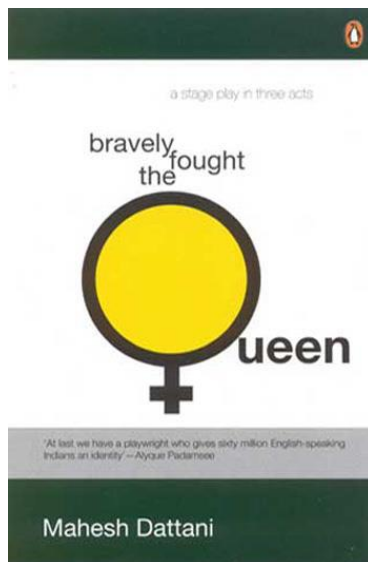


## Feminism in Mahesh Dattani's Play *Bravely Fought the Queen*

Ms. Jagadiswari and Dr. G. Baskaran

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the structure, characters and the theme of Mahesh Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen*. It is argued that Mahesh Dattani is a writer who champions the cause of true art - free from any theory. His plays are universal in taste and flavour, appealing to all sections of society, never bound to any caste, class and creed (Prasad 2007.262). Dattani brings to our notice the discrimination and injustice done to women of our society. He depicts the feminine side which always has to come to terms with society which is a male-dominated world. The play dramatizes the emptiness and shame in the lives of cloistered women and self-indulgent unscrupulous men, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception and hypocrisies. Questions of equality in gender, sexuality and identity are raised and the unspoken is voiced, the unseen is made visible. The play deals with three couples, each existing in a hierarchical relation with others.

### **A Champion of Art Free from Any Theory**

A true art is not meant for teaching and preaching. Its primary function is to give delight. Only a writer, who maintains a perfect blending of both feeling and form, can push upward the art at its zenith. Mahesh Dattani is not a conventional theatre artist or a theorist of drama. His identity in the realm of Indian English drama has been acknowledged as a thinker, craftsman and a devout humanist. After receiving the honour of Sahitya Akademi Award, Dattani's identity has universally been acknowledged as the first Indian dramatist, writing in India, with the fragrance of Indian soil, soul and sensibility. The success of his art is hidden in the fine fabric of his subtle sensibility stirred by the suffering of individual against the compulsions of society and his ability to make a lively representation of them in theatre. Dattani comes in the category of writers who champion the cause of true art - free from any theory, universal in taste and flavour, appealing to all sections of society, never bound to any caste, class and creed (Prasad 2007.262).

### ***Avant Garde Feminist***

Dattani is also known to be *avant garde* feminist. John McRae has rightly regarded him as "the voice of India now" as his plays mostly deal with the problems of the women and the marginalized. "Feminism" is probably the most popular and the most complex one. It refers to the prolonged struggle against the "tyranny of the patriarchal state" and it is based on the urge for the equality of women in every walks of life. It attempts to fight against the oppression of women on various levels. Dattani counts under the section of writers who establish women at the centre of their fictive world.

### **Focus on Discriminatory Patriarchal Social Order**

Feminist writers have tried to highlight the weaknesses of the discriminatory Patriarchal social order and successfully drawn our attention to the various issues relating to the miserable plight of women. Dattani is one such writer who has brought to our notice the discrimination and injustice done to women of our society. He depicts the feminine side which always has to come to terms with society which is a male-dominated world. Although, the people talk about women enfranchisement and feminine liberation, subconsciously all women are well known of the fact that they have to go a long way to break the trials and tribulations built by men in their every walks of life.

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There was the time when both men and women were employed as slaves by their masters. After many years men slavery was abolished but women slavery is still in progress. At Initial stage itself women were not a “forced slave” but “willing slave”. The society brought up women from the very earliest times in the belief that they must obey and submit to men. All moralities told three things like natural attraction to the opposite sex, women’s entire dependence on men and lastly the fact that any pleasure or privilege or ambition that comes to women could come only through her husband, and says that women’s education and formation of character were forced to have only one aim which is that of attracting men.

### **Value of Women in Family and Marriage Life**

In order to make the people realise the value of women in family and marriage life, Dattani has staged the fabulous play *Bravely Fought the Queen* to let the people know that how one should not lead their life. When the society understand how not to live, then automatically they will come to know how to make their family and marriage life a meaningful one with the presence of a woman. This play stands as a testimony to the fact that the male must give respect and understand the feeling and emotions of women and do not create any sort of social restrictions for them and not force them to lead merely a semblance of life. Women oppression is not only found on lower level but also to the women in rich families. Women are trapped by birth. She is traditionally bound, organised and manipulated by patriarchal in all age. This play is the best example for it.

### ***Bravely Fought the Queen***

*Bravely Fought the Queen* has been critically acclaimed all over the world, including Britain’s prestigious Leicester Haymarket Theatre. The play is set in Bangalore of 1980s and 1990 and charts the emotional, financial and sexual working in the lives of an urban Indian family. The two brothers are the co-workers of an advertising agency, married to two sisters who mainly remained mostly at home and look after the men’s old mother Baa. The play dramatizes the emptiness and shame in the lives of cloistered women and self-indulgent’ unscrupulous men, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception

and hypocrisies. Questions of equality in gender, sexuality and identity are raised and the unspoken is voiced, the unseen is made visible.

### **Focus on Three Couples**

The play won the Sahtiya Academic Award on 1998 which shows its uniqueness and greatness. The play deals with three couples, each existing in a hierarchical relation with others. The play centres on the Trivedi family with its two brothers Jiten and Nitin and their wives Dolly and Alka. Dolly and Alka are sisters. All the relations are maintained strictly under some rules and regulations. Praful is the only brother for the two sisters. The third family that is connected with the characters of the Trivedi house, is that of Lalitha and Sridhar - a couple whose identity is still in formation. In this hierarchal relationship Sridhar is the employee of the Trivedi brother's, and Lalitha in that sense, is socially subservient to the two sisters.

### **Jiten and Dolly**

Jiten the elder son always treats his wife Dolly as slave and she is considered to be a pawn in his hand. Dolly has been married for fifteen years to Jiten who has always ill-treated and beaten her up. She reminds him up that how on her mother Baa's instigation, he had beaten her up and kicked her when she was pregnant. As a result she gave birth to a premature and spastic Daksha who is now studying in a spastic school and wants to be a dancer. Her only interest is to listening to soulful *thumris* by Naina Devi to forget her sorrows and the emptiness of her life.. Both husband and wife feel reluctant to talk about Daksha till the end of play.

ALKA: She must like you very much. She hardly ever mentions her daughter to anyone.

DOLLY: Stop it!

ALKA: She doesn't tell anyone.....

DOLLY: Stop it, I said! (BFQ ACT I 34).

Dolly by listening her daughter's name always remembers how she was tortured during pregnancy when a letter arrived insinuating that Dolly, Alka and Praful's father was not legally married to their mother and that he lived elsewhere with his family and four children. This is also one of the reasons for their husband's torture on them. Her only pastime seems to be dressing up

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and going out for an evening's social engagement which is cancelled one day and due to which when she asks her husband to take her out to evade the suffocating atmosphere at home, but Jiten ignores her. This shows his hatred for her as he considers only a puppet that must follow and not to demand and command.

Baa, the mother-in-law keeps filling in the blanks from the upper level that Dolly's brother has lied about their parents. Dolly tells her husband that she didn't know what Praful told him about their father and she thought that her husband knows everything before marriage. But the damage was done. At that time Dolly and Alka's father was living with his wife and four children, implying that the two sisters and Praful were born out of wedlock and that their mother was that man's mistress. Baa becomes very angry when she comes to know the truth and says:

BAA: Your mother is a keep...a mistress! My sons have married the daughters of a whore!

DOLLY: Your mother never understood that. She blamed it on us!

BAA: Throw them out of the house.(BFQ ACTIII 96).

Dolly takes up for her mother: "My mother didn't know about his wife till later. She was deceived too!....(BFQ ACTIII 96). Jiten is a womanizer and plays with all girls who work as a model in his company. Dolly never asks him about it and remains silent. Dolly reminds Jiten that she won an argument with him only once and that too when she became pregnant, otherwise it is he who always has his own way. Jiten wants Lalitha to get out of the house before they can argue any further. But Dolly is adamant. She wants to discuss everything with him in Lalitha's presence because she has been a witness to the family's dirty linens washed in the public. So little more won't do any harm.

### **Nitin and Alka – More as Enemy than as Husband and Wife**

On the other side Alka and Nitin consider each other as enemy more than husband and wife. Alka is a spirited young woman in her early thirties and also suffers from the same predicament. But she is gregarious and drowns her sorrow in drink. Jiten never makes an effort to spend time with Alka rather the latter accept some attention from him. That's why when Jiten

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and Nitin planned to take them out, both are seem to be very euphoric and take all sort of efforts in order to make them gorgeous.

Alka, due to curiosity, makes a call to her husband to ask when they are coming and where they are going in that evening, emphasising that he was the one who said that they had to go and that too on business matter. Alka is shocked when Nitin tells her that the program has been called off. She pleads with him “Nitin let us go somewhere, just the two of us... just for a drive. Anywhere. There are so many things to discuss and we are never.. I’m all dressed and ready and all you have to do is pick me up. Forget Dolly. Forget your brother”(BFQ 26). But Nitin apparently asks her to stay at home and he alone moves out. He fails to understand the unbearable pain that a woman undergoes when she is alone in a small. Women are all that Jiten seems to be interested in. He has no respect for them and considers them as machine to fulfil the sexual pleasure. He tells to Sridhar:

“It is the biggest advantage of having an office on Grant Road. It was pointed out to me by the bugger who sold this place to me. No checking into seedy hotels in City Market. Just drive down Lavelle Road and pick one up. Bring her here and pack her off in half an hour. You save a lot of time..... it is a regular thing for Nitin and me. Driving out and picking a couple up.” (BFQ 67).

Both the brothers are obviously no respecters of women; they neglect their wives and have been beating them up and driving them out of the house.

This really depressed her a lot and she feels that her husband does not like her and soon comes to know the truth that her husband is a gay which affects her a lot. It makes Alka to drink in a big way to get over her homosexual husband’s neglect and apathy. It is Jiten who pushed repeatedly Nitin to drive Alka out of the house but can’t bring himself to do so.

NITIN: She has never forgiven me!

JITEN; Make her forgive you!

NITIN; How?

JITEN: Get rid of Alka!(BFQ ACTII 71).

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JITEN: Get rid of Alka!(BFQ ACTII 71).

Nitin smokes and drinks in moderation but is a committed homosexual who prefers huge, big-built and rough auto-drivers as lovers- both in the office and the house. That explains why he condones Alka's transgressions, waywardness and drunken behaviour. He ends up playing second fiddle to his brother.

Nitin is convinced that he has been tricked into marrying Alka by Praful and he had driven her out of the house earlier when a drunk Alka created an ugly scene at a family gathering in Praful's presence of cheekily asking Baa whether her two sons- as different as chalk in from cheese had the same father. Baa has hated Alka ever since. Alka's behaviour also alienated her brother Praful. He does not visit his sisters in town, citing the distance from his hotel to their house. Alka drinks heavily and goes out to drench herself. Soon both the brothers return home and remain dumbstruck with Alka's behaviour. Jiten asks Dolly to tell her sister to go inside and change her dress. But Alka does not listen to anyone and she makes herself busy in drenching in rain. Actually that is the only way for her to forget all her sorrows which she cannot share to anyone even to her own sister Dolly.

### **The Family Background**

Jiten and Nitin's father was a cruel and a dark man who harassed their mother. This kind of cruelty perpetrated on Baa by her husband is brought to light every now and then in the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* when she feels jittery even after so many years of his death: "I have married such a villager! Aah! You slapped me? Never, never slap me. Nobody has hit me. The men in our family are decent" (BFQ 83).

Baa sees the picture of her husband in her elder son, Jiten and thus automatically develops an inclination towards her younger son, Nitin who resembles her a lot. He is more subdued and sympathetic character. The mother-son intimacy comes out in the following lines:

BAA: Nitin! You don't like your father, no? he's not nice.....Tell me you hate him! He hit me! Nitin tell me you hate him! say it!

NITIN: Yes! I hate him! (BFQ ACTIII 86).

Even Baa the mother of Jiten and Nitin is tortured by her husband in front of their own sons.

BAA: You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jiten! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father!

JITEN: Forget it(BFQ ACTII 57).

### **The Plight of Modern Educated Women**

The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* clearly depicts the plight of modern educated women. In this play all the women characters are the examples of exploitation that is still prevalent in urban families of our country. It also shows the reality that women cannot be kept suppressing for a long time. If they are not heard for a long time, they will fight back. They suffer not because they are sinners but because of the men whom they believed and submitted themselves and their life in their hands. Their fantasies in *Bravely Fought the Queen* arms themselves at the end of the play to fight back.

At last when Dolly raises her voice and blames him for everything, at that time he realises his mistake and apologises to Dolly, blaming Baa for everything that happened. Then crying, he urges Dolly "Get her back! Get from wherever she is. I want her home"(BFQ 97). Jiten keeps sobbing and says that Baa made him to do it. But Dolly won't let him get away so easily. She reminds him "They were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me! It's in your blood! It's in your blood to do bad! (BFQ 97)." Jiten refuses to believe her and rushes out of the main door and move out in car and due to anger he ran his car over the old beggar-woman.



On the other hand Alka too burst out when she is rebuked by both the brothers when she is dancing in the rain. Alka was obviously acting out of impulse and replies:

ALKA: I don't know what I am doing outside. Aren't there times when you don't know what you are doing?(to Nitin).What's the harm in that? Huh? Tell me.

NITIN: None. There's no harm in that.

ALKA: You agree with me? Don't you? You do see what I mean? Dolly, did you hear that? You are always saying that I imply I've got a better deal. He is understanding.(BFQ ACT III 83).

### **Realization**

Nitin realises how unfair he has been to Alka and he feels that in order to hide his homosexuality he has been neglecting Alka for a long time. Nitin slowly goes close to Alka, who is asleep on the sofa and speaks to her: "He tricked you too, didn't he? How can you still love your brother after what he did to you.....? That right. Don't answer just asleep (laughs) You were always a heavy sleeper. Thank god" (BFQ 99-100). In rest of his monologue, Nitin reveals his homosexual relations with Alka's brother Praful and how he has responded to his sexual overtures but makes him ashamed of himself later. At last he accepts Alka as she is, with her drunkenness and promiscuity.

### **Human Spirit Is Not Crushed**

At last both of them confront and get over their problems and the stumbling blocks in their way by standing up for their rights. Each fight his or her own battles in the manner she or he deems fit. The bonsai in *Bravely Fought the Queen* symbolises the fact that, unlike in Ibsen's plays, the human spirit is not crushed at the end of Dattani's play. Dattani's play simply asks one question to the audience that why the society demands faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of man to his wife. Alka is all armed to fight back and question the norms set by men for women and Dolly is ready to join her: "And we call go- bravely fought the queen! Bravely fought the queen!... Full of manly valour"(BFQ 78).

### **No Bias Against Women**

Dattani is not biased against women. He regards them as human beings in comparison to others who regard them sometimes a thing or an object of entertainment only. He focuses on the powerlessness of women as they are confined to the houses and financially dependent on men. His play *Bravely Fought the Queen* simply asks one question to the audience that why the society demands faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of man to his wife. Alka is all armed to fight “And we call go- bravely fought the queen! Bravely fought the queen!.. Full of manly valour” (BFQ 78).

### **Three Generations of Women**

In this play we have three generations of women - they are Baa, Dolly, Alka and Daksha. The play also reveals the fact that the suppression cannot last long as women will fight back to question the autocracy of men. Alka very boldly questions the authority of her husband and asks for an explanation for his disloyalty. She also exposes the betrayal of her brother for not revealing the existence of homosexual relations between her husband and brother. All the women characters in this play suffer and such women are still prevalent in educated urban families and also the examples that women will fight back if they are not heard or are suppressed for a very long time.

### **Men As Victims of Their Own Rage**

As Simone de Beauvoir perceives and comments; “The position that women occupy in the society is comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race” (21). One can’t say that women are born as sinners and they are suffering just because of men whom they trust a lot. They not only surrender themselves but also their life which is fully ruled by one man army. As Dattani says in an interview to Lakshmi Subramanyam: “I am not sure I have portrayed the women as victims in *Bravely Fought The Queen*. I see men as victims of their own rage and repression. This has serious consequences on the lives of women”.

## **Bonsai and Women**

Dattani talks about two generations who seem to be sharing the same experiences at the hand of their callous husbands and yet to come third generation, Daksha who also experiences the maltreatment of her father even before her birth and is born as a disable child. Dattani's use of the bonsai is an interesting trope in the play. On one hand it reflects on the nurturing aspects of Lalitha. On the other hand, it also unveils the attitude of a power ridden society towards women.

The women in the play are creations like Lalitha's bonsais, whose shoots or their desires are constantly trimmed and cut so that they spread only to a particular level. They are not allowed to attain the required height. Their roots are not given ample space to spread. This is also the case with the women in this play. They too are trimmed in different ways to fulfil men's desire. Usually people say that the rule of men over women is accepted everywhere voluntarily and that even women makes no complaints about it. But women today have started recording their protests. In England, America, France, Italy, Switzerland and Russia, thousands of women have protested against their social conditions. But there are many social and natural causes that make it impossible for women to collectively rebel against men.

## **Use of a Variety of Abuses from All around the World**

In order to convey his message to the audience and the reader as well and to make them realize and accept that such things do happen in the society, Dattani does not restrict himself to using common Indian day-to-day abuses. Like men, women also require proper space and atmosphere for the proper and healthy growth of their personality. While writing plays he explores both the masculine and the feminine self within him. He says to Lakshmi Subramanyam: "they are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I focus is the powerlessness of these people.... And I am not going to change my sensibilities for political correctness either. My only defence is to say that I am not biased against women"(134). This is why Dattani is held as "a Playwright of world stature".

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Ms. Jagadiswari, Ph.D. Full Time Research Scholar  
Faculty of English & Foreign Languages  
Gandhigram Rural Institute Deemed University  
Gandhigram – 624 302  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[jagdishwari1988@gmail.com](mailto:jagdishwari1988@gmail.com)

Dr. G. Baskaran  
Associate Professor of English  
Faculty of English & Foreign Languages  
Gandhigram Rural Institute Deemed University  
Gandhigram – 624 302  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[rgbaskaran@gmail.com](mailto:rgbaskaran@gmail.com)