

## **Love in a Cage: A Critical View of Patriarchal Victimisation by Mahesh Dattani in *Bravely Fought the Queen***

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### **Abstract:**

Indian society that is a patriarchal one, has been victimising both men and women since long time. It hides its brutal realities behind the mask of modern civilization. Mahesh Dattani, one of the veteran modern playwrights, creates plays with their themes relating to the modern urban Indian family. His protagonists search for their identities within the oppressive societal structures of customs, tradition etc. He presents how the patriarchal domination makes the women to live under extreme oppression and accept it as “natural.” In his one of the most celebrated works *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani dexterously emerges the issue of oppression, domination of patriarchy on both the males and the females giving them lifetime traumas. This paper aims to depict Dattani’s tortured characters focusing on the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* that represents all the tormented people in India facing struggles for existence caged in an invisible prison named patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Societal Norms, Domination, Performativity, Women, Oppression.

**Introduction:**

India is a country where even after the independence women are bound to live under the rule of patriarchy and not only women but also the men are at their deplorable states though being in a patriarchal society. As far as the Indian society is concerned, there prevailed a deep rooted custom of worshipping the women as “goddess.” Under this cover, they were treated only as dolls devoid of will and choice. In fact, most of the critics are united on the issue that the marginalisation of women is a part of sexual politics because a woman is also a human being of flesh and blood. Unfortunately, this marginalisation is still a big issue especially in India and the most pathetic thing is that it has been normalised among the women by the society.

Theatre has emerged in India a long time ago but hasn't always been fair to women. Things started to change a few decades ago with the emergence of feminist theatre. The goal was to bring a change by showing women in a different light. Mahesh Dattani stands as a significant voice in contemporary Indian English drama. He explores the marginalised condition of women, societal expectations and the realities of patriarchal violation.

In this play, Dattani illustrates that women are free to have education but not free to speak out for themselves. Dattani's pen not only depicts women's condition but also highlights how the strict gender norms subjugate even the men, making their lives pathetic. Dattani makes his words a strong weapon to stand for these societal issues and to provide a deep insight of the reality of everyday life. In most of his plays, female protagonists play unfamiliar role through which he sheds light on different dimension of feminine psyche. In spite of their peripheral state in family they are capable enough to turn back to their oppressors. Women are subjugated by the prescribed rules of the society and are expected to stay within the strong walls of patriarchal domination. They are burdened with societal norms

set by patriarchy from a very childhood. This upbringing perpetuates throughout their lives creating different, unequal roles for men and women.

Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* is concerned with the theme of gender discrimination and a severance between the world of men and women. Here he skilfully presents the scenario of so called educated, urban household where women especially housewives are treated as dependent, weak and useless garbage. The play focuses on an Indian family which is the residence of two brothers---Jiten Trivedi and Nitin Trivedi who run an advertising company and are married to two sisters---Dolly and Alka. Baa, the mother of two brothers, moves between the two households where two of her sons and daughter-in-laws live separately. She is more attached to her memories than the present moment. Dattani presents an environment where marital deceptions, traditional tension between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws, the darker moments of business are normal. It takes us through the entire gamut of emotional experiences. Thus the play portrays how a household becomes an invisible prison of patriarchy that hinders the spontaneous growth of both men and women. The titles of three acts of the play namely "The Women", "The Men", "Free for All" are highly significant. The world of Act I throws light on the female world that has been pushed to periphery and is pitted against the business world of men in Act II. The third one is a brilliant creation of Dattani as a playwright and it is in Act III where the two worlds of men and women clash and collapse and every oppressed character fights like a queen. Especially, the characters' explosion of long repressed pains are expressed bravely standing opposite of patriarchal norms. The play is pregnant with gender, sexuality and identity. The play opens with a "thumri" playing in an urban Indian household. The first act of the play vividly delineates the claustrophobic situation of the women in the seemingly affluent and civil household. The monotony, frustration, indifference of the women is revealed. Here, Dolly, Jiten's wife and a mere homemaker in Trivedi family, is in

the stage in her mud mask and Lalitha, the wife of Sridhar who is an employee of Trivedi Office, comes to discuss with Dolly about the masked ball which will promote the Re Va Tee ad. In this particular Act when Alka, wife of younger Trivedi, Nitin and Dolly get indulged into an argument over attending parties, Alka strongly accuses Dolly that instead of mingling with people at the parties she just takes a drink sitting in the corner and this is the reason why their husbands don't take them out often. Dolly's cold attitude, getting sudden anger and indifferent reply evoke the sense of being passive under extreme oppression as we hear Dolly's reply---

“Dolly: You are right. I guess I must learn to be a bit more...sociable.” (Dattani 4)

The pause indicates the forceful transformation of females under tremendous burdens of societal norms fixed by patriarchy. Women in the play lead their lives designed by prescribed norms and try their best to conform. The play talks of pretence, of a performance that women carry out in their daily lives, pretending to be what they are not. So, Dattani brings this idea of appearance versus reality in Act I in the conversation between Dolly and Lalitha:

“Dolly: I'm sorry. I wanted to laugh but I was afraid. Lalitha: Afraid?

Dolly: Afraid I would crack my mask.”(Dattani 4)

Dolly is seen wearing a mud mask. The “mask” in the play signifies performance as a way of life, adopted by women to live in the patriarchal society.

Most importantly this particular Act tells us about bonsai tree which plays a crucial symbolic role here. We are first introduced with it from the conversation between Alka and Lalitha. It is Lalitha who has a passionate love for “bonsai” tree. This very tree strongly represents the patriarchal domination. The image of the bonsai, a plant whose growth has been arrested artificially through human intervention, assumes a dominant metaphor in the play in order to

introduce the theme of stunning the mental and emotional growth of women. It is vivid from the conversation of Alka and Lalitha.

“Alka: You said you make Bonsai?”

Lalitha: Yes. I’ve got a whole collection

Alka: How do you make them?

Lalitha: You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and...stunt them.” (Dattani16)

The image of the “bonsai” and the detailed process of its creation draw parallels between the stunning of a plant’s natural growth through unnatural and artificial means. This strategy is used by patriarchy to arrest the natural growth of female mind and to dehumanize them as objects capable of exhibiting the superiority of the creator but unable to display the natural qualities they are attributed with. Here, the female characters’ treatment towards the bonsai indicates the treatment of the males of the house towards the females. Even Daksha, the little girl of Dolly and Jiten can also be compared to the bonsai as both her physical and mental growth have been disrupted at the very beginning by her own father’s inhumane treatment towards her mother. According to Kate Millett, “Under Patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described.” (*Sexual Politics*)

Dolly and Alka share their monotony and frustration of living a neglected and lonely life. Lalitha is quite dynamic to ward off her monotony by keeping herself engaged in many works especially in making bonsais.

In our society, mainly women are taught to be stay under strict rules and protection of men and pathetically it has been normalised to them to be fully dependent on men. Lalitha, here, is perpetuating that legacy by her act of being happy to be dependent on her husband, especially by her practice of nurturing bonsai.

Act I constantly indicates a planned programme of the two brothers and their wives which ultimately gets cancelled. Dolly, who was expecting for their invitation (the programme) can't accept it calmly and reacts in full of wrath. Now I would like to mention here that anger or wrath is the bodyguard of pain. She is desperate for an outing with her husband. It depicts that how pathetically she is treated by her husband. The pain has become so much intensified that it makes her suffer from forgetting things. When the programme gets cancelled, she restlessly asks Jiten to get confirmation and pleads to him emotionally: "...Look. Never mind the Kapoors. Let's just go out somewhere."(Dattani 23)

This tremendous urge shows the wounds created by the pain in Dolly's innocent heart. On the other hand Alka makes herself sunk into alcoholism to get relieved from the pain she used to get from her husband's indifferent attitude towards her.

Dattani challenges many general topics regarding stereotypical gender roles. Through his plays, Dattani explores the multiple facets of multiple human relationships and their validity in today's world. Dolly's silence and coping up with her unhappy conjugal life being dutiful to her mother-in-law depicts the attitude of a homemaker which is "perfect" according to patriarchy. Here comes Judith Butler's theory of "Performativity". Dolly's endurance of the torture shows the brutal reality of set-up gender roles. Dolly's mud mask is the silent endurance of her oppression.

According to Judith Butler, "... nobody really is a gender from the start."(*Gender Troubles*) Gender is constructed socially. Society, especially Indian society forces mainly women to act according to their set-up roles which tell them to be docile, submissive and dependent upon males and stay under the pressure of patriarchal norms. Dolly embodies this performative aspect of ideal wife and mother and her identity is shaped by her role or duty of a caring wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Most importantly, Dolly's inner turmoil, her repressed desire

reveals the cracks of her gender performance. Alka, on other side, though challenges the gender roles by her drinking habit, is confined within the same domain of patriarchy. Her performances are rebellious but still fragile.

The treatment of males towards females is skilfully depicted in Act II, where the audience comes to know the behaviour of Jiten towards Dolly. When she makes a call to Trivedi Office to talk to Jiten, the masculine figure Jiten does not give a care about it and mind his own business, completely neglecting his wife's emotion:

“Sridhar: Your wife is on the phone.

Jiten: Tell her I am busy.”(Dattani 63)

Then roughly barking on the phone Jiten tries to establish his words and accuses Dolly as a liar.

This is just an example shown by Dattani but there are lots of such events that happen regularly in most of the Indian households which make all the Dollys passive.

In Act II, the play presents a heart-wrenching act of dehumanizing women. The Re Va Tee is a company which sells women's underwear. In this act the audience witnesses an issue created by the insulting attitude of the marketing pattern. Here a detail description of how the Re Va Tee makes the advertisement of the under garments is clear from Sridhar's words---

“Sridhar: You see, take our press ads. You've got the model lying invitingly on a bed and the signature is 'Light his Fire with Re Va Tee'. In the storyline for the video commercial, you have the model looking out of the window and she sees her husband or her lover has come home. She quickly rushes, opens a box, removes the new Re Va Tee bra, panties and nighties. Cut to her dressed in them. She lets her hair loose, pirouettes and lies down on the bed, just as the door opens. Freeze. Signature 'Light his fire with Re Va Tee'.”(Dattani 52)

This interpretation vividly shows how patriarchal society “commoditises” women. The great

companies, brands which are mainly owned by the men use women, especially women's bodies for their marketing policy and thus degrade them making it "natural". The objectification is more prominent when Sridhar questions and also answers it by saying, "Now, why would a woman go for something expensive if she is going to wear it only at night? Primarily for sexual reasons."(Dattani 52) It is evident how "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters." (Irigaray 24) And Nitin utters, "That is what our campaign is geared towards... sex."(Dattani 52) The most pathetic are the words that describe women as nothing but an object of sex to men as if they are sex craze beings and are supposed to please the men sexually. So their main focus for buying expensive nightwear should be for men. The Re Va Tee account is nothing more than an erotic spectacle. This advertising policy of the company shows how patriarchy plays a prominent role in commoditizing women and how the males see them. Here, the horrific 'male gaze' works vividly. The "male gaze" refers to the way women are objectified by the lense of patriarchy in the fields of movies and advertisements to drag audience' interest. Laura Mulvey says, "Woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions... ." (*Visual and Other Pleasures* 99) According to Michel Foucault, "There is no need for arms, physical violence. Just a gaze."(*Discipline and Punish*) When Sridhar tells the Trivedi brothers about a survey report on their products and ads by presenting the negative results Jiten roughly asks him to screw the report by saying that the survey was supposed to be done on men:

"Yes! Men would want to buy it for their women! That's our market. Men. Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power."(Dattani 54) Also he nastily tells Sridhar that there is no point in asking a group of "screwed up women." Jiten's attitude vividly indicates that how the females are less than a human being to the

males. The word “buying power” evokes a sense of domination where non-earning women are subjects of the authority of men who have the power.” Jiten, here represents a perfect patriarchal figure to whom women are simply powerless objects or commodities or more vividly some mere bodies dependant and committed to their men. In this play, Dattani projects the crude reality where women, no matter how much become educated, cannot easily shake off their identity as inferior to men. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak illustrates that the subaltern as a female cannot be heard or read. Still in patriarchy and imperialism, they are subject to constitution and object formation. So when the survey report opposes their marketing strategy, Jiten completely spurns the idea of valuing the women’s opinion as he does not want to move from his male ego.

In this Act, Jiten decides to ask his mother Baa for their house (property) to be sold and when Nitin becomes emotional about it Jiten scolds him by uttering “Sentimental fool.” Here, the gender norms are clear, where society expects men not to be sentimental or emotional. Strength should define “masculinity.”

In Act II, scenes go on in a parallel way. On one hand Jiten and Nitin are concerned about their profit-loss and property issues and on the other side, Baa is shown to be concerned about past incidents and how she used to protect his children from their dreadful father. It shows that patriarchy does not care about any relationship and only focuses on dominating women including even mothers.

Baa, the old, bed-ridden mother-in-law, is a perfect example of women under the rules of patriarchy. Her heart-wrenching conjugal life is revealed through her hallucinating words. The audience is witnessed that she was brutally beaten by her husband on her face often. Even sometimes in order to protect her children she accepted the punishment given by her husband. The fear of her late husband leaves her in such a trauma which is still being carried

on by her. She hallucinates her husband and still gets scared of him, patriarchy has made her mentally unstable ruining her entire life. She now dominates her own daughter-in-laws in variable way, making them irritated and treats them in a rough way.

Now comes Sigmund Freud's theory of 'Repetition of Compulsion'. According to him, there are so many cases where people appear to be passive victim of something which they are powerless to influence. So, the person repeats an unpleasant experience because the repetition is associated with a direct gain of pleasure. Baa's generational trauma makes her daughters-in-law's and also her own life miserable.

Here, the mother-in-law is the subject of performativity where she is supposed to be passive and tolerant towards male treatments and the patriarchal world has taught the women to take it as 'natural'. So, Baa had been bearing all these ill treatments for years and does the same thing towards Dolly and Alka, thinking it 'natural'. It can also be called as "generational trauma." Baa hates Alka the most because she is a little bit rebellious and does not always play her gender role properly which according to Baa is not 'natural'. In contrast, Dolly performs the role of an ideal homemaker being docile and tolerant covering her wounds with mask. The words of Baa about her daughters-in-law in Act II are a good example where she says:

"Baa: ...The older one is good for Jitu, but beware of the younger one. She is like her mother."(Dattani 65)

It shows that Baa whose mind is confined and taught by the societal norms hates Alka because she cannot dominate her the way she (Baa) used to be dominated. It indicates a very pathetic fact that how patriarchy compels women to hate another women. It is Act II that reveals Jiten as a perfect representative of patriarchal figure---his hegemonic control over his employee shows his pride of being economically superior. Nitin who is

apparently seemed to be soft hearted can't go over his brother's words even when her brother asks him to throw his wife Alka out of the house to impress their mother. Sridhar, who is a little bit honest and, according to Lalitha, a good husband, becomes unable to avoid his lustful desire towards a whore. The other two brothers have also made them indulged in this vulgar act though having wives which clearly depicts the nasty male community's sinful acts that are quite 'natural' to them, which impact their family life deeply.

Act III unfolds another crucial issue which is emotional and shocking at the same time. One crucial aspect that should be noticed is the manner in which males become victims of their own patriarchal power structures and orders. The theory of multiple subjectivities in the category of 'women' proposed by Judith Butler has led to the development of an analogous theory of 'hegemonic masculinity' which refers to a culturally normative ideal of male behaviour. It is in this Act that the audience is informed about a secret relationship between Praful (Dolly and Alka's brother) and Nitin. According to heteronormative society, Nitin and Praful's "performativity" opposes the constructed gender roles. Masculine and Feminine roles are not naturally fixed but socially constructed.

Consequently, he has to hide his homosexuality behind the institution of marriage with Alka. He represents a disempowered man whose power has been snatched by the same sources that make Jiten powerful. Nitin's sexual orientation ostracizes him from the patriarchal premise; he is pushed to belong to the lowest strata of masculinity where he exhibits values, principles, demeanours that are at odds with those expected from a man. It can be concluded through Butler's words, "We form ourselves within the vocabularies that we did not choose, and sometimes we have to reject those vocabularies, or actively develop new ones." (*Gender Trouble*) Nitin and Praful oppose this prescribed vocabulary, the norms and consequently suffer. So, Nitin's marriage to Alka to survive in this patriarchal society ruins three lives ---- Alka's, Praful's and Nitin's.

This Act reveals that Dolly was beaten at her pregnancy by Jiten and as a result Daksha is born as a pre-mature child who is bound to live under special treatment being away from her family. Also Baa's primary hatred towards her granddaughter shows how male prescribed lessons teach women to have aversion towards another girl or woman may she be a member of family. The way in which male oppression influenced women intensely is evident when Alka calls "Jhansi Rani" a "masculine" figure because she was brave. So, the unofficially constructed idea that bravery is equal to masculinity has got stuck into the minds of females that force them to think themselves weaker than males. In her essay, Kate Millett asserts, "Aggression is male and passivity is female." (*Sexual Politics* 3)

Dolly has a fondness of singing, which is sacrificed by her to bear the burden of unwritten patriarchal norms. The males have made cultural activities like singing, dancing etc. the acts of Tawaifs who are seen as 'bad' or 'profligate' figures of society. So, according to them, those women who will practice these things will be marked with a badge named "Tawaifs." Naina Devi, whose name is mentioned again and again in the play, stands as a good example of this who leaves her royal identity to follow her passion towards singing "thumri." This is the patriarchy which subjugates women with the strong chain of norms and takes control over their lives compelling them to take drastic steps in life.

Towards the end, finally, every soul, arrested by the male domination, throws off their masks freely. Dolly undergoes a radical personality shift in personality. She develops into a courageous and savage character and bursts into rage against the unfair treatment she used to receive from her conjugal life. Alka's announcement to dress up as "Jhansi ki Rani" is another kind of unburdening herself from the oppression. Both of their rebellions echo the fact that one cannot continue to victimize someone else just because he or she was a victim once. There should be an end to this generational torture. Baa's final decision of making Daksha the owner of Trivedi house is her own way of fighting back as she becomes

confirmed that as Daksha is a girl, her fate will also lead her towards destruction like her (Baa) own life. Baa, the figure who appeared as a true perpetuator of patriarchy, here fights back at the end to save her granddaughter's life. So, she reflects the "Queen" named "Jhansi ki Rani" who protected her kingdom, unveiling herself from the "pardah" or the veil. Truly, the queen (Baa) fought bravely. Her act is a stark protest against all her oppression and insults.

Most importantly, Nitin slowly unfolds Praful and his confidential relationship with him, standing opposite to the prescribed heteronormativity. Thus continuing his relation Nitin fights back against the gender norms. At the end of the play Alka, the exhausted soul finally reveals the reality of patriarchy by revealing the fact that brothers who apparently appears as protectors of their sisters ultimately becomes the destroyer of their lives deliberately. Thus she bursts out with anger, blaming her brother Praful for arranging the unhappy marriage for his sisters. Nitin and Praful's rebellion against the set-up norms illuminates one of Butler's concepts that perhaps a people take birth in some way but are not fixed to act according to the prescribed roles. Biological structure cannot always define our emotional acts. Also Lalitha is shown as a victim of patriarchy whose trust on her husband helps her surviving though her husband is not an exception. However, her dependence on her husband has been normalised by her though she is a working woman. The marriage is a joke here.

### **Conclusion:**

The dramatic works of Mahesh Dattani provide a perspective on the societal norms. The artist's creations effectively portray the inherent conflict between personal aspirations and societal norms. In a nutshell, Jiten's domineering demeanour, violence and proud attitude, Nitin's inferiority and still being dominating towards Alka, Dolly's silence, Alka's drinking habits and distressful attitude, both of their anger towards bedridden Baa and

irritation towards her calling bell, Baa's hallucination, anxiety- all are presented as heart-wrenching impacts of the one main thing-patriarchy. Lalitha, though she is presented as a happily married woman, can also be paralleled with Baa as both of them seem to perpetuate the prescribed norms of patriarchal legacy. Dolly and Alka's imaginative figure named "Kanhaiyan" is nothing but a relief from their constant subjugation and oppression of their unhappy marriages. The negligence of their husbands leads them to create this imaginary figure to fulfil their desires, and "It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women." (Hooks 2) Thus Indian women are regularly becoming victims of patriarchal violence even standing on the twenty-first century. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a story of the oppressed souls' constant battle with societal stereotypes and their struggle to be free from the strong handcuff of the society. Love becomes an illusion here. As Dattani's plays project the naked society that hides itself under the rough shell of patriarchy, they also show a brave protest against it. The characters of *Bravely Fought the Queen* make themselves free in the very last act of the play that sets a remark to the society.

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