

**FOUR QUEENS WITHOUT A KINGDOM:**  
**IMAGES OF THE SUBALTERN IN DATTANI'S**  
***BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN***

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Mahesh Dattani is known to be particularly concerned about subaltern members of society, those who are marginalized and granted no place in the mainstream. His plays have provided a voice to the voiceless and brought the plight of the subaltern into focus. Women, homosexuals, transgenders find a place in the matrix of his drama. *Bravely Fought the Queen*, while exposing the hypocrisy of society, dwells upon the subaltern position of women (whether wives, sisters or daughters) and those men who fall outside the sexual norm. Society's invariably rigid constructs do not allow them to assert their identities or carve their unique niches.

There are allusions to two real life queens in the play. Even before the stage movements and dialogues begin, we hear the music of Naina Devi – a queen who preferred to give up her royal identity in order to follow her heart and sing. Worse, the sort of music she chose to sing was that associated with professional entertainers. This refusal to conform was bound to create a social storm but, armed with her husband's support, she persevered in her defiance and ultimately won acceptance in her new avatar: she carved out her own special identity as the queen of the thumri. She may have lost one kingdom but she created another one more meaningful to her.

The play opens, while Naina Devi's thumri is heard, with the interaction of two sisters (daughters of a would-be singer) – Dolly and Alka – with Lalitha. Lalitha's husband works for their husbands, Jiten and Nitin. As such, they are

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almost in the position of queens in her world. However, they are discovered to be in a state of subjugation and are barely even queens of their own lives.

It is hardly novel to see women in subaltern roles. It seems to be their inevitable fate even though the setting here is contemporary, the locale is urban and the social stratum is affluent. Both the sisters have had arranged marriages in which they seem to have had little say. Dolly is approved by Baa and termed "good for Jitu" because she is docile and amenable, i.e. easy to control. The choice of Dolly's sister Alka as Nitin's bride, however, was unpopular with Baa because she perceived her as less malleable than Dolly and therefore not good daughter-in-law material. Indeed, Alka does not keep absolutely quiet as Dolly does. She seems to have more spirit; she is likely to be less easy to control. The criterion is all about control and suppression. Baa's bell which seems to ring eternally is a symbol of her domination and their circumscribed life. As far as the men are concerned, they seem little interested in their wives and have consigned them to the house(s) and the care of their mother without any remorse. Both women are heard begging for time alone with their husbands but their pleas only receive the standard response that they should stay at home and "keep Baa company" (241, 272).

The men and women clearly inhabit different spheres: Dattani has an act devoted to "The Women" in the home and then another to depict "The Men" in their office. The remoteness of the location of the house(s) and Baa's needs preclude the possibility of any meaningful independent activity outside the home for the women. "Keep Baa company" is the standard instruction if they phone their husbands looking for an outing or company. The degree of disappointment they express when they realize that their dinner outing with friends has been cancelled is an indication of their desperate need for a life beyond mere domestic responsibility. Alka is downcast. Dolly laughs hysterically when Lalitha asks whether she doesn't feel "isolated" (238) so far away from the city. Going out is a rare and wonderful thing: they certainly seem to be giving their preparation and make-up a lot of time and interest.

The Queen in the title of the play refers to the legendary warrior queen Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. Alka, the much trodden-upon younger daughter-in-law in the Trivedi family, dreamily identifies with the Rani of Jhansi and longs

to put on the costume of the Queen, complete with armour and a swashbuckling wooden sword, at the masquerade ball being planned as a marketing stunt to launch a new company product. She attempts to rebel against the claustrophobic atmosphere in her home where she is virtually a prisoner. She has been tricked into marriage with a closet homosexual (her sister's brother-in-law) by her brother (who has been his partner). She has already been thrown out of the house once due to the machinations of her mother-in-law and is in peril of a repetition now. There are multiple layers of deception and hypocrisy to plough through – typical of the so-called affluent society in any city or country. Dattani is a past master at masterminding the ultimate expose of social hypocrisy. His method is to relentlessly peel off layer after layer in the manner of Edward Albee in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Interestingly, one of the characters in *Bravely Fought the Queen* is also found to be purely fictional like George and Martha's son. Evidently Dattani's characters are as psychologically disturbed as Albee's and the action in this play gradually dismantles the false facades presented to the world.

Alka has spirit and craves a redefinition of her marriage. She fancies herself as a warrior queen who fights and wins back her rightful domain - her husband's interest. She would like to be the (victorious) third queen in the play and find a way to celebrate her successful conquest of her husband's heart. Jiten tells Praful that Baa finds her "so ..." (268). The blank suggests she is objectionable. Even before her unacceptable parentage is discovered (her mother was an entertainer and not legally married to her daughters' father), she is found too spirited to be the suitable girl for Nitin. Later, when we meet her, unlike Dolly, she has not yet completely reconciled herself to the miserable situation of her marriage.

Lalitha, from whose perspective we see the Trivedi family, appears to be a more free woman who has the support of her husband. He squires her around town and she helps him with his work. He clearly discusses his work with her and she is far better informed about things at the office than Dolly and Alka are. She is a freelance writer for the Times and also dabbles in poetry and other things like meditation and, of course, bonsai. But she is helpless too: she cannot go home on her own. Neither can she do anything to avert her husband's one

night stand with a prostitute. However, the Trivedi women talk of her abilities and activities as merely “something to do” (251), thus reducing her life to the level of their own.

The bonsai she brings as a gift for Dolly becomes a central symbol in the play. The bonsai represents a cruel miniaturization of a free spirit. As Lalitha explains innocently and gleefully to Dolly, it involves minimizing the amount of earth that the plant has to grow in. It also involves pruning its stem and branches and regularly snipping its roots so that its growth becomes stunted. The dwarfed plant is an artificial creation of human will. It may appear beautiful to some but it is a deformed plant. The symbol begs for a comparison with the situation of women in the Indian scenario – also under grown and stunted in terms of the development of their independent identities. Instead of allowing them to grow and develop in their own natural way, their wings are clipped and their area of activity reduced so that they become pathetically inept, dependent, clinging creatures who invite criticism for the very qualities that the patriarchal “grooming” has created. Lalitha points out that the plant gets habituated to its changed ethos and accepts it and moulds itself to it. This is the sad situation of women socially conditioned by their men folk over the ages. The bonsai is meant for Dolly, thus associating its symbolism with her. It is also appreciated by Alka, thus pointing to her situation too. Just as a bonsai is fed meagrely, Alka has been given the bare minimum in marriage – just the name of a married woman, without the intimacy or the stability and security. Yet another bonsai seen on Sridhar’s desk is described as “odd” and “grotesque” (264), surely pointing to its basic unnaturalness. What has been accepted (and even found attractive) by the women seems odd in the sphere of the men who, as the controllers, have never been restricted or manipulated. Like the bonsai the women have become “resigned to their new shape” (258).

Over the ages women have come to accept the diminutive role indicated by patriarchal instruction for them. It is interesting to notice that Dolly is not attracted to the role of Queen when Lalitha offers her the idea of wearing the costume of a queen at the forthcoming masquerade ball being planned by the company. Her preference for the role of a tawaif – a woman trained in the feminine arts and accomplishments, whose main aim in life is solely to please



men – is very telling. She is a product of successful conditioning.

Dolly is the stereotypical Indian woman, the bonsai version of womanhood, acquiescing in her subaltern status. All she can do is to dream of a lover who is gentle with her. Kanhaiya, the young cook projected as her lover, is merely a figment of her imagination. But Alka is less quiescent. She makes no secret of her unhappiness and refuses to bow down. However defiant, though, she has not found any effective means of rebellion. Her only act of defiance is to drink. Although Dolly exposes her unkindly, it is obvious that her descent into alcoholism is the result of her intense unhappiness.

Her unhappy rebellion is seen in her drinking and in her less docile behaviour. However, once again, what is considered the standard way of drowning a man's sorrow is seen as quite unacceptable in a woman. This leads Alka to try to disguise her drinking. Alka may drink "guardedly" (244) but she is unguarded in her speech and this too has led to a commotion in the family in the past. Nitin has actually thrown her out of the house before and Dolly and Praful have had to beg to have her reinstated.

When she goes out to dance in the rain, it seems an innocent enough expression of her youthfulness and joy de vivre. However, Dolly is horrified that the watchman has seen her and that the men, who arrive inopportunely at that moment, have seen her too. They will read her innocent action quite differently. Alka may not take things lying down the way Dolly does but her defiance is pretty ineffectual. She crumbles before Jiten's anger. Significantly, though she is thrilled at the thought of dressing up in the costume of Jhansi ki Rani, she craves only tin plate armour and a wooden sword which she would "swish" (296) (ineffectually) around. Rani Lakshmibai dared to play the role of a warrior monarch and fought to the death trying to save her throne and her state. The women recall the famous Bundelkhandi poem about her admirable fight unto death. The poem extols her as a mardani, a woman with the courage of a man. But clearly she was a rare and unique example of a brave woman. History tells us that her battle was a losing one but that did not stop her from putting in her everything to try to save Jhansi. Indian society may pay lip service to her (as they do to goddesses like Durga and legendary women of spirit like Draupadi too) but the woman every man seems to want is a meek

and malleable woman. The treatment meted out to them, again, is like that of Ram to Sita. After all Sita's sacrifices, Ram casts her away for the sake of appearances. She is unable to find a way to win back her position in spite of her innocence. Women in Indian society have been forced into this subaltern position. Like the typical subaltern they are also unable to speak for themselves and to make their plight known, addressed and rectified. Dolly is unable to actually leave Jiten with a Nora-like gesture of defiant rejection (309). Even Alka is finally seen helplessly asleep while Nitin continues his secret double life.

The patriarchal set-up in the family is represented by the Trivedi men – Jiten and Nitin. They have built twin houses for themselves far away from the city. The impression given is that of a romantic, cosy home for two brothers who are close. It seems “cute” (238) and idealistic but is revealed to be something else entirely. They have virtually imprisoned their wives in their well-guarded fortress-like home. The eternal presence of the guard at the gate becomes almost menacing and he most certainly reports the movements of the women to the men. The two houses, far away from the city, become symbolic of the isolation of their wives. The two sisters (married to the Trivedi sons) alternately look after their mother-in-law. Thus they are tied to the home and their considerable responsibilities there. Further, their mother-in-law, Baa, is a bed-ridden invalid, barely able to speak, who requires constant attention. Jiten and Nitin decide not to tell their wives about the money they are borrowing from Praful. This is standard; the wives know nothing about their business affairs either.

The brothers are crass and mercenary: they lie, cheat, bribe, manipulate, abuse and humiliate their associates in chilling power play. Jiten's treatment of Sridhar, their employee, is domineering and disdainful. He seems to be a competent professional and deserves respect, especially since he seems to be the only thing between them and complete bankruptcy. They rely on him to make the project successful, thus making him important to them. However, forcing him into a subaltern position, Jiten orders him around without any modicum of even common courtesy. Finally, he even forces him to procure a whore for him, grossly threatening to sack him otherwise. Sridhar is repelled

and affronted but ultimately remains helpless since he needs his job for economic survival.

Dismissing the findings of the survey Sridhar has carried out, Jiten refuses to take seriously the opinions of “a group of screwed-up women” (276). Women are beneath his notice. He refuses to acknowledge the sexist attitude in the advertisement which the women in the sample survey have condemned.

Praful is (or has been) Jiten’s best friend but this does not stop Jiten from taking the greatest pleasure in cheating him. He calls him a bastard and has no compunction in padding the amount he requires and means to cheat him of the entire amount even though he is his own wife’s brother. He also lies with impunity, telling Praful that his sisters are “away” and telling them, in turn, that Praful did not have the time to visit them since they live “too far” (250).

Violence seems to be a common factor in men’s treatment of women in their family. We discover that Jiten is a wife-beater just as his father was. Baa has suffered many a beating at her husband’s hands and Dolly too has been beaten up by Jiten. In fact, Jiten beat her up when she was pregnant and is responsible for the deformity of their child. Praful is no better as a brother. Alka narrates an incident from her schooldays when Praful objected to her coming home with a (boy) friend and held her face over the stove, deliberately burning her hair. He tells her she must never have anything to do with any men ever. At the end of the play Sridhar actually witnesses what appears to be the deliberate murder of the homeless old woman (who has quietly been sheltering in their compound) at Jiten’s hands. Are we to equate standard masculinity with aggression and violence? Is Nitin’s more gentle and “understanding” (309) nature an attribute of his gay orientation?

Like Mammachi in *The God of Small Things* Baa has also been the victim of domestic violence. We learn that the money in the family was all Baa’s. Her husband was a crude, uncultured man, a “villager” (288) but as the man in the relationship he was able to dominate his wife. She has hated her crude husband and taught her children to hate him too. But, such is the power of the patriarchal image that, in spite of her indoctrination, the boys still grow up with his image as their role model. Jiten learns to be violent and aggressive like

him and Nitin, though appearing more gentle, seems to be “fascinated” by aggression and violence in some way (281). But instead of protecting her daughters-in-law (as fellow women) once she has the position of power, Baa perpetuates the patriarchal attitude. Having over-internalized patriarchal discourse, she, in turn, plays the role of the “she-patriarch” (the worst enemy of her fellow women) and victimizes her daughters-in-law. It is at her instigation that Jiten assaults his pregnant wife to punish her for the lie told by her brother. Praful may have lied about their parentage but Dolly believed they knew the truth. She is an innocent victim.

Her position of she-patriarch is clearly emphasised when Nitin remembers his father who liked huge trees (as opposed to miniature ones). When the father is mentioned, Baa’s room lights up. It could also be seen to be significant that Baa’s room is “above”.

In Act I and in Act III Dolly has Naina Devi’s thumri playing. The symbolism of Naina Devi’s bold decision to sing love songs usually the preserve of tawaifs is central to the play. Dolly tells Lalitha that she married into royalty but still chose to sing like a tawaif. She would surely have been marginalized by society but the wonderful thing is that her husband supported her. Together, they faced all the social ostracism and reproofs that came their way until finally she came to be celebrated as the queen of thumri. This parallel serves to undermine Alka’s stance. While Alka clearly has more spirit than Dolly, she still does not take enough of a stand and also does not persevere long enough.

In another analogical incident Alka rushes in from the rain when the men arrive and complains of being all muddied and dirty. It could be read as implying that her reputation has become besmirched. But Dolly tells her that if she stands in the rain long enough, the mud will wash off. The metaphor is obvious here – however much society may disapprove, they will always grant you your victory if you persevere enough in your convictions. Society is, after all, eternally in a state of transition and will accept a new wave, a new direction if it comes in a strong upsurge that outlasts the typical initial resistance to any form of change.



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Lakshmibai, that brave-as-a-man queen, ultimately lost her battle but not for lack of trying. Alka, who wants to dress up in her costume, looks like she too will ultimately lose her battle but in her case it will be because she has neither fought bravely nor long enough. Metaphorically speaking, she has failed to choose a sword sharp enough and wield it with enough vigour. Again, metaphorically, she has not stood in the rain long enough.

Rani Lakshmibai lost her Jhansi. Naina Devi gave up her royal status for that of a thumri queen. Alka will never acquire her kingdom if she is content to merely put on a queen's costume as fancy dress. But what then of that other queen lurking in his closet? Will Nitin, disclosed to be a closet homosexual, ever find the courage to proclaim his sexual preference in the open? Will he ever find his kingdom? Perhaps, if Dattani keeps writing and increasing the awareness of his audience!

Is the "odd" (264), "interesting" (271), and "grotesque" (271) bonsai in the office designed to be a symbol of Alka's imperfect subjugation or of Nitin's different sexuality and subaltern status? Has Baa's constant plea to abhor his father been responsible for his turning away from the type of (violent) masculinity he saw at home during his growing years and continues to be Jiten's hallmark? Is this what makes him more gentle and understanding with Alka than Jiten is with Dolly? We know from the revealing memory scenes that Nitin is not entirely convinced that he should hate his father. The image of the stammering child points to great internal confusion. Another time we are allowed to witness Baa's insistence that her boys see how badly their father beats her. Is a certain ambivalence towards his father responsible for his turning away from macho male sexuality (perceived as standard) and choosing a different path of sexuality and also, at the same time, the key to his "fascination" (281) with the violent aspect of men like his father and the rickshaw driver?

Baa: Jitu is just like his father. Just like him.

Alka: And you wanted to make sure Nitin would be different.  
(284)

Baa's memory lapses take her back into the past. In response, we

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hear the young Nitin speak in his childish voice, revealing to us the situation of the past during the boys' childhood.

Baa: Nitin? (As if to a child.) Do you like your father?

Nitin: (Voice changes to a child's.) 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- dddon't, I ddddon't...

Baa: There he is! He's coming! Go away! Leave us alone! (Screaming, to Nitin.) Tell me you hate him! He hits me! Nitin, tell me you hate him! Say it!

Nitin: (in a normal voice) Yes! I hate him! (302)

In answer to Erin Mee's statement that "Nitin is the first homosexual character I've encountered in any modern Indian play", Dattani said: "I would say the only time a homosexual character has been treated with sympathy." Certainly, Nitin's inclusion points to a desire to raise awareness about homosexuality as a fact that must be acknowledged. The blame for the sisters' tragedy seems to lie, at different times, with their husbands, their father-in-law, their mother-in-law, and Praful. But, when all is said and done, it is society's rigid structures that force homosexuality into hiding and create problems like Nitin and Alka's.

Like Ibsen did in his social problem plays, Dattani has pointed out a problem existing in the current social matrix in India. Like the problems in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* or *Ghosts* and other plays there is no simple instantaneous solution at hand. But the end of the play finds Lalitha and Sridhar leaving the trouble-torn Trivedi household and, as Michael Walling has pointed out, the final dialogue has a poignancy and "a sense of the huge task

ahead” . Alka is a huddled figure who cannot bear the consciousness of her situation. Dolly is weary but has nowhere to go to escape. Nitin, still a victim of the need for secrecy concerning his chosen sexual affiliation, goes to meet his lover in their secret place. Nothing has changed. When Sridhar notes that the roads are still flooded and they have a “long walk ahead” (314), Robert Frost’s immortal lines come to mind – “But I have miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep.” Indian society is just waking up to acknowledge these problematic issues. We have a long way to go before we can accept the fact of different kinds of sexual orientation without a sense of disturbance. If Nitin had not been concerned about hiding his sexual orientation, he (and Praful) would not have ruined Alka’s life. It is only when Nitin comes out unashamedly that he will come into his own. Men like Jiten and his father need to recognize women as comrades rather than as commodities to use according to their whim. Baa has to stop bothering about what people will say. Social facades have been considered all too important. Social shams and hypocrisy are ultimately the target that Dattani aims to penetrate and deflate. Like Ibsen, he would like society to relinquish its “ghosts”, outmoded ideas about sexuality, gender constructs and whatever else, and march ahead with more transparency in presentation and interaction.

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