

## **Gender Issues: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Mahesh Dattani's plays are the mirror of contemporary Indian Society. They discussed the undercurrent of social life. He is one of the forerunners in discussing the varied theme of homosexuality and marital problem in the spouses. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the gender issues highlighted in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The play revolves around the three generations. It portrays the complexity of the husband-wife relationship, mother-daughter relationship, and mother-son relationship.

### **KEYWORDS**

Gender; patriarchy; society; homosexual.

### **Introduction**

Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* was first performed at the Sophia Bhabha Hall, Mumbai on 2<sup>nd</sup> Aug. 1991. The play has a multi-layered thematic technique. It deals with the three generations and reflects the inhuman treatment meted out to women of these three generations. The playwright has divided the play into three acts with titles for each. The title of the first act is *The Women* which deals with the women characters in the play which are Baa, a widow and the mother of Jitin and Nitin; Dolly, wife of Jiten; Alka, wife of Nitin; Daksha, daughter of Dolly and Jiten; Lalita, wife of Sridhar, an employee in Nitin and Jitin's office. Act II is titled *The Men* which is dominated by men characters in the play as Jitin, Baa's elder son; Nitin, Baa's younger son; Sridhar, an

employee in Jiten and Nitin's office and Praful, brother of Dolly and Alka. Act III is titled *Free to All* which is the combination of the activities of the men and women characters. The characters of Mahesh Dattani's plays are lively and true to life without any supernatural qualities. Namrata Pathak points out the characters of Mahesh Dattani's plays in her article titled "The Self in Drama: Creating /Constructing Spaces in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*":

Succinctly enough, instead of portraying traditional avatars in his plays, he chooses to give birth to characters that are dynamic, very much living, animating, breathing, making choices in every juncture of their life, and accepting myriad influences on their inner and outer worlds. Such characters

are not ashamed of being a homosexual, transgender, eunuch, whodunit, or being a part of the third gender (Pathak, 2012:1)

The play deals with a family in the urban strata of society. This family has a mother, Baa; her two sons, Jiten and Nitin; two daughters-in-law, Dolly and Alka and one grand-daughter Daksha. All the characters of the play are very lively and true to life. Baa's husband was of dominating nature. L.Amritashwori Devi writes in "Women as Victims in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*" for Baa,

Baa's husband was a dominating and violent man who had not only prevented her from singing but also used to beat her up time and again. He also ill-treated their sons. His nature towards Baa and their sons were so rude and brutal that she becomes affected even after the death of her husband whenever she recalls him of making her unable to live in the present (Devi,2011:190)

Baa met him before her marriage and came to know about his dominating nature, "You want me to sing only for you? I will sing for everyone! Why are you so angry" (Dattani, 2000:288). Baa was ill-treated by her husband in her youthful days. Her husband was very brute. She had to face humiliation physically as well as psychologically at his hands. But an Indian woman does not want to reveal her miserable plight to everyone. That's why when Baa's husband beats her, she cries not to hit him in the face,

Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu1 Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! No! No! Not on the face. I beg you. I beg you! Hit me but not on. . . aaaah! (Dattani, 2000:278)

The face is a mirror that presents the miseries of a person very clearly. But a woman wants to cover her misery and does not want to reveal it to everyone. Sujata Sen points out about women in the book titled *Gender Studies*, "Women tolerate all the torture silently keeping it all within themselves to keep the family fabric and prestige intact" (Sen, 2012:101).

### **Treatment of Gender Issues**

Alka, the wife of Nitin is the victim of a patriarchal society. First, she suffers at the hands of her brother, Praful, and then her husband and mother-in-law's hands. Praful is very cruel to her. Once, she came back home from school on a neighbour boy's scooter, at this Praful burnt her hair on the stove, "He lit the stove and pushed my face in front of it! I thought he was going to burn my face! He burnt my hair. I can still smell my hair on fire" (Dattani, 2000: 257). Here the pity is she is not realizing the fact that she is being tortured. She is more concerned about her face. The face is an identity of both Baa and Alka. Her husband has homosexual relations with her brother Praful even before his marriage to her. In this way, her life is devoid of any love. She dilutes herself in wine to get rid of her loneliness. She remains intoxicated all the time. In this state, once at the dinner time, Baa insulted Alka's family before Praful, at this she remarks, "Your sons are so different from one another. They are both petty like you, but otherwise... Do they have different fathers" (Dattani, 2000:256). She has been thrown out of the house by her husband for these remarks. Linda L. Lindsey rightly points out in the book titled *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*, "Husband and male kin held the power of life and death over women" (Lindsey, 2011: 106). After this incident, Dolly tells Alka, "For three months I was in agony after your husband threw you out. Praful came twice begging and pleading

with Nitin to take you back” (Dattani, 2000: 256-57).

Dolly is the victim of patriarchy. She has to suffer at the hands of her husband. Her husband, Jiten resembles his father. His father beats his mother badly and he also beat them. Dolly’s husband beats her badly with his hands and feet during her pregnancy and the result of which is the premature birth of Daksha with a deformed body. She does not want to tell the reality of Daksha to anyone and says she is under training as a dancer. That’s why she talks very little to anyone to hide the reality of Daksha. Alka complains to her of this nature,

At parties, you just sit in a corner sipping your lime juice and speak when spoken to. You refuse to mix, you refuse to be interesting. You are just not . . . an interested party. That’s why they don’t take us out more often (Dattani, 2000: 247)

The real plight of Dolly is revealed by Alka in the play, “Having leach for a husband. A saint for a brother and a leach for a husband” (Dattani, 2000: 300). Her husband has no time for her. Her loneliness is revealed by Alka, “Poor Dolly, sitting by herself, looking pretty and . . . wastes. With only a half-dead mother-in-law for the company” (Dattani, 2000: 260). In her loneliness, Dolly takes interest in listening to Naina Devi’s thumari. She and Alka also create an imaginary character, Kanahiya as her lover. Alka gives Dolly two options on which they can talk before Lalita, one is Kanahiya and the other is Daksha. Dolly prefers to talk about Kanahiya. But the story of Kanahiya told by Dolly and Alka to Lalita was not the real truth. Dolly herself says, “She knows about Kanhaiya. That’s all. So let’s keep it that way. . . The half-truth and nothing but the half-truth” (Dattani, 2000: 293).

Daksha, the third generation of the Trivedi family, is also the victim of patriarchy. Her mother, Dolly was kicked

by her husband during her pregnancy. The result of it is the premature birth of Daksha with a deformed body. Her father even does not mention her name before anyone. When Lalita comes to Dolly for discussing the costume for a ball, then at the name of Daksha Lalita asks about her. Dolly is shocked as Jiten has not mentioned Daksh before Lalita and says to herself, “He doesn’t mention Daksha, but he mentions my tailoring” (Dattani, 2000:239). Dolly even does not want to mention her daughter to anyone. In the words of Alka,

She hardly ever mentions her daughter to anyone. . . She does not tell anyone that her daughter is training to be a dancer! She is going to be a famous dancer, isn’t she? (Dattani, 2000: 259)

Even Alka’s this description of Daksha is also incorrect Daksha is under physiotherapy.

Dolly and Alka’s mother is the greatest victim of patriarchy. Their mother has three children: two daughters, Dolly and Alka, and a son, Praful. Her husband is already a married man and has four children. He deceived her by not telling her about his first wife and later left her and started living with his former wife. Dolly comes to know about it later, in the words of Dolly, “My mother didn’t even know about his first wife till later. She was deceived too!”(Dattani, 2000: 311). But in Indian society, nobody blames that man but only the woman. She has to suffer twice firstly at the hands of such a husband and then at the hands of society. In this play also, Baa does not say a single word for Dolly and Alka’s father who has deceived their mother but calls their mother a whore. A woman even can’t understand the problem of a woman. Baa even once does not think about the sorrow of such a woman who has to face such adultery of a husband.

The play presents the hypocritical nature of the characters. Dolly’s mask is

the symbol of her hypocritical nature. She is very aware of the cracks in her mask because these cracks are the symbol of her true self. At the mention of the replacement for the cook she says, "My mask is all cracked" (Dattani, 2000: 239). The dress selection for the ball is also symbolic. Alka wants to wear the costume of Rani Janshi. But in reality, she is not brave like this Rani. Dolly wants to wear a beautiful mujra dress like a prostitute which presents her desire to love and to be loved outside marriage. For Daksha, the dance costume is decided but in reality, she is crippled and under psychotherapy. At this Lalita comments, "That's no good. You have to come as something you are not" (Dattani, 2000: 297).

The use of bonsai is also very symbolic. It is the symbol of the suppressed desires of women. The branches and roots of a tree managed to be cut from time to time to give it a desirable shape and maintain in a pot in the house. It is the symbol of women. A woman also has to suppress her desires and ambitions to maintain the family intact. Man curtails her rights to limit her to the house. In this way, a bonsai presents the plight of women in Indian society. The dead shoot is also symbolic. L. Amritashwori Devi remarks for Lalita, "The dead shoot means that she has many suppressed or unfulfilled desires and aspirations as a result of the male-dominated society, though not directly" (Devi, 2011: 196).

Lalita, the wife of Sridhar, an employee in Jitin and Nitin's office, is very fond of making bonsai and taking care of them. Once, Lalita and Sridhar won a raffle at one of those made-for-each-other contests. The prize for it was two free tickets to Goa or cash. She even rejected the idea to go to Goa and had some fun because of her bonsais. She could not leave them alone because who would take care of them after her. In the play, she tells Dolly, "Sridhar wanted Goa and I wanted

cash. I just couldn't imagine leaving my bonsais with the neighbour, worrying whether she had remembered to water them" (Dattani, 2000: 252). But a man can't digest if her wife has her own choice and does not follow the choice of the husband. Sridhar is no different from these traditional men and says to Lalita, "It's typical of women to do exactly opposite of what their husbands want, just to prove they are independent" (Dattani, 2000: 252). Lalita's obsession with bonsai which is an experiment with the natural order of the trees presents her imaginative world where she can design everything according to her own will. In the words of Namrata Pathak,

In Lalitha, Dattani probes the nuances of an artist's mind; exposes the untrammelled, unpredictable and non-rule-bound nature alluding to the imaginative operations of an individual's psyche; and shows the artist's engagement with the continuous possibilities of imagined meanings (Pathak, 2012: 5)

The past of a person affects his/her life badly. But when it is the past of women it affects her more than a man. This is the case with Dolly and Alka. Their father was not living with their mother. He lived with her former wife and four children. At the time of their marriage, Praful, their brother, told their in-laws that their father was dead. But after their marriage, Baa came to know about the reality of their father through a letter from her cousin in Ahmadabad. She insulted Dolly and Alka by calling them the daughter of a mistress or a keep. In the words of Baa, "Your mother is a keeper. . . a mistress! My sons have married the daughters of a whore!" (Dattani, 2000: 311). Dolly has to pay a great price for the revelation of this past. Baa even tells Jitu, "Throw out her as well. Whore!" (Dattani, 2000: 311). Baa instigates Jiten to beat

Dolly who was even pregnant at that time and the result of it was the immature birth of Daksha. L.Amritashweri Devi points out about Dolly,

So, she suffers not for her own fault but for Praful's. She suffers because she is a woman. The husband who himself is a cheater and is disloyal to his wife and who enjoys with whores cannot bear his wife's being a whore, that too is only imposed on her by the society (Devi, 2011: 193)

But it is not easy for a man to accept his mistake. He always tries to make responsible for that to a woman. Jiten does the same, he makes responsible to Baa for his beating Dolly. But Dolly does not accept it easily and says, "They were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me! It's in your blood! It's in your blood to do bad!" (Dattani, 2000: 312). Alka is thrown out of the house by Nitin after the revelation of her family secret. In this way, both the sisters have to suffer at this revelation.

A woman achieves completeness in motherhood. Linda L. Lindsey points out about women in the book titled *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*, "Motherhood is the necessary ingredient for making them complete" (Lindsey, 2011: 211). If she does not bear a child she can't get a respectable place in her home as well as in society. It is clear from the conversation between Alka and Baa-

Alka: You can win so easily with me because you have two sons to protect you.

Baa: Yes! I have been blessed with two sons. I thank God.

Alka: And I? I have been cursed because I don't have children. That's what you want to say!

... And Dolly has been blessed because she has Daksha?

Baa: Karma. It is all karma. . .

Alka: He needs your permission to have children and by God, you

won't give it to him! (Dattani, 2000: 284).

If Alka had progeny, her life would be different. There is no need for her to take shelter of wine. Dolly has Daksha which is the only consolation of her life but she is also with a deformed body. But being a child, she is the only power for her. Through the conversation between Jiten and Dolly it becomes clear:

Jiten: That's because I know what I want. You don't, so you lose.

Dolly: When have I ever won? Once yes, I did. When I became a mother (Dattani, 2000: 309).

In this way, a woman must have progeny for her respect and her power. Manu also considers motherhood necessary for women, "Women were created to bear children, and men to carry on the line" (Dattani, 2000: 209).

A woman has to be dependent on a man for security reasons. In society, it is not safe for a woman to go out alone at night. Lalita who comes to Dolly's house to discuss the masked ball is dropped there by her husband, Sridhar. Sridhar also says her that he will pick her up after the completion of her work. That's why she says to Dolly to stay with her till her husband will come. She herself accepts that it is not safe for a woman to go out alone at night. Sridhar thinks it is unsafe for women to move alone at night. In Dolly's view, they should have women auto drivers. You might still lose your jewelry, but at least you won't get raped.

Linda L. Lindsey presents the plight of women in her home through a proverb, Men have careers; women have jobs. Men are breadwinners; women are bread bakers. Men are sexual leaders; women are sexual followers. A man's home is his castle (Lindsey, 2011: 241)

Dolly and Alka represent the shallow domestic life of business-class wives. When the play begins, Dolly and Alka are dressing for a party. There is no matter of

their own wish. They are preparing because their husbands want them to go with them. After some time, the plan of going out is canceled by the husbands without asking the consent of their wives. Jiten, Dolly's husband even doesn't tell her directly about the cancellation of going out. She comes to know about it through Alka, her sister and she reacts, "He never told me! He never told me anything!" (Dattani, 2000:249). Gerda Lerner points out in the book titled *The Creation of Patriarchy*, "Women, under patriarchal rules, do not dispose of themselves and decide for themselves" (Lerner, 1986: 80).

Jiten and Nitin, both brothers are adulterous to their wives. They usually bring whores and enjoy life with them. In the words of Jiten, "It's a regular thing for Nitin and me. Driving out. Picking a couple up" (Dattani, 2000: 287). Sridhar, Lalita's husband, on the one hand, presents himself as a reputed person and faithful to his wife. When Jiten asks him to bring a whore for him then he says, "I-I've got a reputation to. . . I mean what if someone sees me and tells my wife?" (Dattani, 2000: 287). But on the other hand, he himself indulges in adultery. To the question of Jiten about the status of the whore, he says in a very low voice which can't be heard by Jiten, "She is great. I had her on the back seat. You can have my leftovers" (291).

In the eyes, of the Jiten and Nitin, a woman is a commodity and an enjoyable thing. In the words of L. Amritashwori Devi, "Men can never think women as human as they are and they are always victimising them (women) because they need to show their superiority over them" (Devi, 2011: 193). In the press ads of their ReVaTee, a new range of color-coordinated nightwear and underwear for women, they present a woman as a sexpot, "You've got the model lying on a bed and the signature is 'Light his fire with ReVaTee'" (Dattani, 2000: 274). In reality,

a woman for them is only a useful commodity. To get the women's responses to this ad they filled up a questionnaire from them. Sridhar tells Nitin and Jiten about the answers to the questionnaire, "They all said- in different words of course- but most of them used one word to describe it- offensive. They all find it highly offensive" (Dattani, 2000: 275). At this Jiten thought that it is the men who bought things for them,

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, 2000: 276)

When a person is responsible for the bad deeds which cause great harm to another person related to him/her then he/she loves him/her more than natural. For Daksha's deformity, Baa who instigated Jiten to beat Dolly in her pregnancy, Jiten whose hands and feet made her deform, and Praful who keeps the secret of his family unrevealed from the in-laws of his sisters, and the revelation of this secret results in Baa's anger are responsible. To make up for the loss of Daksha, all three persons love Daksha more than natural but their love can't remove Daksha's deformity. Dolly says to Jiten,

I saw her and I knew! I knew instantly! Your mother loved her more than was natural! Praful loved her! More than was natural. You love her more than Baa or Praful! Because you feel the most guilt! (Dattani, 2000: 312).

It is Jiten whose hands and feet made Daksha like this that's why he loves her more than anybody else. But now his love can't make up for the loss of Daksha's life. That's why Baa has given all the property to Daksha and made Praful the trustee of the property till the maturity of Daksha.

Baa, the mother of Nitin and Jiten is bedridden but even in this situation, she tries her best to torture her daughters-in-law, Dolly and Alka. She keeps on ringing the bell time and again sometimes even without any reason. It is clear from this conversation between Baa and Alka,

Alka: Why do you keep ringing that bell?

Baa: If I don't ring the bell, I will go to sleep (Dattani, 2000: 282).

Her intention is to create more and more trouble for Dolly and Alka. In the words of Alka, "Two things she fights us all with. That bell and her loud mouth" (Dattani, 2000: 249). Baa also does not like her daughters-in-law going out with her sons. In her eyes, they waste money by going out. Baa says, "Those girls go out, go out, go out-a-a-a-all the time!" (Dattani, 2000: 272). Linda L. Lindsey points out, "A woman must continually be on call to the needs of her family when her own needs are put on hold or ignored" (Lindsey, 2011:194).

Baa has two sons, Jitin and Nitin. The elder son, Jitin resembles his father in his colour and even cruelty but the younger son, Nitin has a fair colour like his mother and he is not cruel like his father. By recalling her past Baa says, "He is dark! Dark! And I am so fair. My children will be dark, like him! (Smiles). Two sons...The younger one is beautiful, like my father! He has my blood!" (Dattani, 2000: 288). Nitin is fair by colour but he has many weaknesses. He has homosexual relations with Praful and marries his sister Alka to continue it after marriage. But when he comes to know that in her will, Baa has given all the property to Daksha and made Praful the trustee of the property till the maturity of Daksha, he wants to get the property at any cost. He even gets ready to leave his wife, Alka to get the property. He says to Baa, "Will you give me the house if I send her back- for good this time?" (Dattani, 2000: 302). In the eyes of Nitin,

Praful is more unbearable for him than Alka.

He says to Baa,

All my life I have listened to you and obeyed you. Only once have I gone against your wishes, and you punish me for that? But he is to blame. Praful tricked me into marrying her! If you want to hate anyone hate him. I hate him now! Do what you want with the property but don't let him run my life! He is out to get us! Alka can stay here, or go away, or drink herself to death, I don't care. It doesn't make a difference to me! But get him out of my life! (Dattani, 2000: 305).

The old beggar woman who appears in the play under the tarpaulin time and again has a symbolic meaning. The first time she appears, at the reference of the name of Praful, the second time she appears when Alka recalls Praful's cruelty of burning her hair on the stove, and the third time she appears at the reference of Daksha and the Thumari of Naina Devi. She is the symbol of the bitter realities of the characters of the play which are hidden as she is hidden under a tarpaulin. Praful's reality is revealed by Alka and Nitin is very heinous. Daksha is described as a good dancer but in reality, she is under psychotherapy. The fear of Alka and Dolly for their husbands is also revealed in the rain scene. They don't have the right to do anything for their liking. At the end of the play, the old beggar woman is crushed by Jitin's car which is the symbol of the coming out of all hidden secrets, as Jitin accepts that he was responsible for Daksha's premature birth and Nitin accepts his homosexual relationship with Praful.

If a husband supports his wife, she can achieve her dreams. The reference to Nana Devi who was a Queen proves it right. She was a queen but she wanted to

sing songs of love which were called thumari sang by tawaif only in those days. But her love for singing was very strong and she had not to care what people called her, she had an interest-only in one thing singing and her husband supported her. Dolly tells her history to Lalita,

The queen wanted to sing love songs sung by whores! Why? Nobody knew. . . She went ahead and sang! Her husband supported her. At times she was mistaken for a tawaif. But it didn't matter! It didn't matter to her because she was singing! That was all that was important to her. Today, she is called the queen of thumari (Dattani, 2000: 295).

The suffering of women at the hands of men is age-old suffering. In the present context, the suffering of women may be different from the suffering of Baa, Dolly, Alka, Daksha, Lalita, and, Dolly and Alka's mother but women always suffer at the hands of men. L. Amritashwori Devi rightly remarks,

The subjugation, the torture, or the way our women suffer may be different but the age-old system

of dominance over women by men will never end and they are and will always be victims in our male chauvinistic society. (Devi, 2011: 196).

### **Conclusion**

Thus the play presents the plight of women in society. The three generations of women have no difference in their plight. All these three generations have to suffer at the hands of men. Indian society is a patriarchal society where women's rights are curtailed like the bonsai. She has no life of her own but her life is related to the male counterparts of the family. Baa, Dolly, and Alka all of them have to lead a life in which their husbands have the authority to deal with them. Daksha is a victim of this patriarchal system and even by birth, she is born with a deformed body because of the ill-treatment given to her mother by her father during her pregnancy. Jiten and Nitin, both brothers are adulterous to their wives and Jiten even beats his wife during her pregnancy. Thus, the play presents that women are suffering from generations at the hands of men.

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