



# Patriarchal Hegemony and Alienation of Women in Mahesh Dattani's "Bravely Fought the Queen"

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**Abstract**— The play "Bravely Fought the Queen" was written by Mahesh Dattani in 1991 and was published by Penguin Books in 2006. It delves into "questions of gender, sexuality, identity, and family politics all at once" (Rathee 31). Besides these inquiries, the play explores unique aspects of women's bravery, such as resilience and defiance in the quest for identity. "Dattani portrays unconventional, radical, and rational aspects of societal issues, containing the seeds of the clash between the individual's 'self' and society's pre-determined frameworks" (Agrawal 185). The playwright focuses on feminine concerns within the repressed context of homosexuality in a society that only acknowledges heterosexuality. Those who are still uncomfortable discussing sexuality cannot accept non-traditional sexual orientations such as homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism. Many people "like to discuss feminism because it's widely accepted, but they are unable to address gay issues because it's not considered Indian. It doesn't happen here" (Erin 21). However, Mahesh Dattani has stated that "being gay or lesbian is neither right nor wrong; it's reality, and we need to learn to accept alternative relationships and coexist with them" (Qt. in Erin 21). This paper examines the marginalization and domination of women by patriarchal society. Methodologically, it contains a feminist reading of the text, evaluating the exploitation of women during that period. Dattani has effectively portrayed the crisis and trauma of female psychology through the play. The present research paper subtly explores the theme of male domination and the social status of women throughout the play.

**Keywords**— Patriarchal, Domination, Marginalization, Abuse, Suffering.



## I. INTRODUCTION

Books reflect life comprehensively. They are widely seen as a way to express self-identity and the author's socio-cultural issues. They provide a stage to uncover the complex ways in which individuals categorize themselves and their understanding of social, cultural, and political truths.

Dattani once noted, "Theatre has always been a reflection of man, portraying his world and the enduring conflicts that torment him, evoking a range of human emotions" ("Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance" 1). Emphasizing this "reflection" inherently rules out the possibility of resolving conflicts, reversing situations, or rejecting the current reality – none of which occur in the play "Bravely Fought the Queen". Nevertheless, the play has achieved remarkable success on stage and in print since it entered the

realm of Indian English theatre, both domestically and internationally. While not the product of a visionary, it is not an "imitation" of reality, but rather a "representation" of harsh realities by spotlighting a darker reality that very few creative writers have been willing to acknowledge. The envisioned outcome is not a revolution, but a revelation of multiple truths through the performance and enactment of history (to the audience and even those responsible for the horror), intentionally keeping the consequence beyond the scope of the theatre - both literally and metaphorically. The patriarchy sustains itself by favouring a way of seeing things that are based on men's experiences as the standard for judging the experiences of both genders, effectively disregarding women's perspectives. We encounter individuals who have internalized patriarchal norms and values, shaping their perception of life. The play aims to showcase the

specific cultural effect of this operation, magnifying it intentionally. Dattani offers an assessment of what is presented as the "Indian tradition," revealing its intrinsic contradictions, and the way the discourse is used to preserve hetero-patriarchy, which is basically a colonial legacy. As stated in Mee (319), "You can't talk about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having sex with the cook or having a sex life – that isn't Indian either – that's confrontational even if it is Indian." The artistic construction may not offer a resolution, but it does challenge the predominant social and political narrative.

"Hetero-patriarchy is a overriding system where men hold power through the practice of obligatory heterosexuality. It involves forcing unwilling women into humbling marriages, ill-treating pregnant wives, and defining women as objects of sexual gratification.

"*Bravely Fought the Queen*" is a play set inside the Trivedi household that highlights how power functions within an Indian family. It delves into the clash between old-fashioned cultural values and modern realities, challenging domineering family structures and offering a provoking interpretation of traditional family portrayals in Indian television serials.

Dattani's play digs into the Indian tradition of negotiated marriage, prioritizing family honour over individual choice, the subservience of the bride's family, and the societal validation of only heterosexual relationships. It also discourses the preservation of women's grief in repressive marriages without support. The play explores various forms of domestic violence, including same-gender violence, diverse masculinity, and commercial exploitation of women. Dattani portrays a segment of society that aims to oppress marginalized groups such as women, gays, subalterns, employees, and individuals with dark complexions. The play delves into the facades that individuals and families put up to deceive the world, revealing the emotional toll they pay to appear successful in their need to belong and to contend with societal scrutiny.

#### Women Characters in "Bravely Fought the Queen"

The fourth play by Mahesh Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, was first performed at the Sophia Bhabha Hall in Mumbai on August 2, 1991.

Dattani explores the status of women in contemporary Indian society and portrays the historical oppression of women in the play. The story portrays domestic tragedy and the challenges faced by women due to patriarchal dominance. The female characters, mostly the women of the Trivedi family, tolerate suffering due to male dominion. There are four physically present female characters in the play and two others whose presence is highlighted though

they are not substantially present. There are six male characters, two of whom are not physically present; all, excluding Sridhar, exploit women. The actually present female characters in the play comprise Baa, the mother of Jiten and Nitin Trivedi; Jiten's wife, Dolly, Sridhar's wife Lalitha, and Nitin's wife, Alka. Sridhar, a worker in Jiten and Nitin's company, is one of the four male characters physically present in the play. The other anonymous male characters, who are not actually present, are the man who marries Praful's mother and Baa's husband. Now, let us examine how the female characters in the play are maltreated at the hands of their male counterparts.

The play portrays the exploitation of the three women of the Trivedi family. Let us start with **Baa**. At the beginning of the play, we see Baa as the fragile mother of Jiten and Nitin, with white hair and dressed in a white sari. Through a sequence of flashbacks in the play and her helplessness to delete 'memory' and 'past' from her mind, we come to know about her catastrophic past and the injustice and exploitation she endured at the hands of her husband. Baa's husband was a dominating and violent man who not only proscribed her from singing but also repeatedly abused her physical. He also wronged their sons. His behaviour to Baa and their sons was so severe and vehement that she continues to be affected even after his death whenever she recalls how he made her unable to live in the present.

So, she sticks to her sons with thorough expectancy for what she does not get from her husband. She involuntarily arouses her sons against their father so that she gets added favour from them. A very important thing is that as a consequence of the tyranny of her husband, she starts to have abhorrence for Jiten only because he has taken after his father in appearance and behaviour and starts loving Nitin in an excessive and abnormal way for, he looks like her in nature and appearance. So, in her elder son, Jiten she sees the image of her husband, therefore, she inevitably develops a disposition towards her younger son, Nitin. Her obsession with Nitin, and her longing for love from her sons alienate her and arouse Oedipus complex in Nitin turning him into a homosexual so that his love for his mother remains the same.

Also, her extreme focus on her sons and her possessiveness towards them attack the secrecy of her daughters-in-law. Her obstinate attachment to her sons and her wish to control them is so extreme that it disturbs the marital lives of the two sisters. She allows Jiten to abuse his wife, Dolly, even when she is in the advanced stages of pregnancy, leading to the untimely birth of their daughter, Daksha, in the seventh month. In Nitin's case, she prevents him from starting a family. While striving to gain credit for herself, which was not granted to her by her husband and society, she seizes control of her daughters-in-law's living space through interference

into and manipulation of her sons' marital lives. This bossy behaviour makes her act as a patriarch towards her daughters-in-law.

Her unconscious craving for love, support, and understanding from her sons shoots from the injustice, violence, and maltreatment she has faced from her husband. Her inability to live in the present and constant dwelling on the past, along with her slightly abnormal nature, are all the consequences of her husband's lack of care and his harsh treatment. Her control over not only her sons but also her daughters-in-law is her way of looking for security and love from her sons. She is indeed a prey, and her victimization is so serious that while she tries to maintain command over her sons and daughters-in-law, her hurting past continues to have power over her.

**Dolly**, the older of Praful's two sisters, is married to Jiten. She is portrayed as a lonely woman stuck in an unhappy marriage with an indifferent husband. Jiten married Dolly not out of love or attraction, but simply to conform to social expectations of marriage. The man is neither loyal to her nor does he try to understand her. He satisfies his sexual desires with prostitutes instead. He takes advantage of being under the category of 'fortunate sex,' where there are no limits in his life. In his sixteen years of married life, he has only taken Dolly out once, showing that he is not treating her the way she deserves. Her husband bears the symbol of patriarchal power and used to beat her up for every petty stuff. Her mother-in-law, intentionally or unintentionally, imposes supremacy over her and her sister while exploiting their husbands as the strength and basis of her patriarchy. Another man indirectly instigating her misery is her brother, Praful. He deceives Baa and her sons by making them think that his father and the two sisters' father are the same person. The two sisters are the children of his mother's second marriage while he is the child of her first marriage. Her spouse is present with the symbol of male authority. He previously physically harmed her for minor reasons. Next, her mother-in-law consciously or unconsciously exerts control over her and her sister, exploiting their husbands as the backbone of her male-dominated society. Another person indirectly causing her suffering is her brother, Praful. He deceives Baa and her sons by leading them to believe that his father and the two sisters' father are the same person. The two sisters are from his mother's second marriage, while he is from her first marriage.

He withheld from Baa the fact that he and his sisters, Dolly and Alka, have different fathers, despite having the same mother, in order for them to be welcomed as daughters-in-law. When she was seven months along in her pregnancy, she made Jiten beat her up, considering that the child is not her son since she is viewed as a whore as well. Therefore,

Daksha is born seven months early, prematurely. She is mentally and physically disfigured. stupid. **Daksha** is so victimized as well. She is a presence that is quiet. Serves as a representation of Jiten's brutality and torture in the drama. regarding Dolly. Dolly and Alka's mother also experience hardships; she had been duped by her second spouse, who withheld his identity making her appear to be a whore in the eyes of an already married man society. These two women also endure hardships as a result of the customs of Indian society. Once more, Dolly's argument with Lalitha, when she visits her home to talk about the ball, suggests that her husband doesn't appreciate her presence in his life and doesn't want to share any information with her about him or his job.

**Alka** is Nitin's wife and Dolly's younger sister. She is tormented with two distinct hands: her husband Nitin's and her sibling Praful's. In tormenting her, Jiten and Baa are thus no dissimilar from them. Her oppression begins when her brother sets fire to her hair for riding the neighbour's son's scooter back from school instead of walking with Dolly.

Her marriage to Nitin was arranged by Praful. Although she knew nothing about Nitin, she thought that by quickly accepting her brother's marriage proposal, she would make up for the hurt she had given him by riding the scooter of the neighbour's son. However, it is clear from Praful's arrangement of her marriage to Nitin that he is merely utilizing her to further his plan. He is so obsessed with Nitin that he wants her to wed him to carry on their gay relationship. She must suffer for the rest of her life as a result of his dishonesty and use of her as a tool to continue his affair with Nitin. Nitin is therefore a gay man who is losing himself in Praful's powerful arms. Given that Nitin recognizes as gay, Baa has the authority to decide whether or not to allow Nitin to have his children. His mother does not want him to become a parent. She is not made a mother as a result. Alka's marriage to her spouse is not happy. However, it is said of her that she is not an ideal woman because she is childless. Alka laments, "You (Baa) know why I can't have children," in the play. "You won't let me. That's why" (Dattani 2000: 284).

It is said that Baa's favourite is Nitin. Nitin and Jiten are hoping that Nitin will inherit the house. However, that is incorrect; Daksha is left in charge, and Praful is selected trustee. She chooses Daksha because she is the one most responsible for Daksha's handicap. Once more, Praful is picked to serve as trustee since, in her opinion, only Praful truly loves Daksha. In addition, she wishes to make up for the disgrace she caused him by telling him about the father of the two sisters. However, Jiten and Nitin are largely ignorant of Baa's emotions. They therefore believe that Baa is surprised by Nitin's marriage to Alka, which prompts her to give the house to Daksha with Praful acting as trustee. They

don't mind that Daksha is the heir to the family, but they can't tolerate that Praful is the trustee. We'll talk about Nitin's comments to his mother in this section. "Baa, this is important. Will you give me the house if I send her back for good this time?" (Dattani 2000: 302).

One thing to think about in this situation is the room that Nitin gave his wife. The house is more important to him than his wife. She doesn't matter to him; thus, he is prepared to kick her out of the house for the good of the house. Jiten is there to compound Nitin's maltreatment of Alka. Jiten treats Alka rudely in Act III, regarding the heir to the house. It is made clear that if Alka gets in the way of them owning the house, he could care less about what happens to her. Alka has only been seen by him as a commodity that can be removed should it prove to be a hindrance. Alka suffers greatly as a result. She lacks decency and the attributes of a perfect wife, and she is childless. She is also a drunk, making her an immoral woman. However, she is pushed to be such a woman by her brother, her husband, and her brother-in-law. Alka endures suffering rather than the flawed and guilty individuals who are themselves. She experiences so severe abuse that it completely transforms her into someone else. Because of this, male dominance affects all Trivedi women. They don't receive what is just. It appears that Baa, Dolly, and Alka all have some abnormality and deviation from their current life—hovering in reverie, sustained lingering on memory, and creating their imaginary world where they fancy anything they aspire to have in real life—because of the intense exploitation and tyrannical acts towards them. They have been victimized.

Unlike the other three Trivedi ladies, **Lalitha** is an outsider and Sridhar's wife. She embodies a normalcy that the other three Trivedi women lack. Her presence goes against Dolly and Alka's positions. We can claim that her status is far higher and free from that of Trivedi ladies because she is in a somewhat safer and nicer environment than theirs. Trivedi women are not confined to the world of the home, where they must reside. In the outside world, she has a room where men rule their lives. It is up to her and her spouse to decide whether or not to have children. She may not be receiving enough freedom in our patriarchal society, though. She suffers at the hands of society rather than at the hands of Sridhar. She still yearns for something that, as a woman, society does not supply for her, and she looks for it in her compulsive love for her bonsais. The strange form and macabre appearance of the bonsais serve as an objective depiction of the psychological states of the many female characters in the play as they attempt to flee the frustration of their claustrophobia.

"Alka seeks a consolation in alcohol. Dolly develops a fascination for Kanhaiya, the cook while the obsession of

Lalitha transmutes her passion for bonsais" (Agrawal 2008: 73)

Although Lalitha receives little attention throughout the play, it is made clear that she does have moments when she feels abandoned, subjugated, and controlled. She is not as suffering as Trivedi women are. However, she is also a victim. It reflects in her passion for the bonsais. Even if she did not suffer at the hands of Sridhar, she is still prevented from leaving Dolly's house on her own by the male-dominated society. Because all Indian women are subject to males and their patriarchy, she also suffers and uses her artwork to express her pain. As a result, she is a bonsai herself.

## II. ALIENATION OF WOMEN

Mahesh Dattani portrays the different features of the marginalization of Indian women in modern times. This marginalization is in blunt contrast to the revered status that women held during the period of the Rig Veda, despite India now being a flourishing economy and the world's largest democracy. Dattani's concerns extend to taboo subjects such as alternative sexual behaviour, including homosexuality, as well as the confrontational sexual behaviour of women, set against the backdrop of pervasive gender discrimination. He aims to unite the audience and the actors on stage by bringing peripheral issues to the forefront through stage setting, dialogue, costumes, themes, spectacles, and the highlighting of problems. The problems, such as the distressing situation of gay individuals, the marginalization of women, and gender discrimination, are deeply rooted in Indian culture, yet they are often perceived as foreign. Dattani has demonstrated bravery in addressing these issues.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of the subaltern studies and cultural discourse in her work "Critique on Postcolonial Reason" (Spivak: 1999) discusses the marginalization of the disadvantaged classes, particularly women. Similarly, Dattani explores an alternative platform in his dramatic work, realistically portraying female characters to offer audiences and readers a unique perspective on various forms of marginalization. His drama serves as a voice for women and other marginalized individuals, striving to address the societal imbalances in India. India has undergone significant socio-political changes, both pre-and post-independence, yet the status of women has seen little improvement as they continue to face marginalization on multiple levels.

The theoretical basis of the subordination of women or any gender discrimination is based on the concept of binary opposition within various societal structures such as class, caste, gender, etc. In the context of Indian society, Dattani raises the question of whether a woman or Hijra can speak through fringe issues. This paper examines these unresolved

issues. Dattani courageously addresses the question comprehensively, highlighting that the majority of women still cannot speak freely as their choices are limited by society. However, there is a minority who speak out despite the challenges, as depicted in "Bravely Fought the Queen."

The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) initially illustrates that the identity of Indian women is tied to their husbands'. Thus, maintaining a sense of individuality becomes a difficult decision for them. Lalitha's identity is defined by her husband, as evidenced when the wife of her husband's boss inquired about her as "someone's wife," rather than as an individual: "... You may be somebody's wife. What I mean is your husband- I know- is working for my husband" (p234). She is made to feel inferior in two ways: as a wife and as a subordinate in society. In the drama, the Trivedi brothers Jiten and Nitin own an advertising company and occupy the highest position in society as men and as employers of Sridhar, their accountant, and Lalitha's husband. The wives of the Trivedi brothers, Dolly and Alka, are depicted in different social positions in the drama. As wives of the employer brothers, they hold a superior position, but they are marginalized as women in the same social setting. This becomes evident when Dolly boasts about the twin luxurious houses built for the two brothers but feels uneasy when Alka asks about her share in the houses, as she is aware of the uncertainty of their rights in a male-dominated society.

An Indian business family is depicted where husbands are busy pursuing wealth and wives remain at home, feeling bored and lonely. They are compelled by their sense of emptiness and monotony to drink alcohol to cope with the void in their isolated lives. Although Dolly and Alka may belong to a higher social class than Lalitha, they are equally marginalized. Baa, a domineering mother-in-law and a woman herself is excessively harsh towards Dolly and Alka, who, exasperated by her cruelty, cannot respect her. This is evident in the brief response to Lalitha's inquiry about her health - "She is alive" (p239).

Bonsai also represents self-control. Dolly and Alka enjoy a luxurious modern lifestyle involving clubbing, parties, going out, and exploring by car. Their husbands, who are businessmen, are too busy to give them the attention they deserve. Often, they disappoint their wives by cancelling promised outings. Once, when Dolly receives a call informing her that her husband will be late coming home, Nitin glances at the bonsai tree irritably, suggesting that their wives need to be trimmed and restrained.

Indian women depicted in Dattani's play have not been submissive to their domineering husbands or society. Alka is one of the few women in the play who bravely speaks up and fights back, reflecting the name of the drama, which is

an English version of the Hindi poem, *Jhansi Ki Rani*. Alka embodies the spirit of the historic Rani in her courageous battle against her tyrannical husband and mother-in-law. Alka plans to portray *Jhansi Ki Rani* at the masquerade ball, while Dolly chooses to depict *Tawaif*. Alka's dance in the rain represents her liberation from the confines of a loveless marriage. The rain also symbolizes the tears she has shed throughout her life as a woman, and now she has found the strength to fight back, much like the courageous queen. The wives' subordination and seclusion in the play are linked to the changing Indian society, conflicting values in a business-oriented family, and stark class divisions. The Trivedi brothers are willing to take advantage of their own brother-in-law to secure investment in their advertising company. The current advertisement endorsing a women's undergarment brand is titled *Re Va Tee*, portraying women as mere objects of desire, which contradicts the traditional Indian ideal of modesty. The text challenges the notion that "a woman's sole purpose is to please a man... No woman eagerly anticipates her husband's arrival to change into an expensive, frilly nightgown and jump into bed..." (p279).

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my research of Mahesh Dattani's "Bravely Fought the Queen" sheds light on the complex dynamics of male domination and its impact on the social status of women. Through the characters and their interactions, the play provides insight into the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. The themes of empowerment, resilience, and societal expectations are woven into the narrative, highlighting the need for continued efforts to address gender inequality. By delving into these themes, the play prompts critical reflection on the prevailing attitudes toward women and the possibilities for change. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of challenging traditional power structures to foster a more equitable and inclusive society.

My paper spreads light on the male domination and social status of women, portraying the challenges they face in asserting themselves in a patriarchal society. The play serves as a powerful commentary on the need for societal change and the empowerment of women. Through the characters' struggles, Dattani highlights the importance of addressing gender inequality and promoting equal opportunities for all. Overall, the play serves as a poignant reminder of the need for progress toward a more equitable and just society.

The challenges faced by women in society are the responsibility of all of us, the common people. It's time to change our attitudes and stop dominating women. Only then can the situation improve, and women, who are the pillars of our society, can live healthy and strong lives.

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