

## The Oppression of the Other by the Absolute in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*

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### Abstract

Patriarchy has long been salient in feminist philosophy, for it is pivotal to questions about women identity, the body, and agency that feminism must address. This paper is a manifestation of the artificially affluent modern society lost in materialistic pursuits and carnal pleasures, downright dominated by patriarchal institutions that are yet to value the woman in the right perspective of a changing time. The speciality of this paper is the characters in Indian English texts who evince how women's selfhood has been systematically subordinated or have been outrightly denied by law, customary practices, and cultural stereotypes over the years and hitherto. This paper will delve into the role of women in the institution of marriage through the dramatis personae of 'Dolly' in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*, where the supposedly "Other" owes "the Absolute" her virginity and strict fidelity regardless of anything. This paper will also examine the perspicacity of Mahesh Dattani, as he mirrors upon the terrible treatment meted out to a female in a patriarchal society from. The woman, from the beginning of the play is tailored and forced to 'fit in'. In this regard, one may be surely reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's declaration, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman". The paper therefore intends to highlight the fervent contributions of self-narratives with respect to roles like 'Lalitha', and 'Alka', in the study of ever prevailing patriarchal institutions. In addition to it, this paper analyses the long ongoing female struggle, for the assertion of her individuality and against her marginalization.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Stereotype, Marriage, the Absolute, the Other

The segregation of values along the binary of gender has been historically long associated with the valorization of the masculine and the suppression of the feminine. Individuals grow up in social settings saturated with culturally normative prejudice and implicit bias, even in communities where overt forms of bigotry are strictly condemned. Although official norms uphold the values of equality and tolerance, patriarchal culture continues to relay camouflaged ideas of the inferiority of historically subordinated social groups through stereotypes and other imagery. Different factors work towards the perpetration of the system of patriarchy, many of which are ingrained into such operating mattresses as “culture”, “norm of society” and “tradition”, and are then passed off as normative.<sup>1</sup>

Mahesh Dattani, one of the most acclaimed playwrights of modern India, in his fourth play, *Bravely Fought the Queen* had criticized the fashionable, rather affluent section of the present-day Indian society. According to Dattani, under the finery of “culture” and “tradition”, patriarchal machinations continue to function, by excluding women and repressing the “non-normative sexual practices”, and forcing them to withdraw deep inside the closet. The present play is quite serious, although it is not plainly expressed for, as the dramatist uses a multi-layered thematic technique. The theme of the play touches on one of the most burning issues of our time, which is true even in our contemporary times, and this is the issue of male vanity and egoism, to satisfy which women are relentlessly subdued, even at the cost of their own humanity within the precipices of a male chauvinistic society. Dattani, therefore, seeks to expose the various layers of hypocrisy and prejudice by taking a rational and objective stance in his plays. The following paper will thus unveil the facade of the spectacular show under which the women are treated as the ‘second sex’,<sup>2</sup> or treated to be the mere incarnation of weakness and submissiveness, which further leads to their economic, cultural, and biological subjugation by the patriarchal society, and are therefore denied participation in the activities of business world.

In the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* the women are placed in contradictory yet realistic positions with respect to the varied ramifications of power which operate within the society. Through the voices from the past, Dattani presents Baa as a victim of a history of violence against women and the way in which it has taken a new form in Dolly and Alka. Baa exercises patriarchal control over the affairs of the family being the legal inheritor of the ancestral property. She has been “processed” over the years, to conform to the role of being not only a woman, but also a patriarch in the guise of a woman, who would ensure that all other women in the family, similar to her, accepts a secondary position with respect to the other males in the family and the society at large. Her nature, which is a bit deviated from the normative, is a result of her brutal exploitation by her husband, who continues to haunt her even after he had died, by putting her into a condition in which she cannot even differentiate between the past and the present. However, though oppressed herself, Baa becomes instrumental to the suffering of her daughter-in-laws, and as stated above she betrays her own sex in order to sustain patriarchal regimentation in the Indian family system. This is clearly exemplified by Dattani, as despite being “bed-ridden”, her influence can never be annulled as she becomes a repository of all the patriarchal values in the family. She instigates Jiten to hit Dolly in her advanced stage of pregnancy mercilessly and forbids Nitin to have a child. At this, Alka is blamed of a blemished womanhood, for her childlessness forces her to lament, “You know why I can’t have children. You won’t let me. That’s why!”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in making Jiten beat Dolly she vents her frustration of earlier times when she too was subjected to domestic violence. Her instigation nevertheless proves to be negative and destructive, as she is directly responsible for Dolly giving birth to a premature spastic child, Daksha, who stands as a silent symbol of Jiten’s domestic violence.

Dattani's use of bonsai is an intensely interesting trope in the play. The bonsai unveils the efforts of a power ridden society to stunt the normal growth of mind and spirit of a woman. Thereby, though free from the extensive domestic exploitation, Lalitha suffers in the hands of the society as she tries to seek what she lacks in her obsessive love for the bonsai. Lalitha asserts that, "You can shape their branches into whatever shape you want—by pinching or wiring the shoots."<sup>4</sup> This wiring and trimming that she subjects her plants to may be well compared to the representation of the control and restriction that she has done to her own life, by cutting the "dead shoots" which signify her "suppressed desires" and "unfulfilled aspirations".<sup>5</sup> In regards to this, one may be reminded of Simon de Beauvoir's declaration, "her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly."<sup>6</sup> The Bonsai's bizarre shape and grotesque looks are objective representation of the mental condition of the female characters who try to escape the claustrophobic patriarchal machineries. Simone de Beauvoir labels women under patriarchal domination to be "mutilated" and "immanent", for much like the Bonsai, women's natural needs are not taken care of.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the Bonsai also reflects on the beauty and class quotient of their male counterparts. In other words, socialized to objectify themselves, women are said to become narcissistic, small-minded, and dependent on others' approval while being excluded from careers, and busy with the monotonous house chores, women fail to become transcendent agents.<sup>8</sup>

In a conformist patriarchal society, virtues are imposed in a dualistic fashion based on which men are considered to possess the traits of rationality, intellect, and bravery. On the contrary, kindness, submissiveness, and politeness are regarded as the virtue of an "ideal woman" in our traditional societal structure. However, these idiosyncrasies which are levelled for the whole of women genus are not regarded as "ideal qualities" in the mainstream realm of human culture. Orthodox patriarchal society has always brushed aside and regarded such feminine trademark, exhibiting which a woman becomes an ideal woman as fundamentally secondary, and inferior, deeming it not worthy enough to stand at par with masculine qualities. Forsooth, masculine attributes are not intrinsic, as these are rather articulated effectively and in consonance with which men are expected to reveal themselves as an exemplar or a paragon in a conventional patriarchal society. It is due to this social status that both men and women are compelled to suppress their innate qualities in an unfavourable society as it would lead to anti-patriarchal criterion.<sup>9</sup> Besides, they reinforce their valour by desexualizing women to the extent of "being eunuchs and adjourn that women are naturally fixated on the fantasy of men as they are much rational, and powerful moral beings".<sup>10</sup>

Evidently manifested thus, characters like Dolly, and Alka are blinded by the patriarchal values and mindset, where they being the supposedly "Other" owes "the Absolute" their virginity and strict fidelity regardless of the fact that the "Absolutes" take advantage of being under the category of 'fortunate sex', since there is no limitation in the different aspects of life whatsoever. Baa and Dolly's subjugation is somewhat similar, but it is Alka whose anguish and frustration are due to her husband's homosexual libido and her brother Praful's deceitful concealment of her husband, Nitin's reality. To expatiate vividly, Praful tricks her and uses her as an instrument in maintaining his gay relation with Nitin. The extreme efforts made by Nitin to keep his sexual preference a secret, in order to "conform" with the societal norm, and to combat the fear of being labeled as a disgrace, displays in graphic details his isolation and marginalization. The severe tyrannical acts levelled against the Trivedi women furthermore, results in their abnormalities and deviation from their present life, as they permanently hover on their memories, and thus creating for themselves, their own imaginary world where they fancy anything they aspire to have, that they have been denied in their real life. Notably, Dolly's sexual reverie centering on the inexistent Kanhaiya and Nitin's homoerotic musings on the

auto-rickshaw driver, merges semantically as well as thematically in the Dattani's dramatic composition. The semantic sonority of the "strong black arms" of the auto-rickshaw driver that eroticizes Nitin is distinctly vibrant in the "powerful black arms" of Kanhaiya that embraces Dolly in her mind's eye. The conflux of the synecdochical "black arm" ergo softens the rim between Dolly's fantasy and Nitin's reality besides minimizing their identities by relegating them as "transgressor" or the "Other".<sup>11</sup>

If the exploitative ambit of heteronormative marriage, donning the garb of upper-class hypocrisy compels Dolly and Alka to stunt their selfhood on the one hand; on the other hand it simply erases Nitin's homosexuality by rendering it invisible, to preserve the status quo evident in the gamut of familial stipulations urging them to confirm to the restrictions of their marital home. Thus, the culmination of patriarchy rests upon appropriation of identities at various levels which sustains in delineation of the absolutely stereotypical characters in the play, such as Baa and Jiten, who live to make these appropriated identities viable.

Significantly, it is important to set down that patriarchy is epoch-making and far-reaching than individuals who participate in it. Patriarchy is a system popularizing and sustaining the core value of restraint and dominance in all possible human space of existence. All men and women are therefore entangled in this grinding set-up and none of us can control whether we take part in it, therefore patriarchy cannot be equated with men alone. In a repressive society, while growing up people tend to identify with and participate in the overwhelming oppression unremarkably, following the trail of minimal resistance with regards to the societal punishments and rewards that hinge on going along with the status quo. Thus, under the facade of a liberated setup, people are still judged according to the parameters that are age-old and are labelled as the "bad woman", the homosexual, or more precisely the subjugated 'Other', if they refuse to inherit the 'silence' and speak up when culture threatens their 'existence'.<sup>12</sup> Yet many exhibits a silver lining amid this growing gloom where there is a change in the old situation of authoritativeness as the neglected and terrorized Other begin to rise and offer a brave resistance. Although, it is beyond debate that the artificially affluent modern society, lost in materialistic pursuits and carnal pleasures, downright dominated by patriarchal institutions is yet to value the Other in the right perspective of a changing time.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Devi, L. Amritashwori. "Women as Victims in Mahesh Dattani's Play: Bravely Fought the Queen." *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 3, no. 5&6 (2012). p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Simon de Beauvoir first used the term 'second sex' theoretically in her path breaking work *The Second Sex* where she admirably delineated the unfolding of the evolving feminist thought and the history of feminist structures.

<sup>3</sup> Dattani, Mahesh, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, India: Penguin Books, 2006, p.64

<sup>4</sup> Dattani, Mahesh, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, India: Penguin Books, 2006, p.19

<sup>5</sup> Devi, l. p. 4

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<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Second Sex*, London: Vintage, 2011, p.660

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 611.

<sup>8</sup> Singh, Jasdeep. "Rise of Women by Breaking the Stereotypes and Patriarchal Oppression in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought The Queen*." *Language in India* 18, no. 5 (2018).

<sup>9</sup> Singh, Jasdeep. p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Jagadiswari, Ms, and G. Baskaran. "Feminism in Mahesh Dattani's Play *Bravely Fought the Queen*." *Language in India* 14, no. 8 (2014). p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Puvar, Anuragsinh D. "Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*: A Facet of New Woman." *International Multidisciplinary e-Journal*. Vol V(3). March, 2016. p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

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