



The Silent Cry: Women's Voices And Societal Constraints In Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought The Queen*

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* offers a trenchant critique of patriarchal structures within the Indian upper middle class. The play delves into the complexities of domestic life, exposing the hidden realities of women's experiences within seemingly affluent households. By focusing on the lives of two affluent families, Dattani unveils the insidious nature of patriarchal control, highlighting issues of domestic violence, marital infidelity, and the exploitation of women. Through a nuanced exploration of character dynamics and symbolic imagery, the play challenges traditional gender roles and exposes the moral decay underlying the facade of upper-class respectability. Ultimately, *Bravely Fought the Queen* serves as a powerful indictment of the patriarchal status quo and a call for social and gender equality.

Keywords:

Domestic Violence, Emotional Abuse, Societal Pressures, Gender Inequality, Power Dynamics.

Indian English drama, though not as widely recognized as its literary counterparts, boasts a rich history and is currently brimming with energy. This unique blend of Western dramatic form and the essence of Indian culture offer a captivating perspective on the social, political, and personal experiences of the Indian subcontinent. The seeds of Indian English drama were sown in the 18th century with the arrival of the British Raj. The first recorded play in English, *The Persecuted* (1831) by Krishna Mohan Banerjee, addressed the social issues of the time. However, the initial focus remained on translating and adapting existing Western plays. Playwrights like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Toru Dutt explored themes of cultural identity and the clash between tradition and modernity. Following India's independence in 1947, playwrights like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mohan Rakesh emerged, seeking to establish a distinct voice for Indian English drama. They delved into themes of social injustice, political corruption, and the complexities of Indian society.

The contemporary Indian English drama is flourishing with experimentation and diverse themes. Playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mahesh Elkunchwar, and Anjum Hasan address issues of gender roles, religious conflict, and the changing social fabric of India. While primarily staged in India, Indian English drama is increasingly finding recognition on international platforms. Plays are being translated and performed across the globe, showcasing the unique perspectives and stories of Indians. Mahesh Dattani occupies a unique space within the vibrant arena of Indian English drama. Unlike his contemporaries, who often addressed grand historical narratives or tackled social issues with a starkly political lens, Dattani's brilliance lies in his mastery of presenting everyday life and relationship taboos. Confined settings, seemingly ordinary characters, and the rhythm of everyday life become his stage for exploring profound themes of societal pressures, gender dynamics, and the unyielding spirit of the human condition.

Dattani's contribution to Indian English drama goes beyond his focus on the everyday. He has been a prolific writer, director, and actor, actively involved in nurturing young talent and fostering a vibrant theatrical community. His experimental approach, often incorporating elements of humour, satire, and symbolism, has not only broadened the thematic scope of Indian English drama but has also made his plays accessible to a wider audience. His legacy lies not only in his captivating plays but also in his dedication to nurturing a thriving theatrical space that continues to evolve and engage audiences across the globe. He stands tall as a unique voice within the Indian English theatrical landscape. By transforming the seemingly ordinary into a powerful lens for social commentary and individual struggles, he compels audiences to confront uncomfortable truths and celebrate the unyielding spirit of the human condition.

Dattani's plays, often set within the confines of a single apartment, delve into the complex inner lives of his characters. Dattani's genius lies in his ability to weave social commentary into the fabric of seemingly ordinary lives. He exposes the limitations placed upon women within the traditional domestic sphere, highlighting the emotional burden of societal expectations and the yearning for agency that festers beneath the surface. However, Dattani's portrayal is not merely one of despair. Despite the limitations imposed upon them, his characters exhibit a flicker of defiance and a quiet strength. This approach resonates with the concept of everyday resistance within feminist thought, highlighting the ways individuals, often women, challenge dominant power structures through persistent, yet seemingly small, actions.

The play unfolds within the confines of a single apartment, a microcosm of the larger societal framework. This setting emphasises the domestic sphere, traditionally viewed as a woman's domain, where the characters navigate the ordinary tasks of cooking, cleaning, and caring for others. These everyday activities are not merely presented as background details; they become symbolic of the limitations imposed upon them. Dattani further highlights the societal pressures through the characters' conversations. These desires for escape, solace, and control are poignant reminders of the societal pressures that weigh heavily on them.

The play also portrays how societal norms dictate women's relationships with each other and with the men in their lives. Even though their friendship gives comfort and support, Dolly and Alka's struggles ultimately limit it. Dolly's judgmental attitude towards Alka's alcoholism exposes the internalised patriarchal norms that even the women themselves perpetuate. The men in the play, Jiten and Nitin, are largely absent or emotionally unavailable. When present, they represent the source of the women's suffering, be it through infidelity (Jiten) or emotional neglect (Nitin). Their behaviour reinforces the patriarchal power structure, leaving the women to navigate their lives within the constraints it imposes.

However, Dattani does not paint a picture of complete despair. Through subtle acts of defiance and moments of shared vulnerability, the women exhibit a flicker of agency amidst societal pressures. Dolly's decision to finally confront Jiten regarding his infidelity, Alka's attempt to quit drinking, and Lalitha's newfound confidence in speaking up for herself are all testaments to their inner resilience. These acts, though seemingly insignificant, demonstrate a desire to carve out a space for themselves within the confines of a restrictive society.

Bravely Fought the Queen premiered at Sophia Bhabha Hall, Mumbai, in 1991. The stage production, which Border Crossing later produced in the UK in 1996, was co-directed by Michael Walling and Mahesh Dattani. Dattani's plays often utilize multi-layered settings, connecting the past to the present. Additionally, symbolic elements are incorporated to reveal the characters' inner struggles. Each act is named based on the dominant gender on stage. Act One, "The Women," portrays the emptiness and suffering faced by the female characters, particularly those residing in the Trivedi household. Act Two, "The Men," focuses on the contrasting world of the Trivedi brothers, who run an advertising agency. Their well-stocked bar and Baa's room are the only constant elements in this act. The setting depicts their professional space, with Jiten and Nitin's large executive desks and a smaller one for their employee, Shridhar. A significant detail is the presence of a comfortable couch near Jiten's desk, hinting at potential misuse. Their work revolves around the "ReVa Tee" campaign.

The final act, "Free for All," maintains the setting of Act One and continues the ever-present Thumri music. The title itself is symbolic, suggesting an unconstrained release of emotions. Here, the women confront the situation head-on, expressing anger, blame, and a strong desire for self-assertion. Dattani portrays a symbolic "familial court" where accusations fly until the truth is finally revealed. The Trivedi brothers' true nature—manipulative, homosexual, violent, and unfaithful—comes to light. Dattani dismantles the notion of separate spheres for men and women, emphasising their inherent equality.

The outward appearance of the household, the living room, presents a mask; the true picture lies within—the kitchen and Baa's bedroom, where the harsh realities of their lives unfold. This hidden aspect is what the audience craves to witness—the unseen struggles women face. The constant presence of Naina Devi's Thumri music holds symbolic significance. Naina Devi, a queen, defied societal norms by pursuing her passion for singing Thumri, a genre often associated with courtesans. This act of defiance against societal expectations resonates with the women's yearning for freedom and self-expression. Dolly's desire to dress like Naina Devi reflects a longing for a similar kind of heroism. The play's title itself becomes ironic, highlighting the domestic struggles faced by the Trivedi women instead of a literal battle.

The reference to Rani Lakshmi Bai, a warrior queen who fought against the British, serves as another layer of symbolism. This brave historical figure embodies women's deep-seated desire for freedom and their fight against the oppressive patriarchal structure. In essence, the play exposes the hypocrisy within the household. The seemingly ordinary facade masks the emotional turmoil and restricted lives of the women. Through symbolic references and the characters' struggles, the playwright emphasises the women's yearning for love, freedom, and the courage to break free from societal constraints.

LALITHA: The poem was... Let me see.

ALKA: (interested) „Jhansi Ki Rani“

LALITHA: Yes, but how did it go? (remembers and recites) We'd heard her praises sung so often. So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi. So bravely fought the manly queen...

ALKA: Khoob Ladi Mardani, who to... (CP: 295–96)

The situation escalates as the suggestion to dress up as a brave queen arises. Lalitha proposes this idea to Dolly, but Alka jumps in, eager to join the act. This moment reveals the contrasting situations of the women. Baa, confined to her bed in her late sixties, serves as a constant reminder of past suffering. Clad in white, the scars of her abusive marriage are evident. The memory of her violent husband and the lingering trauma are ever-present. Adding to their woes, the constant ringing of a bell and Baa's loud pronouncements become sources of further distress for Alka and Dolly.

The play sheds light on the exploitation women face at the hands of men. Alka, a victim of both her husband and her own brother Praful, expresses her pent-up rage and resentment. Her outburst, "I can't forget what they did to me! Our brother is a cheat! He lied about our father to them. And he lied to me! He lied to me!" exposes the web of deceit and manipulation she endures. The play injects a layer of unconventional romance through the story of Dolly and Kanhaiya, the teenage cook. Alka, seemingly under the influence of alcohol, narrates their supposed love affair to Lalitha, even incorporating the symbolic Thumri of Naina Devi. The scene takes a surprising turn when Dolly herself joins in, displaying a mix of amusement and awkwardness while listening to the embellished tale.

This episode with Kanhaiya serves a deeper purpose. While his physical presence might be ambiguous, he represents a symbol of the women's dissatisfaction and the emptiness they experience within their confined lives. Alka and Lalitha's excessive drinking further emphasises their emotional state. Alka's intoxicated ramblings hint at the potential for women to shed their inhibitions and express themselves more freely when the usual social constraints are lowered.

Act One concludes with a contrasting set of calls. Baa's feeble voice calling for Dolly signifies the weight of domestic responsibilities, while Dolly's joyous cry for Kanhaiya, real or imagined, reflects a yearning for something beyond the confines of their daily routines. This creates a sense of tension as the audience wonders about the true nature of their relationship and the hidden desires simmering beneath the surface. Act Two offers a stark contrast, shifting the focus to the "men's world" and their professional space.

Their primary concern is the ReVa Tee advertising campaign. Shridhar presents the results of a market survey, highlighting concerns about the advertisement's effectiveness in capturing the female audience's desires. Despite the model's suitability, something crucial seems to be missing. This becomes evident when the "ReVa Tee" advertisement itself is described as "pregnant with meaning" and laden with suggestive symbolism. Shridhar's argument is that the ad fundamentally fails to grasp the essence of femininity and acknowledge women as equals. However, Jiten, the elder brother, dismisses Shridhar's concerns and expresses his satisfaction with the campaign. He believes the negative feedback from female audiences holds little weight because, as he puts it, "they don't have buying power." This statement reflects the prevailing patriarchal mindset that undermines women's agency and reduces them to mere consumers.

Therefore, Act Two exposes the disconnect between the male perspective and the true needs and desires of women. The focus solely on financial gain and a superficial understanding of the female market highlight men's inability to recognize women's intrinsic worth and their role beyond just consumers.

JITEN: Screw the survey! You know who you should have tested it out on? Men! Shridhar: Men!
JITEN: Yes! Men would want to buy it for their women! That's our market. Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have buying power. Yes! So there's no point in asking a group of screwed-up women what they think of it. They'll pretend to feel offended and say, "Oh, we are always being treated like sex objects." (CP: 276)

The play lifts the veil to expose the harsh realities that women face in a society where the male gaze predominates. Jiten's attitude exemplifies the larger issue of disregarding women's perspectives. He views them as secondary individuals, with their opinions holding little value compared to their male counterparts. This highlights the deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset that reduces women to mere appendages. The Trivedi brothers' lives in their posh Bangalore suburb symbolise a moral and financial downfall. Their addiction to prostitution exposes the hollowness within their seemingly successful lives. Their actions not only exploit the women involved but also destroy the sanctity of marriage. Bringing these women into their office further underscores their blatant disregard for societal norms and their objectification of women. Act

Three marks a turning point as the characters come face-to-face, leading to confrontations and the shattering of facades. Jiten and Nitin return home to find Alka in a dishevelled state. Rain-soaked and muddy, she appears to be injured. Their initial reaction is one of shock, particularly towards the state of her appearance, which they deem "indecent." Jiten's response further emphasises the controlling nature of the men. His simple command to Nitin—"ask"her what she was doing outside in the "rain"—reflects their tendency to dictate and limit the women's actions and freedoms.

This sets the stage for a potential clash as the act progresses, with the women likely to challenge the imposed restrictions and societal expectations.

JITEN: Ask her what she was doing outside in the rain. Alka: I don't know! I don't know what I was doing outside. Aren't there times when you don't know what you are doing? (To Nitin:) What's the harm in that? Huh? (No response.) Tell me. What's the harm? (CP: 299–300)

The play lays bare the entrenched male chauvinism within Indian society, relegating women to a colonised and subordinate position. Baa and Dolly exemplify the injustice and ill-treatment they endure at the hands of their husbands, highlighting the pervasiveness of patriarchal dominance. Dattani stages the battle within the domestic sphere. The Trivedi household transforms into an arena where the affluent female characters bravely confront the suppression and subjugation imposed by the patriarchal social system. Furthermore, the play tackles the sensitive issue of homosexuality with remarkable boldness. It sheds light on the anguish and agony faced by Alka upon discovering her husband Nitin's homosexual relationship with her own brother, Praful. This revelation reveals her unwitting role as a pawn in their clandestine relationship. Praful, motivated by his desire to sustain the relationship, strategically maneuvers Alka's marriage to Nitin. Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* poignantly exposes the systematic marginalization of women.

The play serves as a powerful articulation against the patriarchal structures that subjugate them, reducing their worth to mere appendages in a male-dominated society. It functions as a scathing indictment of the exploitation women face - both emotionally and financially - within the confines of familial relationships. Dattani further delves into the prevalent societal ills such as usurious money lending, prostitution, domestic violence, and rampant consumerism. Despite their varying dispositions, the women in the play are bound by a common thread of disillusionment and discontent arising from their claustrophobic domestic spaces. This pervasive sense of despondency compels them to seek solace in various outlets: Alka's addiction to alcohol, Dolly's romantic yearning for Kanhaiya, and Lalitha's obsessive focus on her bonsai plant, all serving as coping mechanisms for their suppressed frustrations.

The play culminates in a moment of assertiveness as the women collectively attempt to reclaim agency and forge their own identities beyond the restrictive domestic sphere. Each woman employs her own unique method to extricate herself from their deplorable condition. The unmasking of the men further exposes their true

nature, leaving them with only the option of escapism. Dolly's transformation is particularly noteworthy. Initially portrayed as submissive and timid, she undergoes a remarkable metamorphosis, emerging as a vocal and potent force. She finally shatters the silence, vehemently denouncing the injustice and ill-treatment she has endured. Alka, too, contributes by making a shocking revelation about her brother Praful's malicious intent in marrying her off to Nitin solely to facilitate his homosexual relationship. Dattani's play illuminates the cultural friction arising from the clash between entrenched societal norms and the burgeoning influence of modern trends.

This clash reshapes the Indian urban family landscape, exposing the emotional, financial, and sexual complexities they face. The women, subjected to multifaceted exploitation, transcend the image of passive sufferers. While they undeniably endure hardship, they eventually muster the courage to resist their subjugated status. They shed the mantle of subalternity and wield their voices as weapons in a powerful declaration of their emancipation and inherent equality. Alka embodies this spirit of resistance. Her resolute defiance against the patriarchal system mirrors the valor displayed by Rani Lakshmibai in her fight against British colonial subjugation. Both women stand as testaments to the unyielding human spirit in the face of oppression.

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