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Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

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Good morning. Let us resume our discussion of Mahesh Dattani's plays. In the last session we looked at one of his plays called Final Solutions where the play is really about the main characters Ramanik and his daughter Smita who come from a liberal Hindu family and they have to negotiate with two extreme ends of religious orthodoxy. So on one hand you have Ramanik's

wife Aruna who is a very orthodox hindu, observes rights of purity and pollution is unwilling to give water or feed Javed and Bobby who are visiting who are actually escaping from a bloodthirsty mob that wants to kill them that accuses them of conspiring against Hindus. So she is unwilling to actually give them anything because she does not like to feed or share her domestic space with people who belong to different castes or other religions. And on the other hand you have someone like Javed who is this young idealistic rebellious Muslim man, the brother of Smita's classmate Tashlim who wants to – who actually finally confesses towards in the play that he was the one who actually triggered the riots between the Hindus and the Muslims. And so he takes responsibility for it and he said that he's the one who was the one who actually triggers the riots between the Hindus and Muslims and they were actually not – they were lying about being chased by Hindu mob. When Javed tells Ramanik that I am the mob. You can't separate me from the mob. There's no difference between me and them. What I do and what they do is the same thing. We both create violence and unrest between Hindus and Muslims. It's just that I do it in a different street and they do it in a different street.

So he confesses that he is the and even identify as Javed even identifies with Aruna saying that they are both two ends of the same spectrum of communalism and fundamentalism. And you also have another intersecting narrative in Final Solutions which is the story of Hardika the grandmother or who under constant flashbacks in the play which suggests her memories of partition of how for the longest time she thought that the Muslims were actually responsible for killing her father during partition. It also describes a friendship with Zarin, a Muslim woman whose father owns fabric store and the fabric store ends up getting burnt by Hardika's own in-laws. So Hardika and Daksha are two interchangeable characters. Daksha playing the young, the youthful version of Hardika.

And so they realized that she'd finally discovers that it was her in-laws who actually burnt Zarin's father's shop and bought the shop from him at half the price. So she discovers later on that her family had refused to give Zarin's father a job or give him a loan to restart his business. And you also see another transformative towards the end of Final Solutions where Bobby, Javed's brother-in-law to be the man who was engaged to be married to the Tashlim he's the one who actually holds the idol of Krishna towards the end of the play in his hand to test Aruna's faith.

So the entire play is really about the negotiation of Hindu liberalism with conservatism, orthodoxy, fundamentalism and it really is testing the limits of what it means to be a liberal Hindu and so the play in fact is quite relevant considering that it was performed in 89 and also before the whole Mandir Mandal and Masjid controversy. So it's an important comment on the very fraught and complex relationship with liberalism on the one hand and on the other fundamentalism and communal violence. So Aruna again is also forced to transform, compelled to transform herself. She actually realizes that she has to practice greater tolerance and she believes now in towards the end she says that she believes in the plurality of faiths that there are many ways to God and that again becomes a liberal standpoint right from one who was quite orthodox and puritanical. And Smita, the daughter, also confesses how she was – she has been suffocated by her mother's piety but that she tolerated her despite the fact that her mother tried to superimpose her own version of faith in Lord Krishna onto Smita and Hardika also discovers towards the end that it was from her son she discovers that it was actually her in-laws who created the violence. So every character in the novel the undergo certain transformation even Javed realizes towards the end that he hates his life that unlike Bobby who will never identified with being Muslim. He is also ashamed of belonging to his community for the violence that they

had committed but now Javed also confesses that he has led a meaningless life by creating unnecessary violence and that has killed many innocent lives.

So let's go to the next play which is another important play by the Dattani called *Bravely Fought the Queen*. And of course the title of the play itself is an allusion to *Jhansi ki Rani* which becomes an important allusion towards the middle of the play as a symbol of female emancipation, female freedom of a certain kind but although this freedom also is couched in extremely masculine terms. So what it means to be a free woman is probably to take power into your hands and to be able to position yourself as a very self-owning independent, self-determining, brave manly woman and so that becomes one of the motives or symbols in the play.

The play itself is actually quite densely plotted because there are quite a few characters and lots of secrets that are revealed by the end of the play which reveals the hypocrisy of institutions like the family right. So you have certain norms that have to be obeyed and that have to be adhered to when you belong to a family but then that by the end of it becomes a sham. It's exposed for, it's hollowness by the end of the play. So it begins with a complete outsider to the family. So you have two brothers you have Jiten and Niten who own and live in twin houses in this very posh locality in Bangalore called Koramangala. The entire play is set in Bangalore and they both own twin houses in Koramangala next to each other. Two brothers are married to two sisters Dolly and Alka and Dolly and Alka have a brother called Praful who never actually appears on stage but is constantly being mentioned and then becomes the focal character of the play by the end even though he never appears on stage. And you have Baa who is the old mother of Niten, Jiten who lives upstairs and if you remember the very complex and elaborate stage settings that Dattani has which suggests a layered stage that can be mapped onto the layers of the human psyche and it also does a very interesting play with time and temporalities. So just like the previous play where you have two intersecting narratives one of Hardika's/Daksha and on the other hand you have the narrative of Ramanik's and the encounter with Javed and Bobby intercutting on and intersecting each other.

Similarly you have another intersecting intercutting form in this play where you have Baa who's living upstairs in Dolly's house and she's always in bed and she probably has dementia because she's losing her memory. She only has memories of [00:08:52] Alzheimer's and she only has memories of her son's youth but she doesn't remember. She obviously doesn't remember what's happening in the present. So her constant calls for help, her constant calls to Dolly and Alka interrupt the main narrative of the play and you also have the main scene which is set in Dolly's drawing-room where Dolly and in Alka, Alka of course is in the neighboring house and they initially a lot of the what's happening in the play is not very clear. We only have suggestions that from these sisters being rather lonely and isolated and uncomfortable in family they married into. They don't seem to be entirely – they don't seem to have a very harmonious and loving relationship to each other. We sense that there are lots of animosities, hidden animosities and secrets that will probably be revealed across the course of the play. The initial act just to go over the summary of the plot you have an outsider called Lalitha who doesn't belong to the family and she is the wife of Sridhar who works for Nitin and Jaten and Nitin and Jiten run a business which, not a business but actually run an advertising firm which is on the threat of becoming bankrupt. So it's fast failing business and they are trying – struggling the desperate to actually keep it afloat for which they need money and they need Sridhar also because Sridhar is one of their assistants who needs to get this new account. He called Revati and Revati is a new range of color coordinated night wear and underwear for women and Sridhar has been given the

responsibility of finding funders, people who will -- clients important clients who will sponsor and fund this campaign and his wife Lalitha has been asked to organize a mass to ball with Dolly and Alka and she wants Dolly to suggest costumes for the actors since the models were going to be acting in the new ad campaign since Dolly seems to have some experience with tailoring and stitching women's clothes.

So there seems to be a misunderstanding in the beginning of the play when Lalitha meets them and Dolly is not expecting her at all. She's not sure why she's here and then there seems to be a mix-up in the dates but then the mix-up also becomes a pretext for them to actually discover for Lalitha to discover a lot about the secrets, the hidden secrets and animosities and hostilities of the Trivedi family. So Dolly seems to be a fairly very irritable and guarded woman. She's emotionally distant. We don't know much about her and Lalitha is trying to understand her but it's not able to. It's interesting that the scene begins with Dolly wearing, Dolly's face completely covered by a facepack. So she's wearing a facial mask for her skin and she's not unable to talk very much or move very much for fear of cracking the makeup on the face and so she's not able to -- so she's she's literally she's wearing a mask. So it's interesting that she's literally wearing some kind of a mask, a face pack in the in the first act suggesting as it were that she has lots of secrets, hidden secrets, hidden desires, hidden animosity, which cannot be revealed. The brothers as I mentioned earlier Nitin and Jiten are living in large twin houses in Kormangala which is a posh locality in Bangalore and there's the other character who does not appear on stage which is Daksha. Daksha is Dolly and Jiten's daughter and Dolly seems to be someone who is rather lonely isolated I mean rather quiet, rather a neglectful mother. She doesn't really know in which school Daksha goes to. She just vaguely knows that she goes some school in Ooty but then where in Ooty she has no idea. And Alka and her sister Dolly both seem to be lonely and isolated and trapped in the house looking after their poor mother-in-law who seems to have lost her memory. There's some confusion and miscommunication over the dates and Lalitha certainly feels very confused and flustered and feelings as if unwanted in a house especially because she's come on the wrong date but she feels an unwanted guest. And she also senses the hidden animosities between Dolly and Alka.

Dolly later on we discover over the course of the play over the conversations that Dolly, Alka have that Dolly is it seems to be a lot more reticent, not a very friendly woman not very outgoing unlike Alka who seems to be a lot more social and gregarious in her behavior. And Dolly also seems be jealous and resentful of Alka because Alka seems to be far better informed about their family plans. She doesn't seem to know much. She feels that Alka is the one who gets to know first about any plans, any outings that the family is going to go on. So Alka is married to her brother Nitin. Dolly also another kind of person who seems to like talking to strangers at large impersonal parties. So she's probably tired of leading the kind of glamorous and wealthy life that her husband leads which entails organizing and hosting large parties where one ends up being trapped talking to strangers. So she is probably a little but she's also disappointed that she can't step out because now because the mix-up of dates since Lalitha seems to have come in the wrong date and she had no idea of the masked ball that she is now trapped at home and she's disappointed either that the outing is not happening. So while she's dressing up and wearing her makeup eagerly looking forward to stepping out with her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister. They were supposed to go to meet the Kapoor's another important client but then the party is called off and so she feels disappointed that she can't step out.

So the sister seem to be quite – they seem to feel rather trapped in that house, in that large mansion looking taking care of their mother-in-law. Then there are also certain others snatches of conversation between hints that are being thrown, peppered through out the play between Dolly and Alka and which reveals more and more about their shared history. So we discover that Alka is an alcoholic who drinks a lot and was also once thrown out of the house for insulting the mother-in-law until her brother Praful convinces Nitin. So Praful and Nitin are college friends and so Praful convinces Nitin to take his sister back and Praful also threatens Alka if she's seen drinking or if she is seen having even the slightest remotest affair with any other man. So the suspicion is that Alka is probably tired of her marriage. Perhaps she's having an affair with another man although that's not entirely clear. But the fact that she is also drunk she says she has no control over her drinking and that she once also insulted her mother-in-law.

And another interesting symbol that records throughout the play is also that of the Bonsai. So Lalitha Sridhar's wife who comes to meet Dolly and Alka for the masked ball is known for Bonsai. So she makes Bonsais and Bonsai as we know have to be stunted to grow to its limited size as a miniature tree. So the roots have to be tied up and they have to be given just upon enough space that the Bonsai just not actually grow up and grow into normal into its normal size. So the Bonsai perhaps also becomes a symbol of women's lives especially women who have suffered patriarchy. And that becomes clear because later on we discover that Baa the mother-in-law through her stashes of memories of her memories of her youth we discover that she was ill treated and beaten up by her husband and so she seems to suffer the same fate at the hands of a husband that in some sense Dolly and Alka later seem to be facing at the hands of their husbands and brother.

So the common motive that links the two narratives of Ba's narrative of her youth, of her violent marriage with Dolly and Alka is one of patriarchal violence, domestic violence. There is another character who's mentioned who never actually appears on stage which is Kanhaiya and Kanhaiya is the young replacement of the temporary cook who works for Dolly and we later discover that Kanhaiya does not exist. So we think that he exists, that he is present somewhere but that he actually ends up being just an invention of Dolly's imagination. So he is just a fictional character who symbolizes who embodies Dolly's fantasy, erotic fantasy. She imagines him as someone who was young and dark and attractive and desirable. And then you also have Daksha who is Dolly's daughter who never actually appears on stage but later we discover that she is training to be a Bharatanatyam dancer but that she's actually a woman who is, a young woman who is disabled. So has suffered certain disabilities. We discover later on why or how she became disabled. But now she is rather incapacitated but still trying – she studies in a special school for children with disabilities and that she's trained to be a Bharatanatyam dancer.

In Act 2 we again are given hints of Nitin and Jiten's advertising firm which is suffering due to lack of funds. Nitin and Jatin has -- they have been given an interest-free loan from Praful for the advertising campaign and they decide to ask for 12 insteado [Foreign Language] the initial 10 lakhs so that they can use 10 lakhs for their advertising campaign and spend the remaining 2 lakhs as interest. So that can be circulated as interest. And they don't want Dolly and Alka to know that their brother Praful has given them money. They on the other hand think the brothers assume that Praful is an inferior fool who actually loaned the money without any interest. So they are actually quite shocked and amazed by and contemptuous of Praful for giving them a interest-free loan and they just assume that he is doing it only because he wants them to remain married to his sisters.

So Jiten and Nitin are struggling to keep the business afloat and their only hope is to get the Revati account for female night wear and inner wear and they're not very happy with the way Sridhar their assistant is handling their account. The client apparently does not like their idea which they – the client claims that they are advertising campaign for this – for women's underwear and inner-wear does not truly understand what women and what they want. So it's not – they accuse him they accuse them of being of obscenity. They think that they are actually that their advertising campaign is quite obscene and sexualizes the woman who is dressed up in her rather attractive and seductive lingerie waiting for her husband to come back from work.

So they have a problem with the opposite the open explicit obscenity of the advertising campaign and then later on Jiten who is the older of the two brothers Dolly's husband also we discover that Jiten is very violent man. He is not someone who listens to reason. He someone who's always violent. He always erupts into violence and rage and he suggested the campaign that the advertising campaign should target men instead of women because if you target men who have the buying power to make their women look sexy then that would actually be a far more successful campaign. Then targeting women who may not have been purchasing power and so they're actually after all dressing up only to please their men. So the campaign he believes should actually target men who have the purchasing power to make the woman look sexy.

So as I mentioned earlier you also have undercutting intercutting memories from Baa. So you have Baa's past memory of her son's childhood which suggests that her sons were actually spoiled by their father but she also reveals that she gave them whatever money, little she had, she got from her father for which she was beaten up by her husband. So we realized that her husband Baa's husband was a violent man who probably did not give her much money who just used her as a servant, as a slave and Baa's only choice was to ask her father for money to spend on her sons. Jiten now wants to sell their ancestral home in Kormangala to pay off their debts in order to then get this Revati account. Even though Nitin on the other hand is reluctant to give up the family home because of the memories, the childhood memories that are associated with the house and Jiten of course he was very upset that Sridhar agrees with the customers feedback when the customers say probably when your customers are of course women and so when they feel that the campaign is rather obscene Sridhar agrees with them but Jiten doesn't and so Jiten nearly fires reader for disagreeing with him. There is also a past incident of road rage which suggests that Jiten's driver had nearly killed an auto rickshaw driver. So Jiten's driver had driven the car across over the auto rickshaw at night. Luckily the driver was not in the auto rickshaw but then he was waiting in a shop while the auto rickshaw was parked somewhere and when Jiten's driver just drove, they try to drive across – drive past the auto rickshaw that had just moved down. The driver came in search of, Jiten's driver but Jiten's driver manages to actually drive past drive on with the auto rickshaw driver holding onto the window. So when the auto rickshaw driver does not let go of the car the driver actually embraces his neck with his arm and tries to strangle him. And so there is this incident of class arrogance and so that again becomes a suggestion of Jiten's violent character something which he seems to share with his father, somebody who's extremely violent and arrogant.

Baa also clearly does not seem to like Alka because she thinks that Alka is a promiscuous woman, a woman who is alcoholic and Alka doesn't have a child also with Nitin and Baa thinks Alka is devious like her mother. So there's another suggestion that there's something different about Alka and Dolly's family. We discover later that Alka and Dolly's mother was a singer and dancer. So this is of course during just post independence when it was still – when the very idea

of a woman singing and performing and dancing was shunned and stigmatized. And so Baa does not approve of Alka's and Dolly's mother who was someone who performed, was a performing singer.

Jiten also tries to conceal the fact that Praful gave the money and he lies to Dolly saying that Praful actually owes them money and then Jiten also makes Sridhar, Jiten of course lies to Sridhar later on saying that he and Nitin pick up sexual escorts in their office and so he then later on forces Sridhar to pick up a sex worker for him and bring her to the office.

So we discover from these different moments in the play that not everything is fine, that the family is also under – is on the verge of collapsing. The marriages are on the verge of collapsing and that nobody seems to be quite happy in the marriage. So Jiten also seems to somebody who is having sexual affairs with completely impunity and doesn't care but what his wife thinks and also forces his authority on Sridhar and makes him bring him a sex worker who will give him pleasure. We also then later on discover towards the end of Act 2 that the house, the ancestral home that Jiten in wanted to sell off to redeem his debts and to get the Revati account has been willed to Daksha. So Daksha is the only heir of the family and she is Dolly and Jiten's daughter. So Nitin tells Jiten that he learned from Baa that she had willed the ancestral home to Daksha and now Jiten is helpless. He does not know what to do about it and he wants Nitin to actually leave Alka because she's an alcoholic and she is probably having affairs with other men. So Jiten thinks that if Nitin divorces Alka he will again win Baa's approval because Nitin was always Baa's favorite son. He is the one who is described as someone who is gentle, who is fair-skinned. The husband so Baa is fair like Nitin. Nitin has taken on her Baa's looks complexion, gentle person unlike Jiten who's like his father who is dark complexion, who is violent, who is authoritarian and so agitated assumes that if Nitin leaves Alka he will again win Baa's favor because Baa does not like Alka.

So that's what he compels Nitin to do. He orders Nitin to abandon or to divorce Alka so that they can get the property back from Baa and in Act 3 again you have the revelation of some more secrets where under the effect of alcohols the two sisters are having or sharing a drink with Lalitha who doesn't drink very much and under the effect of alcohol many other illicit secrets and desires emerge.

So the women of course this becomes an opportunity for them to actually imagine the possibility of playing a transgressive role. So this allusion to Subhadhra Kumari Chauhan's poem on Jhansi ki Rani comes here when Jhansi ki Rani again becomes a symbol, a fantasy of female freedom from social strictures, oppressive norms of family.

So Alka imagines herself as being Jhansi ki Rani. Dolly wants to be a tabawif, tabawif like probably their mother was someone who can sing in fact they keep playing the songs of these thumris by Naina Devi and that itself becomes a symbol of of transgressive symbol of the female voice, of the female singing voice that sings. So this whole idea of singing and performing in some senses is an act of exposing visiblizing oneself within before the patriarchal gaze and then Alka suddenly begins to start dancing in abandon in the rains and so there's a brief sense of freedom as she seems to have as she danced the rains with her clothes getting drenched.

So Daksha later on we discover is the heir of the ancestral home and we also learned that she is, as I mentioned earlier, she is a child – she's a disabled child and so we discover that she was not born disabled. And we also discover that Praful has been made the trustee of the house. So Baa seems to constantly ask Praful or despite the fact that she's losing a memory she remembers

Praful and we now know why she always wanted Praful because she thought that Jiten would never be a kind and giving father considering he was violent like his father Baa believed that Praful was the only person who would love and take care of Daksha. So she makes Praful the trustee of the house and not Jiten or Nitin and Nitin of course also because he got married to Alka whom she doesn't approve of that she realized that Praful was the only person who could actually be the trustee of the house and we later discover from Baa's cousin who tells her that Anka and Dolly's mother was their father's second wife if not wife at least mistress or keep. So we discover that the mother was a singer who was not probably legally wedded to their father who was already married and so there is that stigma of belonging to a family or lineage of female singers and an illegitimate marriage. So Baa seems to not approve of that that Dolly and Alka's mother was a singer who was not legally wedded to their father.

We discover that Jiten had you know in one of his violent rages had actually beaten Dolly up when she was pregnant shortly after their marriage and it's because of that incident that she ends up giving birth to a premature and disabled daughter. And so Jiten is terribly [00:31:58] mostly guilty for having produced her, for having threatened his daughter's life and so he a lot of the love and affection and goes towards Daksha by Jiten is out of sheer guilt and remorse. We also discover that Nitin was having an affair with Praful. So there is another secret which is revealed that Nitin was married to Alka for sheer convenience so that he could actually further his relationship with Praful and so we realized that there was an illicit affair between Praful and Nitin and that Praful had married Nitin tricked him or forced him to marry Alka only for the convenience sake and that probably now Alka realizes that and knows of the affair which is why she longs to be out of the marriage. She feels that she's trapped in a completely loveless marriage. Kanhaiya also we discover was made-up fantasy by Folly who seems to be not only trapped in her in a loveless and violent marriage and she also finally walks out on her husband towards the end of the play and the auto rickshaw driver who we also discover we saw – there's a scene where the auto rickshaw driver Lalitha discovers rickshaw driver climbing the wall of the house at night and walking towards the – she is going towards the outhouse towards the back of the house and we probably this is a suggestion that probably Nitin was having an affair also with the auto rickshaw driver.

We see that the play in some sense slowly gradually unravels secrets that expose the hypocrisy of familial intimacy's that the family which is supposed to be the most the institution, the space, the emotional affective space where the most the most intimate relationships are possible that becomes in fact ironically the very state, the very sight of estrangement and alienation and violence. And we see how this occurs to across the two intersecting narratives between Baa on the one hand who was trapped in a violent marriage who had to resort to her father for to get money for her children and Jiten who like his father has a rather violent relationship with his wife and also is responsible for producing a disabled daughter and Praful who threatens Alka, threatens to burn a hair if she does not actually conform to being a good wife while he conveniently has an affair with her own husband. So you see the hypocrisy and the irony of patriarchy.

So this is exactly where the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* ends. So this is our discussion often *Bravely Fought the Queen*. We will now return with a discussion of another play by Mahesh Dattani, the last play we should be discussing which will again a deal with a similar issue that has to do with gender, the social regulation of gender and sexuality which is called *Dance Like A Man*.

Thank you.