Network of Power Relations: A Foucauldian Study of Mahesh Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract
In this paper, I have attempted to explore Foucault’s views on power and how his views stand in stark contrast with the traditional notions of the operations of power. Power, according to Foucault, is at work in diverse relations in society. It operates in everyday affairs in our life, thereby creating multiple power relations in social nexus. This study aims to apply Foucauldian views and ideas to Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man* to reveal how power relations can be located at multiple levels in the two plays.

Key Words: power, resistance, relation, Foucault, family
Foucauldian View on Power: Introduction

Foucault is one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century. His views and ideas have influenced different fields such as philosophy, history, politics, sociology, literature and criticism, though, interestingly enough, he has never claimed himself to be a specialist in any. One of Foucault’s preoccupations was with the idea of power. In fact, this aspect dominates a major part of his writings, lectures and interviews. His fundamental idea regarding power is that power is something that cannot be possessed but can be performed; it is diffused in all social relations. In other words, there are multiple power relations in society and they have different forms. For example, there may be a power-relation between a husband and a wife. If the husband works at an office, there is likely to be another power relation between himself and his boss.

Foucault’s views on power differ from the traditional view. Power is usually conceived of as a tool of the powerful people – a tool that they use to enforce the powerless people to do something against their will. But Foucault would deviate from this view and claim that power can never be owned. Power manifests itself in a myriad of relations in the society. As Foucault puts it in *Power/ Knowledge*:

Power must be analyzed as something which *circulates*, or as something which only *functions* in the form of a chain . . . Power is *employed* and *exercised* through a net-like organization . . . *Individuals are the vehicles* of power, not its points of application. (98) [Emphasis added]

That is to say, power should not be viewed as something that the institutions possess – in fact, it cannot be possessed at all – and use against individuals and groups to dominate, rule and oppress them. Thus Foucault’s views do not go with the Marxist view on power. The earlier Marxists hold that power is held by the state institutions. According to Foucault, they neglect the complexity and immediacy of power-relations in everyday life. Sara Mill is right to say:

. . . rather than simply locating power in a centralized impersonal institution, such as the army or the police, as earlier Marxist theorists had done, he (Foucault) is interested in the local forms of power and the way they are negotiated with by individuals or other agencies. (36)

If the Marxists look upon power as oppressive and repressive, Foucault would like to add that power is also productive. Power not only dominates individuals
and curtails their freedom, but also creates different modes of behavior, events and situations.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that where there is power there is resistance. According to him, resistance is an indispensible part of power. No power relation is possible without resistance. Power and resistance are the two sides of a coin. Power, to borrow Kelly’s words from *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*, is “coextensive with resistance; productive producing positive effects; ubiquitous, being found in every kind of relationship, as a condition of the possibility of any kind of relationship.” (38) It is here that Foucault differs from the conventional notions of power, believing resistance to be “written in” to the exercise of power. But how can one put up resistance? To resist does not always mean to quarrel or to fight openly with those in power. In this context, one may be tempted to refer to James Scott who states in the Preface to *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*:

How do we study power relations when the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful and when the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery? If we take all of this at face value we risk mistaking what may be a tactic for the whole story. Instead, I try to make out a case for a different study of power that uncovers contradictions, tensions, and immanent possibilities. Every subordinate group creates . . . a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. (xii)

That is to say there are indirect modes of resistance. For example the powerless people may feign submission before their superior/s. But in the absence of the latter, they will behave differently, mocking their superior/s, or criticizing them, or inventing demeaning nicknames for them.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault speaks of different techniques and strategies employed by institutions and authority to regulate discipline in society. Foucault’s special emphasis is on how discipline as self-control is internalized by each individual. In this context it would be appropriate to throw light on the Panopticon – a term associated with disciplinary structures. The Panopticon is an architectural structure for prison proposed by Jeremy Bentham. The purpose of such a model of prison is to create in the prisoners a feeling of constantly being watched whereas, in reality, he is not being watched at all. Bentham thought this about prison;
Foucault found it in society. The essence of the idea of the Panopticon is the internalization of the behavioral code of the oppressor. Thus it develops a new form of power relation.

The most sticking aspect of Foucault’s analysis of power is the fact that power relations are ultimately unsuccessful and are incapable of achieving a total domination. If there are resistance and protests, how can power relations gain complete success? And without resistance, there cannot be an effective power relation. Foucault himself states that where there is no resistance it is not, in effect, a power relation.

To conclude, power, according to Foucault, exists in the relations. It can neither be possessed nor be held. Power is not in the individuals, but in their actions. It is diffused in all social relations. In an interview entitled “Power and Sex”, Foucault observes: “. . . the relations of power are perhaps among the best hidden things in the social body . . .” In this paper, I would try to lay bare the network of power relations in the plays concerned.

II

There is no denying the fact that Mahesh Dattani is one of the foremost Indian playwrights writing in English. His plays delineate contemporary social issues, dramatizing the complexities of human relationships. His originality lies in the fact that he dares to handle subject-matters yet unexplored in Indian literature in English. He has the courage to break stereotypes and choose ‘invisible’ issues for his plays. In other words, he follows the unbeaten track in matter of subject matter. He is the first playwright writing in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of plays Final Solutions and Other Plays (1994).

Much has been said and written about Mahesh Dattani’s plays. It would be really interesting to use Foucauldian lens to view Dattani’s plays. Anjali Chaubey aptly comments in her essay “Wired Desires : Reading Bravely Fought the Queen” :

Dattani’s plays penetrate the façade of ‘normalcy’ and expose the power politics at work . . . The struggle with the dominant forces, the survival strategies, appearances and pretences – all get replicated in his plays. (115)

**Bravely Fought the Queen**

*Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) is a play on domestic life. It uncovers the hollowness of the conjugal life in many a cosmopolitan Indian family. The Trivedi family is the nucleus of the play. Jiten Trivedi and Nitin Trivedi are two brothers who are married to Dolly and Alka.
The two wives happen to be two sisters. But unfortunately both are trapped into loveless marriages. They are housewives, living with all luxuries which are sufficient to create the appearance of happiness. But the play unravels their personal lives and exposes the gap between appearance and reality.

The play begins with the entry of an outsider – Lalitha – into the Trivedi household. Lalitha’s husband, who works at the office of the Trivedi-brothers, drops her there. Dolly at that time was preparing herself for a party that they all four were likely to attend. From the interaction between the two we come to know that Lalitha had come there to discuss about some masked ball. Gradually it becomes evident that the party was postponed. Jiten and Nitin knew this but their wives didn’t. This event shows the lack of communication between the husbands and the wives. Dolly’s words – “I’m afraid I don’t know much about my husband’s work.” (235) – reinforce this gap. Evidently Dolly knows little about the whereabouts of her husband. Here we find a power-mechanism in the relationship between the husband and the wife i.e. Dolly and Jiten. Dolly knows about Jiten’s work as much as he has let her know. If the husband-wife relation / Nitin-Dolly relation is a power relation, there must be resistance. Though it is Dolly on whom Nitin wields power, we never find complete submission from Dolly. This emphasizes the exercise of power.

Dattani’s plays peep into the past of the individuals. Jiten is an embodiment of debauchery and cruelty. He neglects his wife and gratifies his sexual hunger by picking up prostitutes. As he states, “It’s a regular thing for Nitin and me. Driving out. Picking a couple up.” (287). Even once he beat Dolly brutally without considering that she was pregnant. As a consequence, the child was born prematurely and with physical disability. A woman, who has a cruel husband and an irritating mother-in-law, is burdened with the responsibility of looking after a handicapped child. But Dolly does not give in to her predicament. She puts up resistance in her own way, thereby thwarting complete domination. She takes resort to imaginative flight – her fascination for Kanhaiya. It is with Kanhaiya that she makes a romantic tryst in the kitchen:

ALKA. So Dolly plays this appropriate thumri . . . The light outside the kitchen is on and I can see very clearly. I see Kanhaiya. Sitting on his hunches on the parapet outside his room. . . . The light outside the kitchen goes off . . . The light inside the kitchen comes on! And the kitchen door opens. I can see him again.
And I can hear the thumri now. Faintly. Dolly comes to the door. In her pale blue nightie. . . . He looks away, waiting for her to ask for something or go away. She doesn’t. He can’t help but look at her. He can easily see the lines of her body, with the light behind her. Perhaps he wishes he could see her face. For familiar signals . . .

ALKA. . . . He . . . jumps off the parapet and slowly walks towards her. Head bent so as not to betray his intentions. He asks her something. . .

ALKA. She moves a little to let him in. He strides in, very confident now. Dolly shuts the door. The kitchen light goes off . . . (262)

But all this is Dolly’s imagination to which only Alka is accustomed. And this is revealed towards the end of the play:

LALITHA. I just want to know something. . . . When I told you Kanhaiya was in the kitchen, how did you know I was lying? (Dolly doesn’t respond.) Tell me. You were so sure I was lying? How? (No response.) Oh! I see it all now! I understand! (Crosses and exits to the kitchen.)

In her imaginary world Dolly finds temporary relief from the constraints of her family life, what if Kanhaiya doesn’t exist? Treated ill by her husband, she finds out one – though he is a fantasy – in whose arms she would relish love. One may be tempted to say that her fantasy gives her a strong position in the power relation.

There is an identical power mechanism in the husband-wife relationship of Nitin and Alka. Nitin is a homosexual and had a homosexual liaison with Praful, the brother of Dolly and Alka. It is evident that he marries Alka so that he can sublimate his homosexuality under the façade of marriage. Like her sister, Alka feels equally isolated and neglected. But she, too, does not succumb to her predicament. She also fights back. A power-relation, according to Foucault, has to be reciprocal. It is never a victim-victimizer relation. In the play, Alka never appears as a victim. As Dattani himself says in an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, “I am not sure I have portrayed the women as victim in Bravely Fought the Queen.” (130)

If Dolly finds relief in her fantasy-world, Alka takes resort to alcohol. She is a regular boozer. And she has no scruples about it. She drinks even before a visitor. Needless to say, this habit gives her a sort of individuality.
A power relation can be located in the brother-sister/s relationship in Bravely Fought the Queen. Praful tries to exert domination upon his sisters even from their girlhood. One may cite the example of Praful burning the hair of Alka. Once Alka returned from school by riding the scooter of a neighbour’s son. The boy dropped her right at their doorstep and Praful noticed it. He gave her a painful lesson for violating the code of conduct:

**ALKA.** . . . He just dragged me into the kitchen. He lit the stove and pushed my face in front of it! I thought he was going to burn my face! He burnt my hair. I can still smell my hair on fire. Nitin was right behind us. Watching! Just . . . Praful said, ‘Don’t you ever look at any man. Ever.’ (257)

Later Praful arranges her marriage with Nitin with whom he had a homosexual affair. It may seem that in the brother-sister relationship Praful is the oppressor and Alka is the oppressed. But Alka does not give in. She criticizes her brother even to the extent of calling him a ‘saint’ in an ironical tone:

**ALKA.** Our saint of a brother used to warn us against men like you. *(Points to Jiten.)* And what does he do? The saint gives his sister to the sinner and disappears! . . . The saint has another sister who is *(slaps her own face)* bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend! The sinner’s brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a coincidence. (300)

If in a power relation the dominant side fails to gain total submission from the subordinate group, the above reaction of Alka proves the fact. If resistance is the precondition of a power relation, Alka resists by protesting against her brother’s conduct or by refusing to keep mum.

Finally, the existence of Baa creates a number of power-relations. If the Trivedi family is taken for a Panopticon, Baa is located upon the towering structure and her sons and daughters-in-law, in the cells. She never appears on stage; yet she has a dominating influence on the bahaviour and activities of the other four. In Act I, every so often the ringing of her bell is heard. With her bell she calls upon her daughters-in-law who have to obey her call. Even if they feel irritated, they can’t help responding:

**Dolly. (calling)**. Yes, I’m coming! *(To Lalitha)* Without fail, she calls me when I’m in the bathroom. Why don’t you go and speak to her? In there. Tell her I’m coming in a minute. (240)
In Act II, Baa’s position remains the same. According to the stage direction, “The level representing Baa’s room remains as in Act I.”(264) The suggestion is that there will be much influence of Baa on what the characters do and say. It is revealed that they have to act according to their mother’s wishes. Baa owns the property of the family and it is in her power whom she will bequeath it. As Nitin expects to get the property, he has to behave as an obedient son. So he speaks of the constraint, “It was difficult for me. I had to live up to her expectations. . . . (289) Later we gather that Jiten beat her wife partly because it was Baa’s wish:

  BAA. Jitu, throw him out of the house!
  BAA. No! Jitu, hit her on the face but not on the . . . stop it Jitu! On the face, only on the face! Enough! Stop! (311)

As Jiten confesses:

  JITEN. Baa provoked me. It was her fault. (BFQ 310)

So, Jiten beat his wife partly because Baa provoked him. But it would be interesting to note that beating wife or turning wife out of house gets internalized in the behaviour of the two sons. One instance would suffice. When Jiten and Nitin converse about the difficulty of getting the property from Baa, Jiten instigates Nitin to turn Alka out of the house:

  JITEN: Throw her out of the house. This time, for good. Damn Praful’s money! The property is more important. . . . Your marriage never worked. She is a drunkard. An alcoholic. Your wife is a boozer and you still keep her? What kind of a man are you? (290)

It is noticeable that if Jiten’s purpose were merely to gain the property or the house from Baa, he would have suggested Nitin to pretend to turn Alka out instead of doing it seriously. So, it is evident that disciplinary power is at work in the mother-son/s relationship.

**Dance Like a Man**

*Dance Like a Man* (1989) is one of the highly acclaimed plays written by Mahesh Dattani. The play revolves round the Parekh family, just as *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) does on the Trivedi family. An adept artist that Dattani is, he captures three generations of the said family within the two acts of the play. Rightly does Dr. Beena Agarwal say, “The action in the play moves between the past, present and future synchronically dissolving the different time shifts and anticipating the fate of three generations.” (97)
Dance Like a Man hinges on the conflict between tradition and modernity. The immediate location of the conflict is the Parekh family. Jairaj Parekh and his wife Ratna are two old Bharatnatyan dancers. In their youth they were good dancers, but their career could not flourish up to their expectation. To enquire the cause would be to bring out the clash between Jairaj and his father Amritlal. Amritlal Parekh was a freedom fighter and had much social reputation. But he was, in Jairaj’s words, “conservative” and “prudish”. (416). He would not let Jairaj take up the career of a dancer because a man, according to him, no longer remains a man when he chooses dancing as his career:

JAIJRAJ (drinks). The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares – what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man. . . . (406)

Obviously, these are Amritlal’s words that Jairaj mimics. Amritlal wants to impress upon his son the fact that dancing does not go with masculinity. Thus Amritlal tries to thrust his views upon his son. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri is right to opine, “Amritlal carries the baggage of his own times and tries to manipulate the next generation – Jairaj and Ratna – to carry it forward.” (34)

Hence, it is easy for a reader to identify a power relation in the father-son relationship where the father tries to exert his authority upon his son and keep the latter under his control. But in Foucauldian view power is not one-sided. As it would look upon power as being productive rather than being repressive, we would look into what new behaviour and incidents are generated from the father-son power relation. First, Jairaj does not contribute to his father’s views on dance. He protests:

JAIJRAJ. Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn’t fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands. Why, you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us! (416)

Amritlal even goes to the extent of stopping the practice of Jairaj and Ratna before their Guruji at home. Jairaj decides to leave his home with his wife. He would not let his father destroy his career as a dancer. But after a few days he had to come back defeated.

At this juncture new turns take place in different relationships. Amritlal declares that he will not object the two practicing dance. But he lays out a plot so that Jairaj himself gives it up.
To this end, he first convinces Ratna that it is in his power to let her dance. The following conversation throws light on it:

AMRITLAL. Hmm. And you are intelligent enough to realize now that the decision to let you dance is in my hands, not his (Jairaj’s).

RATNA. You have made that very clear. (427)

Amritlal becomes manipulative, using Ratna in preventing Jairaj from dancing. He makes a pact with Ratna — he would let Ratna practice dancing; in return Ratna would stop Jairaj dancing:

AMRITLAL. It is hard for me to explain. I leave it to you. Help me and I’ll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done. (427)

Thus the power relation between the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law unleashes a number of new incidents. Ratna cannot give up her dream of achieving success in her dancing career. To make her dream come true, she complies with Amritlal’s intention and gradually destroys Jairaj’s dancing career. And Jairaj is not too naïve to realize this:

JAIRAJ. . . You destroy me first, then give the impression that there wasn’t much to destroy in the first place, then blame it all on my father, then suggest I make myself useful by being your stage prop, then use words like ‘regret’ and expect me to shrug my shoulders, resign myself and believe that my calling in life is to serve you. . . . (444)

According to Foucault, the individual belonging to the subordinate section would not completely submit himself/herself to those in power. Just as Jairaj protests against his father who intended to prevent him from pursuing the career of dancing, so also he criticizes his wife by reminding her again and again that it was she who realized his father’s intention. The destruction of Jairaj’s career generates three new situations. First, Jairaj turns into a drunkard, a good-for-nothing fellow. Second, Ratna is able to further her career. But on account of her excessive indulgence in it, she neglects her son Shankar. The child dies because of the overdose of opium given to him by his ayah. Finally, both Jairaj and Ratna become overambitious so much so that they try to realize their dream through their daughter Lata. She is also a promising dancer who is going to perform her maiden dance before a number of VIPs. If she can make a thundering performance, it will open up a number of opportunities for her career. Ultimately, Lata proves to be a talented dancer for whom a bright future is waiting.
Of all the power relations in the play, the father-son relationship is the most effective one. It has a lasting effect on the other relations in the play. In other words, it holds the central thread of other relations. The power relation existing between Amritlal and Ratna or between Ratna and Jairaj would not have come to the fore if there had been no ups and downs in Amritlal-Jairaj relationship. Thus, a web of power relations can be identified in the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*.

**Works Cited**


