid structure, one of the aspects of the form has been taken care of. The dramatist is focusing on presenting the overt/covert form of acting in everyday lives of the characters, through the depiction of multiple/fractured identities and consciousness of the characters, multiple level of stage settings, and by showing the contestations between the 'real' and 'imagined' lives of the characters. The three chapters are divided into three sections namely- *Family as a Site of Contestation*, *Gender Politics* and *Performances*, where the last section brings out the above said issue of 'acting' within the fold of 'being'. Richard Schechner (1985) a major theorist of performance studies, describes the two overlapping divisions in his analysis of 'performance' as:

There are two main realms of performance theory: (1) looking at human behaviours - individual and social - as a genre of performance; (2) looking at performances - of theatre, dance, and other 'art forms' as a kind of personal or social interaction. These two realms, or spheres, can be metaphorically figured as interfacing at a double two-way mirror. From one face of the mirror persons interested in aesthetic genres peep through at 'life'. From other side, persons interested in the 'social sciences' peep through at 'art'. Everything is in quotation marks because the categories are not settled. (296)

Although the playwright does not attribute as much motif to his works, but his narratives easily cross the 'staged' reality into the realm of the 'real' where the audience/reader is made to take a look at similar trappings in her/his own life. The theatrical devices and stage settings of his plays highlight the fuzziness of the boundaries between the drama on stage and in life. Each chapter in this work aims at presenting criticisms not of the developments in the play but of what they represent. The separating boundary, the 'fourth wall' in theatre is not only fuzzy here, but is also made redundant. From among many plays scripted by the author, I have selected particularly these three for they provide the scope of indulging at length in probing the family unit because the movements of the characters in the play are centered in and around this social structure. While in plays such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Final Solutions*, *Brief Candie* etc. where the family unit remains at the backdrop, other entanglements take priority although they are springing from the rigidity of this very same unit.

CHAPTER 2

Regulating the will:

Reading *Where There's a Will*

Living in the space ordained to them by a social arrangement which is surviving on 'forced harmony', Hasmukh, Sonal, Ajit and Preeti are nourishing their own ambitions which most often clash with each other's interests. The title *Where There is a Will* (1988) is working ironically, and at multiple levels. What would emerge out of a reading/analysis of the text is that, there is more than one will, and not all the wills are followed by a way. Hasmukh's will is to make his son Ajit embody the tradition which belonged to him (Hasmukh) and which no longer seems to hold any meaning for Ajit's generation. On the other hand Ajit's will is to claim his individuality which is always threatened by his father's interference. Sonal's will is in living up to the ideals of 'womanhood' given to her and Preeti's is will to gain the monetary benefits of the set up of marriage. By the end of the play we see that there is hardly a way out for all these wills to exist simultaneously without being affected hugely by the decisions and actions taken by others.

The family/ domestic space becomes a political space, where all the members are attempting to negotiate their own spaces, at times by hindering and ambushing others' desires and at times merely realizing the futility of their efforts. What is worse is the realisation that one's dreams and convictions which have been cherished for a lifetime belonged to somebody else!

As a Site of Contestation

Ajit's (*Where*) attempts at following his own instincts in business (and in life) are deviously put on hold by his father Hasmukh through the will which made sure the patriarch had his way even after his death. The crucial point of analysis here is the pathetic attempts of a father (who in his opinion had been a perfect son himself) to make his son successful in life in his own terms. For Hasmukh, his son's success means he manages to step in his shoes, treading on the path he sets him on, living according to his designs, in other words when his son is ready to live his father's life:

Ajit: And what becomes of me? The real me. I mean if I am you, then where am I?

Hasmukh: Nowhere! That is just my point! If you are you, then you are *nowhere*. You are *nothing*. Just a big zero...

(Act I, Scene I)

This emphatic 'nothing' and 'nowhere' is from his estimation of his son's worth, but in the end we realize Ajit's achievement lies precisely in being 'nowhere' or 'nothing' vis-à-vis his father's dream for him. Kiran, Hasmukh's mistress aptly points out: 'he may not be the greatest rebel on earth, but at least he is free of his father's beliefs. 'He resists in a small way, but at least it's a start. That is enough to prove that Ajit has won and Hasmukh has lost' (Act II Scene II). The realization at the end of the play that Hasmukh never came out of his father's shadow and the revelation that he has not really lived his life is too overwhelming for him:

Is it - true? Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? Have all my achievements been my father's aspirations

for me? Have I been my father's ghost? If that is true, then where was I? What became of *me*, the real *me*?

(Realising.) Oh, my God! I sound like Aju! Nooo! *(he rushes out waving his arms.)* (Act II, Scene II)

In retrospect, most of the characters are living out the life, aspirations, prejudices that do not belong to them. It is in living the unfulfilled dreams/ desires of their parents/family, which passes on to them as part of the 'legacy', that the characters are deprived from nurturing their own ambitions. These dreams, passions are transmitted so seamlessly that the recipients can hardly believe if that is not what they have dreamt for themselves. Hasmukh could never realize that the life he thought was so successful was never really his! These characters are not only receiving the baggage of parental dreams but are also carrying the hatred, the bitterness, the aversions, grudges that belonged to the previous generation. The future generation is given the weight of the unrealized desires. What Ajit says out of exasperation with his father's will echoes the lives of all the characters - 'We are all living out a dead man's dream!' (Act II, Scene II)

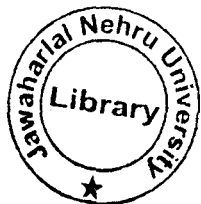
In his plays, Dattani focuses on a society in transition, and depicts the state of the characters caught in this flux: the conflict of deep rooted patriarchal structures with the unavoidable ascent of modernity (with its stress on individualism), on the movement from middle to upper middle class status through its pushes and pulls. Hasmukh's journey is from a middle class family where he is taken out from school to help his father run the business to an affluent upper middle class status where his son

can afford to 'loaf around' (Act I, Scene I). But Ajit's reality begins where his father's efforts have borne fruit and he has abundant resources at his disposal. If the economic conditions can define the socio-psychological being of individuals, the two different worlds of father and son have to somehow co-exist in the same family unit. This is a major focal point of interrogation for the dramatist, the phase of economic 'growth' which positions the two generations in two different social matrixes. The curious mix of translated exteriors (in terms of lavish lifestyle) with the unchanging mental set up of the older generation and the newer generation trying to wriggle free of such associations which come in the way of their independent existence brings them into a combative zone. Besides the clash of interests there is a clash of different worldviews and the nature of this social arrangement is non conducive for any negotiations.

The pressure on Hasmukh and Sonal to conform to the demands of the upper middle class status is evidently taxing on them. Clearly, they constantly have to deal with the sense of not belonging to this newly acquired social status. The playwright describes them as 'obviously wealthy and altogether without taste' showing their discomfiture with the demands of their class¹. Time and again they are found referring to the difficulty of passing through this transition phase:

Hasmukh: (*to the audience*). Its so easy for her to forget that we were middle class family once. She keeps cooking food like it's a new invention. Rich food, using so much ghee and oil. Of course she can afford it. She has me, doesn't she? (Act I, Scene I).

¹ This also points our attention at Dattani's own social positioning.



Sonal:...But you know the story about the crow painting himself white to become a swan? Well, that's him. He can put on all the airs he wants to but he doesn't fool me. I know who we are. We are just middle class people with a lot of money. That's all. (Act I, Scene I).

At one level, the tragedy of Hasmukh Mehta lies in this overriding jealousy of seeing his family reaping the fruits of his hardships - envious of his son for getting it so easy, for his wife's smugness with his wealth and seeing his daughter-in-law enjoy his property. At another level, his dereliction is due to his failure to accept this shift towards individuality. Dattani's contention is that there is hardly any shift in our attitude to accommodate modernity, we are still very resistant to accept any tinkering with our held 'ideals' of behaviors. Hasmukh can hardly do away with his middle class upbringing and he wants a blind emulation of his way of life from his son, whose defiant ways come in the way of such parental authority.

In Hasmukh, Dattani does not attempt to create merely an authoritarian patriarch, disliked by his family and laughed at over his ridiculous ways after his death. He goes beyond showing his downfall or failure and seeks to explore the factors which create such an entity. Dattani mentions in his note to the play, 'If Hasmukh Mehta is treated as a buffoon - as was done in a recent production, his downfall makes no sense. Its not even funny. Its disastrous'². He wants the

² Mahesh Dattani, Final Solutions and Other Plays. New Delhi: Rupa and Company, 1994: 17.

director/actor and the reader/ audience of the play to treat Hasmukh Mehta with 'depth and dignity'. And Hasmukh does manage to attempt to gain our sympathy when we realise with him that he was a mere victim of social expectation placed on him. He wanted to be more and more authoritarian and exercise strict control over his family, for he was merely living to be the patriarchal head of the family as was his father. He is sure that no son can be successful in life without going by his father's advice and opinions. His son's individualistic ways are in rebellion with the notions long cherished by him and with which he is not ready to part. This creates a perpetual contestation between the father and son and they had reached a point where they could hardly stand each others' sight. A father is 'supposed' to wield control over his son, like Hasmukh's father. All his efforts are directed towards making Ajit a similar obedient figure, in vain. The legal Will was the final blow by Hasmukh to score over his family members. He knew that he would be despised for this cruelty but at least he would gain the satisfaction of providing retribution to his family, or so he thought.

The vengeance and hatred of the characters for Hasmukh Mehta turn into pity for him when they really understood what his attempts were about. He wanted them to learn a lesson for not behaving as per his wishes, however as it turns out it's a lesson for him, one of self revelation. The achievements, success he was so proud of, do not hold any meaning to him when he realises that they never were really his. It was his father's orders that he was carrying out, and without ever thinking about it. He was taught to rule as the head of his family and this is what he targeted when he took control of the Mehta business and the household. Through the will he attempted to tighten this control even in his absence, a lesson for his family members for taking

him for granted. But as a ghost he realises that he never was successful when he was alive and it looks even worse post his death. His family members compare him with the most insensitive, unsuccessful and incompetent figures they have ever known. Sonal refers to him as “a village buffalo insensitive to other peoples’ needs” (Act II, Scene II). Kiran compares him to her ‘drunkard, irresponsible’ father who used to assault his wife on a daily basis. What withers him is not the annoyance of such comparisons but the realization of the bitter fact that he was so heavily under the domination of his own father which had completely smothered his individual existence.

School of dependence

What emerges from discussion between Hasmukh’s wife Sonal and Kiran his mistress is that we grow up in the school of dependence - not a healthy mutually benefiting dependence but living one’s life by way of taking instructions. For Hasmukh, earlier it was his father who ‘guided’ him in his life, later he appointed Kiran to that position:

Kiran: He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But *I* was. He *wanted* me to run his life. Like his father had. [Pause.] Hasmukh didn’t really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him! (Kiran *laughs*. Hasmukh *cringes at her laughter*.) Men never really grow up! (Act II, Scene II)

It’s not simply about men or women, it’s about the conditioning that makes an individual easily relinquish one’s right to independent thinking. By virtue of years of

such conditioning, it grows on one's psyche/consciousness to seek shelter in somebody else's opinion. Out of habit one desperately looks for these instructions in guise of lesser harmful terms like advice or consultation. Obedience to the 'father' figure is the operative term in this set up. Un/Consciously we assign somebody to this status and the resultant effect is one of total dependence. For Sonal her sister Minal was the 'guiding' figure and all her life was spent as per Minal's advice:

Sonal: Yes its true of me too. I have always lived in my sister's shadow. It was always Minal who decided what we should wear, what games we should play. She even decides which maharaj is suitable for our family. Even at my husband's funeral, she sat beside me and told me when to cry... (Act II, Scene II)

Hasmukh is inheritor of a tradition which placed premium on obedience and commanding respect. Blind adherence to parental dictates was the norm and he had received grooming in this school. When his elder brother who was non conformist to this tradition ran away from home, the focus shifted to Hasmukh's conditioning. He was to carry forward this tradition. He had to save the name of his father who would otherwise have been under heavy criticism by society. His father further tightened control over him and he was taken out of school. From there on his schooling was the training that his father gave him:

He doesn't behave like my son. A son should make me happy. Like I made my father - happy. I listened to him. I did what he told me to do. I worked for him. I worked hard for him. I made

him- happy. That is what I wanted my son to make me. (Act I, Scene I)

He gains our sympathy from this self realisation that he had spent the whole of his life in making his father happy by idolizing him and carrying out his orders. For him exercising command and control mean power, authority, the schooling he has received from years of parental conditioning. But in Ajit he did not see the figure of 'son' who is ready to give way to a father's domination. With the Will he aimed to achieve all these and more. It also aimed at carrying forward his prejudices/dislike for his wife.

The most surprising and painful development for Hasmukh is to see his wife and mistress bond together. A contestation which was most expected did not happen! Their shared understanding of Hasmukh's personality unravels the false image that he seemed to have built for himself and his family.

Gender Politics

In the Mehta family, the relationship between Hasmukh and Sonal is typical of an arranged marriage set up where both are together simply to avoid the hassle of not conforming. He is extremely dissatisfied with his marital relationship with Sonal, but having a wife at home makes it easier to keep a mistress outside, and for Sonal, it's the social prestige associated with having 'home' and family. The incompatibility between the two is apparent:

Hansmukh:...(Looks at Sonal.) Sonal. My wife. My son's

mother. Do you know what Sonal means? No?

'Gold' [...] I soon found out what good for nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life. Mud. Twenty five years of marriage and I don't think she has ever enjoyed sex. Twenty five years of marriage and I haven't enjoyed sex with her. So what does a man do? You tell me. I started eating out.

(Act I, Scene I)

He comfortably chooses Kiran, his secretary in office as a safe option for his sexual ventures as the main 'course is without the salt'! (Act I, Scene I) But "it isn't nice for a woman to stay single after thirty" (Act I, Scene I) and therefore he gets Kiran married to another man so that his visits to her place wouldn't be looked at with suspicion. What matters to him is his reputation in the society and his loyalty towards his wife is never a question, which is typical of a patriarchal mindset. He is extremely prejudiced against women and especially paranoid about 'clever' women. While praising Kiran's talents in managing her affairs he says, 'Any woman who is a mistress and wife has to be clever' (Act II Scene II). But Has Mukh too is a husband, has a wife and kept a mistress, he too is equally clever! But 'cleverness' in men is desired and in women it becomes undesirable. This word is used too often by Has Mukh to describe his daughter-in-law or any woman who knows how to find her way even in the worst of circumstances.

The will is a product of the misogyny he has been living with throughout his life: "One Thing I can't stand is a happy widow. There should be a law against them"

(Act II, Scene I). Through the Will he brings his mistress within the purview of his 'home' by giving her more respect, trust and responsibilities which would have fallen in his wife's share³. Sonali confesses to Kiran: "I know why! This is his way of getting even with me! Your presence will keep reminding me of how...inadequate I was". He wanted to show her incompetence in front of his mistress. This is reflective of the hatred and dislike for his wife, which he had been living with the whole of his life⁴. It's only ironical that this step made him realise the wastefulness of the life that he had just completed living.

Due to the lack of any meaning and happiness which is professed to come out of the wedded lives, all the hopes and ambitions in various forms are focused toward one's children. Children are supposed to give meaning to the lives of parents, meaning which was erstwhile missing. Be it Hasmukh's constantly goading his son to work in the manner he wants him to (which merely ends up in verbal face offs), or Sonal's efforts in proving herself to be the ideal mother, food being the obvious (and only ?) medium to assert herself, all are reflective of this tendency.

The degree of success of a father or mother is measured through the level of obedience they manage to extract from their children. One's child is considered to be the extension of oneself, is one's claim to posterity. The offspring is the carrier of not just the genes of the biological parents but a continuous embodiment of parental

³ Although she is made the trustee of the Will and has been asked to live 'as a part of the Mehta family', he has not left her any property. Marriage as an institution is upheld, for it's the rightful heirs who are bequeathed the property. Also the class domination surfaces once again when she has to leave her husband to stay with Hasmukh's family (not forgetting the fact that she had married only for Hasmukh's convenience).

⁴ It must have been a wife chosen by his father for him. He had to make the relationship work or atleast

aspirations and pressures. Hasmukh's father was hugely successful by the above mentioned parameters of parentage, for he managed to create a submissive, non-thinking entity out of Hasmukh:

Kiran: He was living his life in his father's shadow [...] He had no life of his own...where were his own dreams? His own thoughts? Whatever he did was planned for him by his father.

(Act II, Scene II)

However, Hasmukh's failure in the role of father makes Ajit an independent, free thinking individual! Hasmukh's gets the food for his patriarchal ego only from his wife and his mistress. When he fails with Ajit, he can easily reprimand Sonal (his wife) for the son's defiant behaviour. He blames her for not having given Ajit the proper upbringing, which would condition him to be a subordinate to his father. The conditions of the Will were targeted at making his wife's life a hell as also of his son's and daughter-in-law's. Kiran is deployed as a vicious instrument by Hasmukh to show his wife how inefficient and inappropriate she was to him as a wife and as a woman: "Everyday is a new lesson for her in husband understanding" (Act II, Scene II). Kiran's attractive personality is defined in contrast to Sonal's demure countenance. 'Kiran is a very attractive, well preserved woman between thirty and forty years of age'. The very thought of bringing them together was a malicious step taken by Hasmukh, and never did he expect this shot to rebound!

Speaking of gender politics, the equations between the women in the

keep up the illusion of a successful marriage.

household, Sonal and her daughter-in-law Preeti, is working on two operands - class position and their relation vis-à-vis male figures. Sharing a relationship which by default is expected to be a volatile affair, the class difference between the two further affects this equation for the women. The fact that Preeti has married 'above her standards' puts her in a subordinate position vis-à-vis other inhabitants of the house⁵. Ajit had chosen her over the girls suggested by Minal, Sonal's sister, consultant! Each time Preeti makes a slip, she gets reminded of her social class and Ajit gets reproached for this decision of his. But when the clauses of the will surface and they get to know about Hasmukh's mistress, Preeti is positioned on a better ground: 'At least my father didn't keep a mistress!' (Act I, Scene II). But Sonal is not ready to underplay the class difference because of her husband's sexual profligacy, she can proudly retort to Preeti, 'That's because he couldn't afford one!' (Act I, Scene II). In front of her daughter-in-law she would defend even the most hateful things about her husband!

The dynamics of relationship between Sonal and Kiran contradicts all the expectations of the male figure common in their lives. It is interesting that the character of Sonal gets properly fleshed out only when she gets a chance to take a command of her life. In my opinion when she declares that Kiran would share her own bedroom that belonged to her and Hasmukh is important not only from the point of the course of play but also provides a crucial insight into Sonal's personality. Before this point, one did not see anything extraordinary about her character - married to a businessman with inflated self worth, all her life she was trying to live up to the

⁵ Self admittedly she had married Ajit because he was well placed. She was extremely passionate towards getting an upward social mobility with the accompanying luxuries.

social roles expected of her, aiming to be praised for her womanhood:

Preeti: But there's no room. The guest room is filled with junk.

The outhouse is very comfortable and-

Sonal: She will stay here.

Preeti: But where will-

Sonal: She can share my room (*looking at Kiran*) Mrs Jhaveri and I have a lot to discuss...Come. Help Mrs Jhaveri settle into our lives. (Act I, Scene II)

There is a great transformation in her character post this unexpected development in the plot. She had more than enough reasons to hate Kiran at her mere sight. For a person whose actions were defined by what 'so and so' would say this was a clear reversal of personality trait. She develops a liking and respect for Kiran which is unmatched with any other relations in the house.

Kiran's father subjected her mother to extreme physical violence, and despite having financial independence she has to undergo similar experiences, and her brothers too are part of similar oppressive arrangements:

Kiran: Isn't it strange how repetitive life is? My brothers. They have turned out to be like their father, going home with bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers. Beating up their wives. And I, I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard and I listened to his swearing. And I too have suffered silently. Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain

forever? (Act II scene II)

The point here is the transmittance of image of woman as receptor through generations and the manner in which the modern educated women continue to imbibe it in their psyche. But monetary dependence may not be the sole cause for even women like Kiran who, even while holding the position of Company Secretary, prefers to bear the brunt of dehumanizing relationships. Are these women holding on to some illusion of relationships, or is the reason for their submission the fear of social ostracism?

Women are shown to be more strong and capable of dealing with trauma. It is Sonal who should have been most affected by the arrival of Hasmukh's mistress in her house. But it's Ajit who is most shocked and unable to make sense of the situation. For the whole of Scene I in Act II when Kiran makes an entry with her luggage to stay with them, he is dazed and unable to react to happenings around him. He breaks his spell only to curse his father for putting them in a situation like this: "I hope he is rotting in hell." (Act II, Scene II)

Performance

I am aiming to analyze performance as a way of life looking into the constructed nature of our everyday reality. Discussing the medium which finds its origin in the act of imitation of life, it is interesting to look at how we have incorporated drama in our everyday existence (at times without realizing!).

Day to day act of living is an enactment of ideologies, rituals existing in our times. With or without knowing one goes on performing these. Existence of any idea depends on its performance, which gives the illusion of form to it. From class, caste, to gender every ideology is existent on its repeated performance. Our identities depend on continuous performance of ideas and behaviour, norms we want to be associated with. We continuously (re-)fashion our image depending on the way we want others to perceive us.

Here I am interested in looking at performance as a strategy of survival in a world where things and situations are most often not as we want them to be. Coming to the family of the Mehtas, the performance ranges from class behaviour, to gender roles, playing up appearances; everybody is involved with some form of role playing. Money is the main motivation for the characters and the conditions of the Will compels them to behave in the way dictated by Hasmukh. If at all they are to acquire their due share, they need to take recourse to role-playing the whole of their lives. But when were they not relying on role-playing is the question. As Preeti says, “The will has (only) left us all naked” (Act II, Scene I). Taking a closer look at their behavioral pattern before the knowledge of the Will reveals that they all were involved in keeping up appearances for their well being. Let us analyze each character individually.

Preeti: She plays all the roles expected of her in a ‘non-committal’ (Act I, Scene I) fashion. She knows that if she fails with her roles she would lose her claims to the Mehta property. She hates her in-laws but never lets her thoughts to surface as she

knows that she would not have to act like this for long:

Preeti: ...He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother. But I didn't let him do that to me. How did I manage? Simple. I gave in, I simply listened to him and didn't 'protest' like you! I knew he didn't have long to live. I thought why not humour him for a few days. (Act II, Scene II)

Ajit: He is appointed as the joint managing director of Mehta business and yet he does not have any decision making power. He wants to modernise the factory, change the business product, but he never gets to do anything. This is because of his father who would not sanction any of his plans. This frustration completely sours their personal equations and Ajit makes it a point to disagree with his father even when he really wants to agree! His retaliation is a response to the parental domination and he continues to act in rebellion to his demands:

Ajit: ...Yes, I lied! Because I would rather lie than agree with you! (Act I, Scene II)

Sonal: She has to excel in the domestic space. Most of the time she is either found 'sulking' in the kitchen or cribbing over the absent Maharaj! She always insists on loading the table with food which cannot possibly be eaten up by the small family. She is hysterical, gets constant migraine attacks and hypertension⁶. She is overtly

⁶ Hysteria is always associated with women, rarely does one come across male characters who are shown to be struggling with its symptoms. The politics of terming a woman as hysterical and hence curing her mainly through violence is again a patriarchal means of 'controlling' women's expression. Foucault in *History of Sexuality* (1990) theorizes hysteria to be a discourse for regulating female

conscious of her roles as a wife and mother lest someone should start pointing at her incompetence:

How many times have I told you not to smoke? (Snatches the cigarette from Hasmukh.) Who do you think the doctors would blame if you get another heart attack? Me. Who else? (Stubs out the cigarette in an ash tray.) And my sister Minal? Do you know what she told me when you got your first attack? You are not firm with him, she said [...] My own sister blaming me for your condition! (Act I, Scene I)

A woman has to prove her worthiness by keeping her house in order. Her frequent migraine attacks may not be solely attributed to the weight on her to perform but she has been seen collapsing under its effect many a times. Her excessive indulgence in cooking and kitchen matters⁷ is a continuous performance of her gender through which she has to derive her sense of being. She is 'triumphant' (Act I, Scene I) to make Ajit say yes for her parathas when Hasmukh is arguing against it. These are her small victories over Hasmukh, through her son.

Hasmukh: he has to extract the 'honour' and respect for himself by his family through whichever means. He is deliberately cruel in his ways to score over them for disregarding his authority. His gibes, ruthless remarks are his response to their non

sexuality. Texts like *Taming of the Shrew*, *Vinegar Tom* etc thematically deal with women characters who are confined in the domestic space under patriarchal violence, with no emotional support. It is only ironical that the causes of such psychic state take it upon themselves to curb this divergent at times liberating female expression.

⁷ Most of her panic attacks can be attributed to the absence of Maharaj, the cook. The figure of domestic help is a recurring character in Dattani's plays. Possibility of sexual liaison between Sonal and the cook cannot be totally ruled out.

consideration of his paternal hegemony. He abuses Ajit over phone when he is talking to his friend on the same line, insults him in front of Preeti, divests him of any monetary power in his company, in his attempt to exert parental control. Although his efforts were unfruitful, but this was his performance, of playing an authoritarian figure which gave him the satisfaction of ruling over his family.

Stages of Performance

The public/external spaces are occupied by men. The struggle between father and son is over the way they want to continue their business, the outer space which constantly impinges on their inner domain ie personal equations. The private/internal space is inhabited by Sonal and Preeti, they constantly have to perform in this space to prove their worthiness. The confluence of the external world of business and private world of family mostly happens over the dining table where the seeming dichotomy between the two spaces is dismantled. What gets visible is that the outer space is always trying to wield control over the inner domains of home and the occupants of the private domain are equally pre-occupied with the developments in the external space.

The characters realise the intangibility of their dreams. Their happiness does not lie in realisation of those dreams, for it never really belonged to them. The aim of the playwright is to delineate the ways in which our ambitions and goals are constructed, determined by the external factors often prohibiting them to think of it in their own terms. What John McRae says for *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is actually the underlining thesis of all his plays: "...It is a play about how society creates patterns of behavior and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society

creates.” (Multani, 2007). The characters in his plays suffer mainly because of society which emphasizes on hypocrisy rather than free self expression, prefers role-playing to ‘deviant’ behavior. Hasmukh needs to be emulated by his son, Sonal needs to be lauded for her womanhood, and Preeti needs to be rich through any means. Such needs of the characters are determined by their social environ and the characters are trapped in this apparently harmless pursuits only to ruin the possibility of existence of their own special needs and desires.

The play also shows how delicate and vulnerable are our constructed realities. Hasmukh’s lived reality collapsed after his death right in front of his eyes. Likewise, the dreams cherished by Sonal, Preeti and Ajit collapsed at one stroke of the will. And yet the characters are happy with the way things are shaping even in the non fulfillment of their cherished dreams. Subir Dhar aptly sums up the narrative of the play:

The liberation of all these characters from the stranglehold of their past is of course also the defeat of Hasmukh Mehta. This domineering husband, heavy father and tyrannical boss is gradually dwarfed and diminished to the point of insignificance....The truth underlying the comedy is serious enough: the man who would rule over his family even after his death is exposed at the end to be what he really was - a comitragic weakling who was rude to everyone because he was insecure himself, an unfaithful husband who didn’t really want a mistress [but] ’a woman who could father him⁸.

Family becomes a site of contestation among members who are closely knit with the

ties of blood while the emotional support, understanding comes from the most unexpected corners - those who are not related to each other by this bond. The kind of 'family' which is formed in the Mehta household after Hasmukh's death is worth emulating. It is established on the basis of shared understanding of each other's needs, and most importantly it is built around the awareness of each other's distinctive personality and its acceptance by other members. Kiran prefers to overlook Preeti's gruesome act of replacing her father-in-law's high blood pressure tablets with the vitamin tablets. Here there is a deeper understanding of frailties, weakness and its acceptance by others. When Hasmukh sees this bonding and admiration among his family members in his absence, there is a burning regret in him for having missed out on that. All his life he was concerned about extracting authority and respect for himself from his family, what he did not care about was this kind of love and understanding: 'Oh I wish I had been more...I wish I had lived.' (Act II, Scene II)

⁸ Subir Dhar, "*Where There is a Will and Bravely Fought the Queen: The Drama of Mahesh Dattani*" in *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani* Eds Dhawan, R.K and Tanu Pant, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2005.

CHAPTER 3

Invisible Fences: In *Dance Like a Man*

...one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable. In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. (Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" 1988)

This chapter will take up the issues of gendered nature of our domestic as well as work spaces, the associated politics of controlling/penalising the transgressing voices and the haplessness of individuals who are trying to negotiate their spaces for self-fulfilment in vain. The politics at the domestic level, of silencing dissenting voices, and the distortions caused on individual psyche due to conservative forces working towards restoring 'normalcy' are some of the main issues I wish to engage with. I will also be reading the play as a case of modern day marriages, which reflects the shifting nature of alliance formation. Notwithstanding the fact that the play was written and performed in 1989, it has raised some important issues pertaining to

women and modern day marriages, which still hold relevance. For example women's career/independence vis-à-vis the institution of marriage, the 'problem' of ambition in women and the nature of guilt thrown on them for being selfish etc. are some important issues that have been touched upon in the play. People from three generations - Amritlal, Jairaj and Ratna, and Lata and Viswas, are trapped in a similar demarcation of social spaces and gender roles. While some of them have comfortably donned their social roles (Amritlal and Viswas), others find it impossible to seek fulfillment in this rigid set up. The title *Dance Like a Man* indicates the obligation to perform like a *man* or a *woman*, to fit in the well defined narratives and adapt to the social codes. The characters on the other hand are claiming their individuality which would only be possible through defiance of such rigid conventions. As Butler says in the paragraph cited above, 'performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect'. This play is an explication of the predicament of the characters who were pulled back from their quest of passion by the social system which keeps in check any such transgressions.

As a Site of Contestation

From the very beginning of the play, the reader/audience is informed about the unconventionality or the 'different' nature of the family. This is a family where the 'freedom fighter' father is unable to reconcile with a dancer for a son, where the mother is unconcerned about who her daughter is getting married to as long as he lets her dance, where the sole concern of the dancer couple is focused in making their daughter a name in the dancing industry and where in the end they fail to make a sense of all the struggle. The concerns and choices of the characters may be unique or different, but the struggle is similar to that in any family, of gaining the space and

freedom for expression. And as has been discussed in the previous chapter, the 'close-knit-unit' of family, with the hierarchised power structure smothers individuals within its fold without leaving any room for self-fulfillment.

The nature of contestation between Amritlal and his son Jairaj is one which does not merit much dwelling for the obviousness of their conflict. Jairaj's passion for dance is simply incomprehensible to the chauvinistic notions of his father. Amritlal was hoping that this childhood fancy of his son would subside in his growing years. It was when Jairaj started making a vocation of this passion, his father decided to thrust him into 'adulthood' through whichever means. Jairaj's interest in 'womanly' field as dance, meant Amritlal's failure in fathering his son into a 'man', quite a failure for a person who took excessive pride in being a man himself.

Amritlal agreed to the marriage of Jairaj and Ratna for it suited his hypocrisy of being a 'nationalist' leader. With this alliance he would be embracing a bahu from a different community and hence would establish himself as an exemplary integrationist leader. For the couple, the motivation/reason behind this union was their common passion for dance. On the face of it this arrangement suited all, and it should have eventually lead to the ever elusive 'harmonious' existence. However, both Ratna and Jairaj have chosen to inhabit an 'unconventional' space of Bharatnatyam, a dance form which, in the dramatist's words, has undergone a 'history of oppression and renaissance'. Despite all the renaissance activity, it is still received well only in the 'feminine' domain. The affluent classes of the society send their daughters to learn this art form more as a cultural exercise that would enhance their marriage prospects and not for any associated value to the art! So, while in its days of damnation, it was

considered 'craft of a prostitute to show off her wares' (Act II), in the days of glory it still serves a similar purpose only with the added elitism. As a woman practitioner of this art form, Ratna's goal appeared to be more in sight when she married Jairaj, who was a dancer himself and would 'let her dance'. Thus making a vocation out of her passion became easier for her by virtue of the tradition of this art form and her sexuality. But for Jairaj, practicing this art form meant defying the very same narratives which worked in favour of his wife.

When Ratna is siding with Amritlal (in helping him to disillusion Jairaj about dancing), she is just moving towards the right side of the table, from no authority (Jairaj) to the one who wields the power. For both, Jairaj and Ratna, their passion for dance holds more meaning to them than anything else. Ratna's passion took over her loyalty towards her husband, who was her partner in the performances and also her trump card to her freedom, at least initially. But as she realized post marriage, the nature of distribution of power within the family meant that her smooth stint with her career rested more with her father-in-law than her husband. Does she carry the blame of ruining her husband's career when she agreed to Amritlal's proposal? It was at the time when within 48 hours of leaving his parental home, Jairaj and Ratna came back, accepting their defeat in surviving without Amritlal's help. This strengthened Amritlal's power position as the head of the family and now he did not have to worry about his son and daughter-in-law's defiance to his commands. He could have easily got them to agree to whichever clause he wanted:

Jairaj: Don't pretend, I am not blind. Why did he allow us to dance? He knew he had us in his hands when we came back to him. We would have listened to anything he said.

Ratna: You would have listened. Not me. Yes! He realized he couldn't stop me. But he could stop you - through me. (Act II)

Jairaj blames Ratna for sabotaging his career while securing hers. What brought them together became the reason for their drifting apart. She was selfish when she let him be shaped in the hands of Amritlal, despite knowing that his happiness did not fit in with his father's idea. Here it would be interesting to gauge Ratna's take on her husband's choice of profession. Was she totally comfortable with his career choice, or she too wanted him to dance like a *man* as his father did? The gendered structure she is operative in places so much premium on the essential characteristics of each category, and dancing was clearly women's space in his uncritical understanding:

Amritlal: A woman in a man's world may be considered being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is - pathetic.

Ratna: Maybe we aren't progressive enough.

Amritlal: That isn't being progressive, that is - sick. (Act II)

Although, she wants to defend Jaira, she isn't very sure of her arguments. She has to fight against the rigid, age old mindset in order to justify her husband's stance. She is quick to relent when Amritlal asks, 'Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up.', she immediately asks 'how?' Later on she regrets to having left him in the hands of his father to be shaped in the form he thought was fit for a man. But at that moment she seemed to have given in to the idea of Amritlal making him worthy of her if she let him go.

The conflict between the dancer couple is not limited to Ratna's role in causing Jairaj's failure. Their perpetual strife to gain a control over their lives caused many a damage in its wake. Their infant son Shankar, mostly left to the care of the ayah, died of opium overdose. During the nights when Ratna had to deliver her stage performance the child was left in the custody of the ayah who would administer him measured amount of the drug to get her peace. As it turns out it was not just the ayah, but also Ratna who was resorting to the drug and its overdose cost them their son's life. Carrying the heavy guilt of the crime, however unintentional, mars her emotional, physical well being and further worsens the deteriorating equations with her husband. She has to struggle for the rest of her life in dealing with these demons of the past which can never be got over with. This brings us to the question of ambition in woman and the guilt of being too selfish about her pursuits. All the cultural rhetoric associated with womanhood, makes it imperative on the 'female' to be a champion of the domestic world first. Despite Ratna's concern, affection for the child, this mishap occurred which points the neglect in the child care, which would be assumed to fall in Ratna's share. This ill fated development spelt her failure in meeting the demands of her gender, of compromising with her motherhood for her career, which makes her question her own decisions.

Nowhere does Jairaj seem to share the blame for this mishap. Wallowing in his own misery of ill-treatment and dejection, he never considered taking care of the baby in her absence, despite being familiar with the ways of the ayah. Yet he never misses a chance to rebuke Ratna for this tragedy. Whether or not he took care of his responsibilities, he had plans of bringing up his son as a dancer:

Jairaj (*talking to himself*): ... Then when he grows up I'll teach

him how to dance - the dance of Shiva. The dance of a man. And when he is ready. I'll bring him to his grandfather and make him dance on his head-the tandava nritya. (*He strikes the Natraja pose and hops about wildly.*) The lord of the dance, beating his drum and trampling on the demon... (Act II)

He wanted to raise his son to be dancer with all his support in rebellion to his own father's position on the lack of suitability of the profession for a man. Through his son, he wished to prove a point, of being a man and yet a successful dancer without any qualms. The allusion is to Nataraja, the lord of the dance, a male figure from the mythology to validate this passion in a man¹. He would have made his son "trample on the demon(s)" of opposition and conservatism which he himself could not accomplish. He blames Ratna for ruining his plans and expectations for Shankar. When he sees her undergoing a similar quest for Lata's dance career he is sympathetic towards her while at the same time he retorts: "At least you have a daughter to be jealous of."(Act II)

This brings us to the relationship between the mother daughter duo. Ratna wants to achieve through Lata, what Hasmukh was unsuccessfully seeking from Ajit, what Amritlal wanted from Jairaj and what Jairaj would have wished from his son - a respect for one's beliefs, a continuation of one's tradition and a close adherence to the life they visualized for the progeny. The future generation is visualised as a carrier of their unfinished songs and yet another opportunity to make worth of their lives again.

¹ It is interesting that he wants his son to dance the dance of a man, thus still thinking of dance as mainly a female practice.

Unlike other parents, Ratna had been lucky when her daughter was equally enthralled with the 'magic' of dance and ever since her childhood, she wanted to be a dancer. The obsession of the dancer parents with the art form and the ambience at home, had probably left no room for any new passion! So, the aspirations of the people from two different generations remain the same, and the new generation gets it easy with all the backing and support which was not available to the older couple.

It's wonderful to have a support system that takes care of all the eventualities and ensures that the ride ahead is a smooth one without any pitfalls. Lata had behind her the experience of her parents, their resources and most importantly their passion to become a name in the industry (which they could not achieve themselves). It's here the playwright brings in the nature of motivations behind such acts which seem to lie beneath self-less parental affection. For Jairaj and most importantly for Ratna, Lata's dancing career is the last ditch attempt to refashion themselves as parents of the famous dancer, if not as famous artists themselves. At a stage when they are assessing the achievements and losses in their quest of passion, the latter far outweighs the former. They are questioning their own decisions, and the worth of sacrifices, all their attempts appear futile to them. Their hopes now rest solely on Lata:

Ratna: Oh, I don't know. It all seems so petty now.

Jairaj: Not worth the...sacrifices.

Ratna: It was too great a price to pay, Jai.

Jairaj: And yet you wish the same for your daughter.

Ratna: Times have changed and things will be easier for her in some ways. Of course, she is talented and can become famous.

Jairaj: Will that make what we have been through worth

something?

Ratna: Yes! I wish Lata more fame than we have had. Why, she can be the best! We just have to push her a bit and with our experience behind her, she can't fail. Yes. I'll do anything to see that she reaches the top. (Act II)

All the while Ratna thinks of using her resources to make her daughter famous, it's never devoid of the selfish motive of improving on her meagre personal accomplishments. It all begins with a vehemence, to beat the forces which played against them, to win their lost battles through Lata. In her victory and success they would find solace of not having fought in vain, and that would make their lives amount to something. But another side of this arrangement surfaces when post the huge success of the much awaited performance of Lata, her mother feels that the achievement is her own. When Viswas and Jairaj are ecstatic about the rave reviews given to Lata for her performance in the following day's newspaper, Ratna is far from happy. While both men stand up and applaud upon Lata's entry, her mother just 'has a forced smile' and gives a cursory 'congratulations, Lata' and 'drink your coffee' in the same breath. No words of appreciation, no genuine compliment from her, although she was waiting for the event since long. While the three of them were reading her reviews, she was sitting in the kitchen and crying. She had planned, and planned hard, for the event and when it does turn out as per her expectations she wants to be in the centre of attention for her efforts rather than Lata. She would like to believe that Lata's success has more to do with her own efforts rather than her daughter's talent. She even divests Jairaj of his credit in the growth of Lata's career graph. Clearly she wants it to be her show though her daughter's performances. Later

on, she wants to paste the picture/reviews of Lata's performance in her own album claiming it to be her own:

Jairaj: You are not pasting these reviews in our album.

Ratna: I will.

Jairaj: They don't belong there. [Silence.] Those critics gave her good reviews because she deserved them. They weren't doing any favours. Face it, woman. (Act II)

Ratna's unexpected reaction to Lata's success is indicative of the mixed feelings that she now has for her daughter. Her daughter is in possession of the support and encouragement that she never had and which caused her to strive so hard in her life. And yet with all the tussles she has been through, she could not achieve all her dreams. Or may be her weeping over her daughter's feat is an expression of her overwhelming emotions, of them finally amounting to something. But how far is Ratna's appropriation of her daughter's career justified despite her honest efforts to help Lata grow? Further, she is more confident of her off stage arrangements (with the critics and reviewers) and less of Lata's competence:

Ratna (*shouting*): I *heard*. Rave reviews! The star of the festival! The dancer of the decade! And why shouldn't she get reviews like these? I deserved it. Spending sleepless nights arranging things. Sweet-talking the critics. My hard work has paid off, hasn't it? *Hasn't it?* (Act II)

Ratna carries the blame of maneuvering her husband's career, carrying the guilt of causing her son's death and the frustration of not making it big in the industry

for which she has given up on so much. Jairaj on the other hand feels victimized not only by his authoritarian father but also his wife. They were supposed to be together, Jairaj and Ratna, but were separated due to the politics of the division of spaces into the categories of masculine and feminine.

Gender Politics

Given the unequal power division and hierarchy between the two genders, the lesser privileged have to work out their ways out through indirect ways. The play brings up the issue of motivations behind conjugal alliances in the contemporary times. Ranging from monetary privileges to upward social mobility, women are looking for 'love' arrangements where they see the prospect of holding on to their career choices. Ratna and her daughter Lata, have chosen their life partners mainly because of the reason that they would be 'allowed' to practice this unconventional profession post marriage:

Ratna: You seem to forget. I married him because he is a dancer.

Amritlal: That's what he believes. I'm a little harder to convince.

Ratna: It's the truth.

Amritlal: Is it?

Ratna: Yes.

Amritlal: Or did you marry him because he would let you dance?

Ratna: That too.

Amritlal: More of that than the first?

Ratna(a little ruffled): Well...yes. (Act II)

Lata: When I was a little girl I used to stand near the door and watch Mummy and Daddy practice. It was magic for me. I knew then what I wanted to be. Viswas, when we are married- you will let come here to practise, won't you?

Viswas: Of course, Lata-

Lata: Thank you! (Act I)

Although Viswas knows practically nothing about the world of nritya, abhinay, adavus, inhabited by Lata and her parents, yet he fits the bill for Lata. Apart from providing financial security, he appears quite pliable, like her own father:

Lata: I guess Daddy is more pliable than usual. Like you.

Viswas: You think I am pliable?

Lata: Yes.

Viswas (sighing): I suppose I am. (Act I)

This couple is frank, straightforward in their discussions, clear about their bargains. Their primary concerns are met with and individual demands sorted out. Lata gets to do what she wants to and Viswas ensures that despite being a public figure she agrees to 'one child right away and another lets see'. This was a clear and immediate shift from 'we wont have any children' stance only some dialogues earlier. Realizing the fondness which Viswas has for children Lata quickly considers to having one even though not wanting it herself. Both the women are working their way out in the existing gender set up by negotiating their spaces with the men in their lives.

Although the two women belong to two generations, they are similar in their attitude to accepting their traditional roles. They would not question the need to seek permission from their male counterparts to pursue their dreams because the position of men as the decision makers in the family is granted. Therefore, this availability of room for themselves becomes the chief criteria of them entering a matrimonial arrangement. While this would point towards their acceptance of subordinate position within the family unit, there are sufficient instances in the play which speak of their determination to fight any opposition against their careers. Ratna was very clear that she would not let her father-in-law's criticism come in way of her career. The determination still held strong even after they had come back to Amritlal, accepting their defeat. Likewise when Viswas with all his support for Lata's career, finds one of her dances 'too erotic', she is quick to retaliate with, 'Do you want to stop me? You can't. But do you want to?' (Act II). Thus despite accepting the gendered structure of the family unit, they are equally prepared to bend it to suit their own ambitions. In the workplace, the dance stage, Jairaj is the cultural minority. He gets exploited and wrongly staged by his wife who has to ensure his failure to secure her success. The marginalization that he is facing at the work sphere affects the personal relations. It's only in the domestic space² where he is donning the role of a conventional man that he can humiliate, abuse, and criticise his wife, Multani (2007) remarks:

...the character of Jairaj, who struggles to 'prove' his manliness despite his choice of Bharatnatyam as a profession, has no problem in taking on the role of a conventional husband and accusing his wife of the very same things that he stands against

² His profession places him in a female domain, therefore it becomes imperative on him to show his

in his defense of dance. (28)

Part of his embitterment is springing from these trappings of gender where his body is becoming the only impediment in his quest of his passion. In one of his fits of drunken frustration, he mockingly admires Ratna's bodily beauty, which speaks of his jealousy and frustration of not possessing a body which would enable him to be desired on stage:

Jairaj (*admiring* Ratna's *costume*): What a beauty you are! Is that why you like to dance? To have men admire your assets?

Ratna (*scornfully*): Why do you dance?

Jairaj (*mockingly*): Oh, but I don't. I'm not good enough.

(Act II)

Through his performance as a dancer he is defying the conventional logic of being a *man*, precisely the 'tough guys don't dance' notions he wants to fight with. In his performance as a professionally unsuccessful husband he gets the chance to display the masculine aspects of his self, which meant being rough, insensitive and abusive. He would have been undeterred with any categorisations as long as he had got to perform his passion. It's only when he is exhausted with the non-conducive environment, disguised opposition from his family, of not having reached anywhere that he turns into this permanent irritable state.

While the character of Ratna appears to have assumed the traditional gendered self of a *woman*, her subversion of the female stereotypes keeps the plot of the play going! Her character best represents the fluid and amorphous nature of gendered

manliness or masculine traits in excess in the domestic zone.

categories. At a time she is performing her gendered self as well as is subversive of those very expectations. She can boss her way around by being a dominating wife and goading mother, she accepts her subordination to Jairaj and Amrital at crucial junctures in life. When Jairaj decides to leave his father's house in resistance to his domination, she can only follow him. And when he decides to come back, failing to survive the pressure of external world, she accompanies him back to his father's domination. However she was forced into a crucial decision making when she had to choose between the freedom to pursue her passion and her loyalty to Jairaj. Instead of the given/assumed response to such a proposal, she chose to pursue her ambition at the cost of ruining her husband's career.

Culturally too, Ratna selectively embraces the traditional roles of a bahu. Rather than adopting the culture of her in-laws, as women are conventionally made to, she made them incorporate (and later replace it with) her lifestyle and eating habits:

Viswas: Your father is a Gujju?

Lata: So?

Viswas: And he doesn't drink *tea*?

Lata: Mummy's influence, I suppose.

Viswas: What a cruel thing to do to a gujju. Not giving him tea!

Your mother must be dominating the poor man! (Act I)

Throughout the play, Jairaj is served coffee, and he has to opt for either idli or dosa for the breakfast, and one assumes that it is his preference too because nowhere does one find him asking for any gujrati dish. But only a few dialogues later in the play, his disgust at Ratna's imposition of food habit surfaces. Interestingly, Lata too

appears to be working on Viswas's food habit, when she is serving bourn vita instead of asking for his choice:

Jairaj: Sit down. (*Viswas sits.*) Drink your Bournvita.

Viswas: I Don't want it. I hate it.

Jairaj: Take it away Lata.

(*Lata picks up the tray*)

Lata: You haven't had your coffee.

Jairaj: I don't want it. I hate coffee. (*Lata looks at Jairaj.*) I always have. (Act I)

The characters while assuming one gender characteristic at a time, are also (un)comfortably donning themselves into opposite gender traits as per the situation. Such subversions of homogeneous gender identity, is to show that one's gendered behaviour is dependent on her/his performance in the given circumstance and that the attempts at providing these acts with fixed meaning is part of the control mechanism operative in the patriarchal set up.

The performativity of gender is meant to suggest- invoke- that gender is constituted by per formative acts which when repeated, come to form, or give shape to a 'coherent' gender identity. Gender is not a stable construct, just as per formative acts are not, can not be stable. (Multani 28)

Performances

The playwright has brought up the issue of performativity of 'gender' through the medium of overt 'performance' and the one which centers around another staged

performance ie of dance. The play is infused with several levels of performances which not only bring up the issue of constructed notions of ‘manhood’/‘womanhood’ but also subvert the very basis of such categories. Theories surrounding the debate over essential difference or the lack of it between the biological category of sex and social category of gender abound. Such categories become problematic when the assigned meanings to the categories merge seamlessly into each other making them appear perfectly ‘natural’! The essential ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ features become synonymous with ‘man’ and ‘woman’ respectively, thus creating casting moulds for two individual type. Feminist scholars like Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) have problematised such imposition of behavioral pattern and roles to individuals solely on the basis of biological category. They have maintained that the category of gender finds its existence in the continuous and unceasing performance of the assigned gendered roles which create the illusion of the essential difference/opposition between the two genders:

...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 1988)

At one level, the play is consistently engaged with deconstructing the received, stereotypical notions of being a *man* or a *woman*. The title can be as

reprimanding for Ratna as Jairaj. If Jairaj could be blamed of transgressing his male role by choosing to be in a professional space meant for women, the extension of this logic is applicable to Ratna's character. Not only is she more focused and selfish for her career, she is also taking control of things and situations which would fall in Jairaj's share, in other words she is the one who is *dancing like a man*. Socially she is expected to build her home but here she is devoting her life to the growth and development of a dance form³. Theoretically she is shattering the stereotypes of demureness, passivity and domesticity associated with her gender:

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 1988)

Through the consistency in the inconsistency of either being a *man* or *woman* in terms of their behaviour, Dattani's characters are defying any homogenous categorizations. In the quotation cited above, Butler is talking of the same practice,

³ Despite the opposition of her father-in-law, Ratna regularly goes to the house of the ailing classical dancer who is considered a prostitute, to learn a dance form which other wise would have died with her. She makes redundant the stigma attached with the old woman and tries her best to keep alive the

the deliberate subversion of the gender norms would bring out the arbitrariness contained in assigning these roles and yet the regular repetitions give it the appearance of 'normalcy'. The characters are enacting their roles in the play and their habits, behaviour, their performance of social roles bring them into two obvious categories of 'male' and 'female'. Amritlal's 'manliness' comes from his authoritarian nature in and outside the house and his aim is to make a similar man out of his son. However in *Jairaj*, the playwright is tinkering with the possible subversions of the received notions of 'manhood' by keeping him as a *man* in the house and placing him in a *woman's* zone. Further, the situation is made more complex by his inability to excel in his chosen field. His failure may be chiefly circumstantial, for many a times he was schemed against by his father and wife or may be he could not make it big due to his own averageness. As a male practitioner of this art form he was extremely dependent on his wife for his success for he was a man in a woman's world. 'Jairaj is the figure whose predicament occupies centre stage, but this position is defined in opposition to his wife, Ratna'(Multani:2007, 28). They have grown up together learning the same dance forms, practicing and delivering similar performances. Being a man he has to perform and struggle twice as hard as Ratna, to be recognized as a good dancer!

Another level of performance by the characters is that of enactment of social roles in way that would help them conform to the social roles and also facilitate their own growth. The marriage of *Jairaj* and *Ratna* is one such performance which is based on a convenient arrangement. Their dance practice since childhood, under one guru, made them practically live together even before marriage. Their common love for

dance (and not for each other!) made them enter into a more suitable set up, a legal union which was supposed to further simplify their pursuits⁴. This was an inter caste-community alliance happening at an important juncture in history i.e. in the 1940's- the decade of struggle for 'independent' India. Amritlal, Jairaj's father took pride in being a 'freedom' fighter and 'nation' builder. Getting a bahu from a different community helped him construct a 'progressive' image⁵, part of the attempts of the time to refashion the cultural rubric to upturn the invading culture. The narratives of the 'nation' (external spaces) are always shaping and intervening in the personal narratives and in this case it played to the advantage of the couple Jairaj and Ratna as also Amritlal. Likewise the prospect of Viswas marrying Lata is even higher because, he is rich and he would let her dance! Viswas on the other hand in entering into an alliance where he might find the family of dancers weird, but he is getting a wife like Lata who is famous, beautiful and is also ready to take care of the conventional roles expected of a woman.

The dramatist uses the trope of same character playing more than one role. So the character playing the role of Amritlal can enter with ease into the role of older Jairaj likewise the character of younger Jairaj can seamlessly enter into the role of Viswas. There is continuity, not only in the performance of the characters on stage but also there is a visible continuity in their social attitude. The older Jairaj has visible shades of his father Amritlal, in terms of his authoritarian nature. Amritlal was impervious to his son's aspirations, likewise as a father figure Jairaj was unmindful of

⁴ It has already been mentioned that Ratna chose Jairaj because he would allow her to dance, even if it was some other profession she would need to seek her husband's agreement for a smooth progression. What is overlooked here is the fact that it was equally important for Jairaj to get a wife who would allow him to dance!

⁵ The dramatist has problematised the above mentioned categories through the characters from the following generation, Jairaj, Viswas, Lata who are extremely critical of what went in the name of such

his infant son's need. Amritlal had imposed his decisions on his family especially over his son, Jairaj too had planned a life for the infant Shankar only he did not get a chance to implement it. The character of Viswas played by younger Jairaj carries distinctive tinge of the latter's rebellious attitude. Both of them bond instantly when they complain about their dictatorial fathers:

Viswas: My father wouldn't loan me money if I wanted it.

Jairaj (*laughing loudly*): Neither did my father. He gave to everyone except me. (Act I)

The younger Ratna later plays the character of her daughter Lata. Similarities between the two have already been discussed. The dramatist has shown that the characters bear resemblances to the figures they might have hated in the earlier stages of their lives. One of Dattani's recurrent themes is the pervasive presence of the past, which he presents on stage through sliding panels and multiple levels of stage. This trope of making the same character play more than one role again is in sync with this thematic concern. The past exists in the present through the characters who continue to embody the behaviors and practices of the previous generation.

In conclusion I would like to add that the division of social/domestic spaces, behavioral patterns into disconnected domains leaves little or no room for individual expressions. People like Jairaj and Ratna who have struggled to encroach on such rigid divisions, after a point feel exasperated with the unsympathetic system. In the end they feel exhausted and are compelled to rethink their own decisions:

Ratna: Finished! Just like me. Yes, your father was right.

Dance has brought us nowhere. It's his curse on us. Nothing seems worth it anymore. Oh, it is all so...worthless. You should have listened to your father. He was right. We were never anything great, never will be, and nor will our daughter be anything but an average human being.

...

Jaiarj (*to himself*): Stopping. And looking back. And seeing that you haven't gone very far. And won't go much further. (Act I)

Even if Ratna and Jaiarj would have become famous figures in the industry (which is unbelievable considering the circumstances), they would still have been judged by conventional parameters. Ratna would always be considered a failure for her inability to excel in the home front, Jaiarj's *manhood* would always be under scrutiny due to his choice of profession. The couple cannot be allowed to dance away happily, in unison. It is only after their death that the playwright shows them *dance* perfectly:

Jaiarj: ...I see you coming to what seems to be heaven, riding with Death on a buffalo...And we embrace. We smile. And we dance (*the younger Jaiarj and Ratna smile and embrace.*) We dance perfectly. In unison. Not missing a step or a beat. We talk and laugh at all the mistakes we made in our previous dances...We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God.
(Act I)

CHAPTER 4

Wired Desires: In *Bravely Fought the Queen*

In the previous two chapters I had analyzed the family unit through the lens of individual politics/motivation of its members. Continuing in the same vein, this chapter will analyze the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) for the culture of violence - physical and emotional, which emerges out of the quest for power within the domestic space. The existent gender based power distribution in the family and the systemic absorption of individuals within its discourse posits unchecked power with the privileged. The lives of those who occupy the lower rungs in this hierarchy are shaped by the whims of those who are drunk with the arrogance of inherited power. The characters in the play are struggling with the arbitrariness of the decision makers of the past and present, and the judgments pronounced on them about their lives and over which they have no control.

Bravely Fought the Queen locates four women within the patriarchal set up, exploring the trajectory of dominance and control by the men and also women in their lives. The patriarchal discourse - of obedience, restraint and compliance is common to the lives of all these women - Baa, Dolly, Alka and Lalitha. All of them are part of the institution of marriage and the family unit, the combination which is expected to support and provide for the needs of its members. But this dysfunctional, unbalanced arrangement assumes the subordination of one class/gender/caste of people under

those assigned the privileged status, suffers from intrinsic failure. The professed functionality and attempts at normalization are only a façade and one peep into the reality of the lives of the characters brings the point home with much ease. The characters are not what they pose to be, their lived realities are different from their desires and neither is their self realization possible in the constricting atmosphere given to them. Such opposition in the lived reality and unrealized desires creates individuals as, in Michael Walling's words, 'divided entity':

For all these characters, then, there is a sense of the self as a divided entity: of inside and outside spaces, of mask and face, of inner truth and of performance as a way of living¹.

Constituting the family unit is the paralyzed Baa, her two sons Jiten and Nitin and their wives Dolly and Alka, who are also sisters. The setting is of an urban lifestyle, with all the modern comforts that create the illusion of well being. But the unwinding of the personal narratives of the characters in the play displays the deceptiveness of these signs of 'normalcy'. The play stages the culture of violence both physical and mental that is perpetuated on women on an everyday basis and the compulsions which make them accept and cope with such atrocities. Baa who is paralyzed and half neurotic has undergone a long history of violence at the hands of her husband. Despite having suffered the agony herself, she later on becomes a perpetuator of a similar violence over her daughter-in-laws through her sons. The

¹ Michael Walling, *'Everyone will be in costumes! And will have Masks on!'* *Gender and Performance in Bravely Fought the Queen* in Angelie Multani. Ed. Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspective. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007: 73.

sisters who were earlier in kept in 'control' under the vigilance of their brother Praful, are later passed on to their husbands for more stricter surveillance.

Praful who had a (homo)sexual stint with Nitin, gets one of his sisters married to him not as a cover up for their relationship but to get himself free of Nitin and to get a husband for Alka who was thought to be going out of hand². Not only has he concealed the truth of Nitin's and his homosexuality from Alka, he had also kept the secret of their father from the two brothers. The chain of violence over the two sisters began with the discovery of the reality about their father, that he was not only alive but he also had another wife and set of children from her, the latter fact was not even known to the sisters.

When it gets divulged to the Trivedi family that Dolly and Alka's father has married their mother without being divorced from the first wife, they are immediately labeled as daughters of a whore! Alka is straight away sent off to her brother's place and Dolly who was in an advanced stage of her pregnancy is badly beaten up by her husband Jiten on Baa's instigation. As a result Daksha, the girl child is born premature, spastic and is deformed for life. Covering up such violent history, the women continue to live their 'normal' lives in the twin houses located in the 'middle of nowhere' (Act I). Not only are these women moving on even after all the humiliation and disgrace they have been put to, they remain silent about the pain they are undergoing because of the apathy of their partners. Payal Nagpal in her essay

² Alka had been witnessing the patriarchal violence even before her marriage to Nitin. Praful had beaten her and burnt her hair over a gas burner when he found her taking a ride back home on a

“Consuming and Selling Women” analyses the gender politics in the play as:

...*Bravely Fought the Queen* presents a classic example of the way in which the process of female silencing is at work in the polished ambience of the drawing room in an urban set up. The presence of women like Dolly and Alka is taken for granted. They are expected with their constant presence at home, to understand the requirements of the ones who are really in charge. (Multani 2007 79)

Obviously, in the given scenario, the women are not left with much choice except for accepting the existing patriarchal hegemony. Escaping its clutches is out of the question for they hardly have any resources that could empower them to shun such dominance. In the following paragraphs I would be looking at the areas of conflict, not between the individuals or family members as I had done in the previous two chapters, but between individual desire and her/his lived reality, its manifestations and repercussions.

Site of Contestation

The three Acts in the play are divided as *The Women*, *The Men* and *Free for All*. This demarcation of Acts in terms of social spaces is a theatrical trope used by the playwright to highlight the nature of division of social spaces and also the redundancy of such demarcations. In the article cited above, Walling describes the dramatist's

neighbour's scooter.

theatrical device as a means of regulating the ‘audience’s gaze’:

One of these is the way he manipulates the gaze of the audience, through his theatrical radical (through socially very truthful) demarcation of social space, which leads in turn to a very specific placing of the audience’s gaze. The opening scene ...is exclusively female....This is compounded by an unconventional fetishising of the male (a reversal of the usual “woman as the gaze” construction). (71)

Spaces coincide, collide and overlap with each other and separations like this only help in realizing the futility of such demarcations. The first Act on Women shows them to be constantly bothered and anxious about the events that are taking place in Act II, which focuses on men, because their actions are determined and influenced with the events in the later Act. Also men and women from their separate ‘acts’ are impinging upon the spaces not allocated to them. The connecting link between the two Acts is the telephone line which keeps buzzing most of the time. It keeps reminding the occupants of one world (professional) about the presence of the other (domestic) and vice versa. To quote Walling again:

The male space is continually invaded by the female space from Act I, as the phone constantly goes, and as we see scenes in Baa’s room, which we know are going alongside the events of Act I. In this way the apparently unemotional, work-based, external space of the office is constantly subverted by the

internal, emotional, female space of the home. A dialectic is set up between the public and private spaces of the home and the office, and the third most private layering. (72)

The stage setting of the play sets the very mood of this contestation through the division of the Acts according to the gendered division of the social spaces. Interestingly, Baa who is expected to belong to Act I never really makes an appearance there. Her presence is either alluded to or her voice remains off stage throughout this Act. Her elevated portion of the stage comes into view only in Act II which is for men. This raised section of the stage in the Act for *Men* is symbolic of her position of power in the family. Despite being paralyzed and bed-ridden she is controlling the lives of her sons and their wives.

The play begins with Dolly getting ready for the party which later we get to know, had already been cancelled. Dolly happened to be present when Jiten called off the outing, but did not care to inform her directly. Despite knowing the change in the plan she undergoes the elaborate process of preparing herself for the party! She puts on a face mask, does her make up and gets ready in a formal saree for the occasion! This is her act of resistance for being taken for granted, for being rendered passive even in the matters concerning her. In Nagpal's words:

Dolly's refusal to acquiesce in a conversation in which her assent is implicated shows how insidiously women are absorbed into the system....The patriarchal system with its

subtle and devious manifestation in the Trivedi household tries to render Dolly and Alka passive. The women are expected to pick on the dregs of conversations and understand their job, keeping in mind the hectic work schedule of the ones in power. Dolly's refusal to accept the cancellation of the programme is an act of resistance to accepting her passive identity. (79-80)

An important intervention in the narrative of the play is the music - thumris sung by Naina Devi which are constantly being played at the background in most part of Act I, The Women and Act III, Free For All. Naina Devi's songs were her resistance to the false notions of 'decency' and 'decorum' imposed on women of royalty:

Dolly: She wanted to sing songs of love. Thumris - sung in her days only by tawaifs. The queen wanted to sing love songs sung by whores! Why? Nobody knew...At times she was mistaken for a tawaif. But it didn't matter! It didn't matter to her because she was singing! That was all that was important to her. Today, she is called the queen of Thumri. (Act I)

These songs which were sung in resistance are in consonance with the mood and general tone of the play³. Whatever the characters desire for themselves can only

³ Dolly mentions in Act III that her mother wanted to be a singer but she never heard her sing. She was silenced within the discourse of female mannerisms. Singing, a form of self expression is considered taboo for women from 'decent' backgrounds. Ironically, she was later termed as a whore because of her husband's dishonesty.

be had in conflict, not through mere conformity to external demand. The subtext of resistance for women is the construction of one's own reality through fiction while for the men (owing to their position of power) it gets expressed in alternate realities. These songs of love also remind us of the serious lack of the same in the lives of the characters, they "simultaneously evoke and comment on the yearning for love and fulfilment experienced by all the major characters in the play."⁴

In the given circumstances, where the characters are not left with any agency to make choices about their lives, 'acting' becomes a way of life. Acting here means keeping up with the appearance of well being and happiness, of maintaining the illusion of normalcy. At another level 'acting' here also means, enacting your desires in a covert form so that it does not come in the way of the 'reality' from which they are seeking diversion. Walling aptly explains this process of acting as a mode of living:

The image of Dolly's mask sets up the whole play's exploration of acting as being...the characters constantly re-invent themselves through fictions. On the simplest level, the idea that they are going out is a fiction. On a more complex level, there are the fictions of Kanhaiya and Daksha; and the fictions that their marriages and their lives have meaning or substance. Dattani's dramaturgy gives the audience a physical image of the character's continuous self-creation. (69)

⁴ Subir Dhar, "The Drama of Mahesh Dattani" in Dhawan, R.K and Tanu Pant. Eds. The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2005: 93-94.

The above analysis demonstrates how the play is about the conflict - between appearance vs. reality. The characters are constantly evading their given realities through their own constructed worlds. For Dolly and Alka, the fictions of Kanhaiya and Daksha are more comforting and appear more tangible than the starkness of their lived realities. Another recurring conflict in the play is the tussle between the past and the present and the way past resurfaces at crucial junctures in the present to afflict the present. The past of their father is revealed in an important phase of the present, when both the sisters are conveniently married to the two brothers. The events from the past leave the present with an unrecoverable trauma and the next generation continues bearing its repercussions. From then on, the lives of Dolly, Alka and their brother Praful centres around lessening the permanent damage caused due to their father's misdemeanour.

Gender Politics

Beyond the façade of well being and normalcy both Dolly and Alka are in abusive and traumatic relationships. Yet, besides the regular quest for happiness and escape from the desolateness, there are also contestation between them to show one has got the better deal than the other. Alka feels despite being married to a gay she is better off than Dolly who has Jiten for a husband. Nitin seems to less violent, more sensitive than his brother and he also involves her in everyday conversations! We can look at this conversation for illustration:

Dolly:...Alright I will say it! You're implying that you have a

better deal than me! (*Mimicking.*) 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! (Act I)

So, when Lalitha's personal narrative enters into the domestic space of the Trivedi's, she is entering the ongoing battle between the two sisters. The class divide between Lalitha and women in the Trivedi family is visible through the level of involvement with the professional lives of their husbands. Lalitha represents the modern, middle class woman, educated but not enough to pull off on her own, engaging herself with several creative exercises that would prevent her from being relegated to a 'housewife' status. She looks up to her husband, takes keen interest in his work, provides all the help and encouragement that would facilitate his work. Also she is making earnest efforts to know about diverse things, which would bring her more in the league of the elite class: "I guess it's nice to know a bit of this and that" (Act I). This, rather simplistic statement is an indication of the pressure on her to perform and prove her worth through such exercises. This is a couple who is raring to make it big by making the best use of the limited resources. Her taking part in Sridhar's work is stems more out of the necessity to put up a combined effort to get a decent living standard. Her qualifications may not have bagged her full time employment, but she is engaged with several small jobs that would generate some income which would add on to Sridhar's.

When Dolly and Alka are trying to look down upon her in terms of their

superior class position, Lalitha strategically flaunts her familiarity and association with her husband's professional life to show her better domestic status than them. The fact that she has and can contribute to her husband's work proves her to be of more utilitarian value than the two sisters who are only told to get dressed for the work related parties.

Lalitha is visiting the Trivedi house for the assignment related to her husband's job. Her presence in the house is recognized in terms of her subordinate social class to the two sisters. Alka has hardly met Lalitha when she tells her to shut the back door of the kitchen and switch off the light (Act I). At first she is little intimidated with their haughty behavior but as she gets familiar with their dismal domestic situation she not only feels better about her life but also exhibits it. She attempts to show off her better equations with her husband than the two sisters whose husbands hardly consider them worthy of daily conversations:

Lalitha: Oh I keep myself occupied. I do a bit of writing.

Freelance. I write an occasional column for *The Times*.

Sometimes I review cultural events. I am into meditation. And oh yes, I grow bonsai plants- I have been growing them for years. I do a bit of creative writing as well. You know, poetry and stuff like that. Nothing great but... (Act I)

Alka immediately dismisses off Lalitha's attempts at self fashioning as mere activities to keep oneself busy. But when she hears that Lalitha and Sridhar were

saving to buy a flat of their own, therefore they have not planned for children yet, Alka is immediately drawn to their lives⁵: “How nice to plan your life like that“ (Act I). Alka who does not have a child herself and who cannot have one despite yearning for it, is fascinated with Lalitha’s life who seems to have a say in affairs concerning her. Dolly whose life runs parallel to Alka’s, gets another point of reference in Lalitha’s lifestyle - she appears to be an active participant in her own life and also her husband’s. Lalitha’s visit to their household further heightens their sense of isolation in the house where they are cut off from any social activity. The two sisters have only each other for both companionship *and* rivalry; the presence of an outsider creates a channel to vent out their inner turmoil:

Alka: Please. I have to. There’s - too much between just the two of us! We won’t get a chance like this again! (Act I)

However, as it gets revealed later, Lalitha’s happily constructed truth about her life is simply her adjustment with the given surroundings. In her narrative of self projection she is an active participant in miscellaneous works and she is extremely proud that she can partake in her husband’s work. But when she loosens herself up after a drink or two, another aspect of this narrative surfaces:

Dolly: You seem to take a lot of interest in your husband’s work.

Lalitha: That’s all he talks about at home. Even my bonsais

⁵ Lalitha cannot have children due to her finance restrictions. Alka may be attracted to their well planned lives, but going about in such a controlled manner is the only option available to the couple. Lalitha might want a child herself but she has to accept the monetary limitations. At one level the bonsais stand for the limited growth and productivity Lalitha is compromising with, wiring her own life

know about ReVaTee. But I don't really mind, it gives me-
(Slowing down with the realisation of what she is saying.)-
 something-to-do. (Act I)

Lalitha participates in her husband's life by involving herself with his work and work related conversations. Even at home, Sridhar's only obsession is his work and if she wishes to be recognized by him she has to become a part of it. Whether or not she likes it, that's the sole option available to her. Although she would like to believe that this adds substance to her life, she is simply making her peace with the circumstances. Yet in comparison the Lalitha-Sridhar pair is better suited than the other two couples for lack of any visible manifestation of physical violence and more room for Lalitha's independent existence⁶. However one may look at her juggling several creative, also money fetching exercises to be driven out of necessity but the fact is that this does take her out of the isolation which the two sisters are stuck with in the luxury of their houses. Payal Nagpal states well the position of Lalitha vis-à-vis the other women in the play:

In this neatly stratified system where women have well-defined roles to play, Lalitha is able to create a space that is her own. She nurtures her bonsais, is a freelance writer for a woman's magazine and is also well-versed with the professional affairs

according to the her socio-economic position.

⁶ Sridhar is better only when seen /read in comparison to Jiten/Nitin. When he is analyzed in objectivity he is found wanting. He exerts a similar patriarchal control over his wife like the other male characters in the play. He would only 'allow' Lalitha's social drinking if he is around. Unlike Jiten he does not get hooked with sex workers, but when he experiences humiliation in his boss's hand he vents his frustration in a similar fashion. When Jiten forces him to bring in a prostitute for him, Sridhar has her first in the car before Jiten. He feels vindicated, without giving a thought to fidelity to his wife.

of her husband, Sridhar....It is Lalitha's attempt at formulating an identity on her own that dissolves the class hierarchy between the women of the Trivedi house and Lalitha. In fact as a woman she appears to be more conscious and aware than Dolly and Alka. 78-79

Performance

On the one hand all the characters are playing up to their social roles and expectations - Baa, Jiten, Nitin, Dolly, Alka, Lalitha, Sridhar are all conforming to their socio-class-gender positions. But their acts of conformity only lead to the strangulation of their individual needs and desires. Consciously or unconsciously the characters have built for themselves alternate realities which not only provide them an escape from the drudgery of accepting the rigid social structures but are also reflective of the deficient lives they are living.

In order to win his mother's affection Nitin has to dislike his father because his mother wants him to. But what gets evident from the tad bit of reference to his father is his fondness for him. When Nitin looks at the bonsai plant brought by Sridhar, he stares at it for long and then he is reminded of his father:

Sridhar: My wife keeps making them. She gives them to people she likes. And converts them to plant lovers. (*Nitin continues to stare at it.*) Is anything the matter?

Nitin: Nothing. I just remembered someone who liked - huge

trees. [*Pause.*] My father. (Act II)

He reflects affectionately over his father, although one hears nothing more about him until in Act III where his meeting with Baa brings out false hatred that he has to display for his father in his mother's presence.

Baa: How can you say such things? (*As if to a child.*) Nitin? Do you like your father?

[*Pause.*] (*Nitin's voice changes to a child's*)

Nitin: Yes, Baa. I like him.

Baa: Go Away! You are not my son! You are bad, like him!

(*Again as if to a child.*) Nitin! You don't like your father, no?

He's not nice!

Nitin (with a heavy stutter): Nnn-nnn-nnn-no, Baa.

Baa: Good! You are my wonderful baby! You are my prince!

(*Again, as if to a child.*) Nitin. You hate your father. Tell me.

Nitin: I-I-ddddon't, I ddddon't- (Act III)

He pretends to hate his father to benefit from the perks that his mother has on reward for him. He does not mind the blind obedience to his mother's wishes which makes him the favorite son! He is so accustomed to reaping the endless remuneration which comes with being a part of Baa's narrative of revenge that he continues to act like a docile child to suit his mother's frenzied state. Therefore when she discloses the news that she has not left her property to him, he feels cheated!

Nitin: 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? (Act III)

Earlier in this conversation, Nitin was ready to send Alka away again to her brother's place if Baa wanted it and was ready to leave the house to him. Clearly his performance as a husband solely rests on the utilitarian motifs. He could send away or bring back Alka as per the need of the hour. Unlike him, Alka on the other hand has accepted him as her partner and is trying to form a bond with him beyond sexual limitations.

Most of the dialogues of Baa appear to be ramblings from a frenzied state of mind of an old woman, but they actually make a coherent narrative of self defense and vindication. It displays her desperation to find a confidant in her younger son who would always side with her. She hates the physical sight of her husband who is 'dark as night' (Act III), who is abusive, violent and who she thinks was not worthy of her. And yet she had to spend a major portion of her life with him in disgust and humiliation. What lessened her pain was the recognition by her sons that she was a victim in the hands of their father. This was a performance which was necessitated by the need to create a support system in the family. Her sons' rejection of their father meant vindication of her own existence. Not only is she burdened with the guilt of Daksha's physical state, she is also insecure about her position in the family due to her paralyzed state. Being isolated to her room, she rules over the two houses with the

loud bell which reminds them of her authoritarian presence. She turns her weakness (poor physical state) into her strength by necessitating the presence of her bahu in the house all the time. She would not let her sons to go out with their wives, would not let them bond, for that may cast a spell over her importance in the family.

Performance as a way of being is best exemplified by the lives of Dolly and Alka. They continue to perform their 'womanly' duties despite being in matrimonial and familial relationships which have shaken them to the core. They are stuck with looking after Baa, the ever complaining mother-in-law, the person who is the cause of all the history of violence perpetuated on them. The fiction of Kanhaiya and the dancing daughter is more for themselves than for any outsider like Lalitha who might be interested in their lives. Through their fictions they are living their lives as they *want* rather than being stuck with the rough deal they have been handed down. As for Baa, who is weighed with guilt of ruining the life of Daksha, even in her frenzied state is trying to relieve herself of the blame by leaving her property to her grand daughter. Walling explains this way of living of the characters in these words:

Dolly, talking to Lalitha about Daksha, is creating a fiction-writing and performing her own life-play, in which she performs the character of the contented, successful middle-class Indian wife. She has suppressed the reality of Daksha's disability and the violence of her birth under the fiction of the dancer-daughter who is away at school. In the same way, Baa constantly ruminates on the past, recreating the idea of Praful in

atonement for her own condemnation of him. Nitin performs the heterosexual husband - in denial of his sexual truth. In all of these fictions sustained by the characters, we are looking at performance as a mode of being. (67)

The characters are yearning for normalcy even though it never appears in sight for them. Both Dolly and Alka at various points in the play have literally begged their husbands to be taken out for recreation. They are stuck in a place where there are no neighbors, hardly any visitors or diversions from their monotonous lives. Nitin also feels suffocated in a heterosexual relationship due the pressure on him to conform to the 'normal' behavioral pattern. In Walling's analysis the fractured consciousness of the characters is reflected on the divided/hidden spaces on the stage:

The divided stage space therefore reflects the divided self - the mask and face - which is at the centre of the play. Dolly and Alka revel in the fantasy that they would go "out". Alka goes "out" in the rain to dance, and to meet Kanhaiya; Sridhar goes "out" into Grant Road to find the prostitute; and it is in the "out" house that Nitin is able to meet his true sexual self with the rickshaw driver. This "coming out" is a metaphor of discarding the mask, of social and sexual honesty with regard to identity: but it is also a destructive impulse, demanding the dissolution of the performance fictions through which the society is constructed. (72-73)

Reflecting the unfulfilled lives of the characters is another interesting symbol of the bonsais. The bonsai plants which are Lalitha's passion are present as a stage prop through out the play. In Act I, the bonsai plant presented to Dolly is looked at with admiration by the women who discuss its peculiar growth:

Alka: How do you make them?

Lalitha: You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and - stunt them. (Act I)

The emphasis on the word 'stunt' in relation to the bonsais brings out a clear resonance with the existence of female characters in the play. Nagpal explains this correlation in the following words:

The women in the play are creations like Lalitha's bonsais. Their shoots or desires are constantly trimmed and cut so that they spread only to a particular level. They are not allowed to attain the required height. Their roots are not given ample space to spread. The result of all this cutting and trimming is a bonsai that makes a pretty and expensive object. This is also the case with the women in the play. They too are trimmed in different ways to create the desired effect...like the Bonsais they too reflect on the beauty and class quotient of their male counterparts. (80)

The growing of bonsais is akin to conditioning of women and men in society. They are given fixed spaces in terms of their defined roles, their growth is pruned and trimmed through limitless imposition of behavioural patterns. After initial years of conditioning, the personality is resigned to its deformed growth, like the bonsais. And then they would no longer be required to be under vigilance. Lalitha who is extremely passionate about these bonsais has been growing them for years, and therefore this kind of cultivation reflects on her existence too. Subir Dhar puts it aptly:

Lalitha's passion for growing bonsai is symbolically reflective of her own mindset. The wiring and trimming she subjects growing plants to may well be what she has done to her own life: control and restriction. The result may be quaint and attractive, but it can also become ugly and grotesque like the bonsai Sridhar keeps on his office table, and which, additionally, is a clear symbol of the deformed relationship the brothers have with their wives. (93)

The presence of the miniature versions of huge plants are a constant reminder of the limited growth-expression that the characters are allowed to have. To be turned into a bonsai, plants are uprooted from their natural habitat and kept in isolation, in the artificial environs. A major ailment of the women in the household is the isolation that they face living in houses situated in the outskirts of the city. At one instance in the play Alka tells Lalitha that staying so far away from the city, they have learnt to be self sufficient (Act I). Being self sufficient here indicates curtailing and wiring of

their desires as per the available choices. In my understanding, the bonsais could also allude to female reproductivity and sexuality. The only fruit bearing bonsai is given to Dolly who has a child albeit a deformed one. Alka gets curious about that plant and inquires about the way they are grown. Somehow, her yearning for a child and the interest in the bonsais appear interconnected. Though Lalitha does not have a child herself, her interest in the cultivation and maintenance of these plants reflects her nurturing aspect, a key feature in defining motherhood. An interesting moment in the play is when Nitin is getting a closer look at the bonsai brought by Sridhar to the office:

Sridhar: I don't know whether these can be called trees
anymore....This one is grotesque. It happens when you don't
bind it or shape it correctly.

Nitin: It looks - interesting. (Act I)

Nitin's interest in the plant which is seen as 'grotesque' by Sridhar is a clear allusion towards Nitin's homosexuality. The repeated reference to this particular bonsai not being bound or shaped correctly, again hints towards the homophobic attitude towards people who profess alternate sexuality. In this heterosexist, flawed understanding, homosexuality is perceived to result from improper conditioning or monitoring. This sustained allusion towards Nitin's sexual preference gets more interesting when Sridhar offers this Bonsai to be gifted to Nitin's wife:

Sridhar: Do you want it?

Nitin: What will I do with it?

Sridhar: You could give it to your wife. I know Lalitha has taken one as a gift for your sister-in-law. So...

Nitin: No. What will she do with it? (Act II)

Nitin's sexual preference makes him ill-suited for Alka and therefore the above allusion. Later on Jiten in one of his fits of violence driven by frustration shatters the bonsai plant. And in the next Act it gets revealed that it's because of the violent beatings in her advanced stage of pregnancy in Jiten's hands that Dolly delivered a premature and deformed child. These parallels between the real life scenario of the characters and their response to the bonsais makes it a symbol more laden with meaning than it initially appears.

Coming to the title of the play, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, it is used in reference to the queen of Jhansi who died fighting bravely in the battlefield and therefore was termed as the 'epitome of female bravery in India'⁷. The couplet which eulogizes her bravery reads as: *'khoob ladi mardani woh to Jhansi waali rani thi*. In the play the women are discussing the costume party for the launch of new designer lingerie by the Trivedi brothers, the assignment which had brought Lalitha to their house⁸. Alka wants to be dressed as the brave queen but as the discussion brings out she is the 'manly queen', 'brave enough to qualify as a man' (Act III). Nagpal briefly sums up this paradoxical situation for the women:

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rani_Lakshmibai accessed on 14th July 2010

⁸ Dolly wants to be dressed up as a tawaif in the ball. Getting dressed as tawaif would be liberating for her, because the mores of female decorum are not applied on them. Her choice of costume is reflective of her rebellion of the external regulations on women.

These women identify bravery with the Rani of Jhansi, but at the same time they find it difficult to relate to her as she is the “manly queen”. Her bravery has been appropriated into a matrix of patriarchal power that recognizes only men as brave. Dattani subtly reveals how even in the course of history, the immense bravery of women has been grudgingly acknowledged, and appropriated as a male prerogative. This suggests that there is a need to relocate areas for empowering female identity as a dynamic trope and not one that remains enveloped in the folds of patriarchy. (83-84)

In the context of the female characters in the play, all the women are fighting their own battles which have already been discussed in detail. But their efforts go unacknowledged because for that they need to fight battles like men, and if they are successful in that they would be appropriated in the men’s discourse. Thus women are caught in the double bind and as Nagpal discusses above, the areas of female empowerment have to be taken beyond the folds of patriarchy.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

It was all your fault....Enough father, I am fed up with what you've done all these years. Enough of the things I lost, I don't want to lose anymore...that's what I have lost. Happiness.

Father I lost happiness of little pressure because of you. You always thought of making your son a great man, and give him a good life, but you never cared to know what I want and how I want to live my life...You think every time it is good for him, did you ever think at least once whether I'll like it? You are satisfied with giving more than I ask. You don't know the pain of denying what you really want. I know it...If you play my game to yourself, why should I play then dad?...Unable to live as you like, unable to do what I like, I am living a hell of a life dad.

In the climax scene in of the Telegu movie *Bommarillu*, the protagonist Siddharth breaks down (in the above dialogues) and pours his heart out in front of his father (and family) about how choked up he is in the utterly planned life for him which has no room for his wants. Of course this honest confession (leaves everybody in tears), makes his father realize that he has not been fair to his son all this while in his efforts to perfect him and he tries to make up for it by helping him to get his girl friend back which leads to a happy resolution of the story. But this was a different

genre, where it gets binding to provide 'happy endings' to ensure the box office success. The medium of theatre on the other hand is not obligated (and thank fully so!) to provide happy climaxes for it aims a closer imitation/replication of life and which as it appears provides no easy resolutions. However, the point of resolution in the movie is the conversation, which brings out the violence imbedded in forcing one's faith and opinions over others without making a room for dissent. One wonders if there is possibility of a similar dialogue between Hasmukh and Ajit, or Amritlal and Jairaj which would have reversed their sour equations and which would have made them recognize each other's needs. However, such simple resolutions would not have explored the complex terrain of desire vs. compulsion, and the resultant anguish which the plays have covered. Dattani does not profess to have a particular social agenda in mind in staging his drama except for an honest representation of reality as he sees it:

Theatre has always been a mirror for man. A reflection of his world, of the eternal conflicts that plague him, through which he has experienced a range of emotions. Man has created a very complex language called theatre. A language that has the ability to redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement. A language that goes beyond the verbal, a movement that goes beyond the physical. Through this language of theatre he has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be¹.

Staging the lives of his characters, caught in the daily humdrum of life, he

¹ Mahesh Dattani, 'Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance.' in Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader. Ed. Nandi Bhatia. Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2009: 470.

brings out the drama of the ordinary, everyday existence. Given the domain of the theatre, which is entertainment, the playwright is successful in providing his audience with good dose of humor without being didactic. What is remarkable about his plays is that same elements serve for the tragic as well as the comic. Ajit and Hasmukh's dialogues which have been quoted in the chapter on *Where There's a Will* can be easily cited here for laughter. A ghost on stage freaking out over the life he has just completed living makes one laugh and sympathise at the same time:

Is it - true? Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? Have all my achievements been my father's aspirations for me? Have I been my father's ghost? If that is true, then where was I ? What became of *me*, the real *me*?

(*Realising.*) Oh, my God! I sound like Aju! Nooo! (*he rushes out waving his arms.*) (Act II, Scene II)

For Dattani, theatre is less of a social intervention and more of a space for reflection, for the dramatist as well as for the audience. In the three chapters I have attempted to analyze the representation of social unit of family and the grave nature of visible and invisible violence that is contained within this stifling arrangement. In the plays under discussion the playwright has depicted what it is to live through the constant need to fit in the given structures. The pressure to accept the existing gender relations, to enter into socially acceptable relationships and to accept the socially imposed roles can make no room for self realisation. What makes it worse, is to live up to the façade of normalcy and continue 'acting' in a mode of survival. In this mode of being, one has to perpetually overlook the act of self denial and the damage that is done to one's inner self while validating the external norms. The narrative of these

plays exposes the drama of the everyday where the well scripted narrative is to provide a normative world order. In the plays under discussion, the initial setting of the stage is perfectly normal, Ajit is complaining about his bossy father over the phone to his friend in *Where There's a Will*, Lata has brought Viswas home to meet her parents in *Dance Like a Man*, and Dolly is happily getting ready for the party in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. But by the time their stories have been told we know that it's all about a forced existence of group of individuals who are irredeemably trapped into living the life whose meaninglessness they themselves see. Their strife for self fulfillment has various manifestations, secret lives, multiple personalities, fictional realities, and yet they are nowhere near their quests. These manifestations are comfortable escapes and sooner or later the characters have to confront what they have been evading - be it their violent past or the uncomfortable present. Dattani's work, in Angelie Multani's words:

...underscores the fragility of the barriers we erect, reminding us again and again of the vulnerability of human beings and the tenuousness of the choices we make. The only thing we can do is to face those demons, confront the past and acknowledge the outside as an inseparable part of our everyday lives. Our homes are not built merely of brick and mortar - they too contain sliding walls, panels which hide secrets, and exits and entrances through which anything or anyone can enter and shatter the comfortable assumptions of a lifetime. ("Inner and Outer Space in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani", 32)

In Aparna Sen's powerful movie *15 Park Avenue* the character of Meethi

(Konkona Sen Sharma) who suffers from schizophrenia, pictures herself to be a contented wife and mother, a life which she had planned for herself but could never live in 'reality'. She scolds her naughty son, feeds the crying daughter, waits for her husband, and thus lives this life in all its details. What makes this sense of reality more, or less real than the life of neurotic patient which is given to her? Whenever her external reality shakes her out of this 'illusion' she feels the need to hunt for her house and family in the Park Avenue street (which actually exists in New York) in Kolkata. Dolly's creation of fiction about her dancer daughter at school and sexual expedition with the young cook are similar narratives of escape from the 'real' into the world of desire and fantasy. However the film and also these plays raise an important issue of the 'real' vs. 'imagined' and the fuzzy line dividing the two worlds. At one point in the film, Jojo (Rahul Bose), says about Meethi's obsessive hunt for her house in the 15 Park Avenue, 'She is searching for something which she can never find' to which his wife replies, 'Like the rest of us' (Translation mine). Like Meethi, these characters are searching for a reality which may or may not be existent, but it's the quest which makes their lives worth living. In the context of the plays Miruna George (Multani 2007) says:

Dattani throws open questions like what is 'normal', 'regular', 'stable' and 'fixed'? Through his plays he suggests the possibilities for reworking, reconstruction and resignifications starting from the basic unit of society, and identifying family as the institution of power. (146)

The existent structure of the family is that of appropriating or covering up all the differences and silencing the dissenting voices. If somebody is transgressing the

set limits resorting to violence physical as well as mental becomes the norm and everyday practice. In some cases it looks to be harmless practice of parental control as happens with Ajit and Viswas where they would not be allowed to have access to the parental property until they accept the authority. In other situations like that of Sonal, Alka, Dolly accepting the patriarchal domination becomes a necessity due to social obligation and financial security. Money becomes an important factor which governs the lives of the characters and one gives way to its pressure easily. Although they get what they have bargained for it is a cost which messes up their lives permanently. There are grudges, angst, dissatisfaction and yet one has to go on living with it, Prasad (Multani 2007) sums up this situation aptly:

...the 'forced harmony' of our lives is so fraught with uncertainties and so close to angst that surfacing of even one memory can tilt the balance completely, change our paths into that of collision and self-explosion. The family holds us together but usually at great cost. There can be no sense of tragedy here, only that of recognition of our everyday life. We know that there is a skeleton in the cupboard in the home of every family - our lives are led to deal with them, in hypocritical denial or discreet acceptance, one worse than the other. (144)

I have tried to analyse the 'forced harmony' (to use Dattani's term) which underlies the structural unit of family. What is significant about Dattani's presentation of this situation is lack of any didacticism despite the seriousness of the issues that he raises. The humor in his play is never dark, although some of the revelations that happens in

the climax hits hard on the complacent reader/audience. The knack to stage the intersecting links between the staged reality and the realities of those comfortably viewing is remarkable. The complacent voyeurism of the theatre going audience in viewing someone else's tragedy or the laughter stemming from follies of the other, are seriously tampered with. The dramatist here is not trying to make any intervention, but to get his audience reflect over her/his reality. Conventionally one looks at drama from the recreational angle, something which exists in a different space-time matrix. Multani summarizes this reception of theatre in the realm of amusement as:

Being used to theatre as a space for entertainment, and therefore removed in so many ways from our daily lives, we tend to react to the world invoked on stage as comfortably sealed off from the socio-political realities we live in. ("Final Solutions?" 22)

But Dattani's plays operate in the realm of the everyday, to invoke the uncomfortable realities which are either covered up or glossed over. The crux of his plays is to take a look at the drama which constitutes the everyday, to recognize drama as a perpetual state of being. The realisation or the awareness of such an existence is therapeutic to those who are involved in the narrative. The end of his plays leaves the audience with some unresolved issues, some unfinished stories, Alka's state of drunken stupor, Nitin's secret retreats, Jairaj and Ratna's guilt ridden conscience, perturb the minds of those who have identified themselves with the existence of these characters. In response to Multani's question, "When you write a play about attitudes to homosexuality, or the sexual fantasies of a middle class housewife, for example, and the audience choose to focus on them as subjects for humour and crudity rather than

as sensitive representations which are meant to question dominant values, does it upset you?" Dattani replies, and this best concludes my analysis too:

...I think one has to come to terms with the fact that audiences are unpredictable and you have no control over their feelings unless you want to tell them that all is well with their world and they are perfect people...I would rather have them laugh at an inappropriate moment either by way of contempt or just plain embarrassment. Even by rejecting the true feeling of these characters they are acknowledging their presence and their own attitude towards them².

² Angelie Multani, Ed. 'A Conversation with Mahesh Dattani'. Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives. Pencraft International: New Delhi, 2007: 169-170.

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