

## Animalisation and Deprivation in Bravely Fought the Queen

Dr. Alka Jain\*

English Faculty, Rani Lakshmi Bai Central Agricultural University, Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, India

### \*Corresponding author:

Dr. Alka Jain

Received: 02.01.2019

Accepted: 13.01.2019

Published: 25.01.2019

**Abstract:** Dattani's Bravely Fought the Queen shows the diabolic impact of animalization, deprivation and dehumanization on the lives of women. It portrays the claustrophobic existence of women in the world of limitations and handicaps. It makes an interesting study to observe how Dattani makes the females in the play, respond to the restrictions and constraints, and whether he justifies their dehumanization. Dattani has been known for his humanitarian stand, and his feminine sensibility can be ascertained by studying how he reinstates the human rights of one half of human population, women. The research endeavours to examine these dehumanizing bondages and their impact on the growth of the female characters in Bravely Fought the Queen, one of Dattani's most raw and violent exposition of the female self and psyche.

**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani, dehumanisation, feminism, animalization, deprivation, gender bias, violence.

### INTRODUCTION

*Bravely Fought the Queen* was the fourth play written by Dattani. It was first performed at the Sophia Bhabha Hall, Mumbai in 1991. The play is in three acts. When asked in an interview, why he explores the theme of gender, Dattani says:

*Gender obviously is a major part of it. And I think it has to do with my own comfort with both the feminine and the masculine self in me. I think the masculine self is very content, it doesn't need to express itself. But the feminine self seems to seek expression, so now the focus is definitely on that and perhaps that is also why, in plays like Bravely Fought the Queen, I take up cudgels for women. In that sense, it is fighting for my feminine self. And since I have the male self which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle [1].*

The play is set in Bangalore of the 1980s and 1990s. It centres on a family of two brothers, Jiten and Nitin, who are married to two sisters, Dolly and Alka respectively. The women remain at home and look after Baa, their bedridden mother-in-law who shuffles between the two houses and lives in her past memories. Then there is Sridhar who works for the brothers, and Lalitha, his wife. Apart from these seven characters present onscreen, there are five more characters that are referred to in the play- Daksha, the daughter of Dolly

and Jiten, Praful who is the brother of Dolly and Alka, the old beggar-woman, the autorickshaw driver and Kanhaiya, the cook.

There are allusions to two real-life queens in the play. One is Queen Naina Devi, the exponent of *Thumri*, and the other is the legendary warrior queen, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. The title of the play, *Bravely Fought the Queen* is an adaptation of the English translation of the famous poem, "khoob ladi mardani woh to . . ." [2].

*Bravely Fought the Queen* is a claustrophobic domestic tragedy of the Trivedi family in particular and the Indian patriarchal society in general. Violence is the underlying theme of this play. It depicts the stunted emotional, psychological, physical, and mental growth of individuals, particularly women who are forced to inhabit a dehumanized world. Dattani depicts high society, urban women who have all the luxuries bestowed on them but have to sustain their battered selves in a cruel world of innumerable restraints and constraints.

The play unwinds before Lalitha, whom Dattani uses as a catalyst to bring out the hidden complexities of the other characters. Lalitha also bridges the communication gap between the two sisters

Quick Response Code



Journal homepage:

<http://crosscurrentpublisher.com/ccijhss/>

**Copyright © 2019 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

and helps them express their grievances. Many wounds are exposed before Lalitha, who at first seems to be independent and better off than the other women in the play. She is a freelancer for *The Times*, meditates and is fond of growing bonsai plants. She knows a lot about her husband's job and helps him out with preparations for the masked ball. Lalitha and Sridhar appear to be made for each other.

Though a modern and educated woman, Lalitha appears to be restrained in several ways. She says to Dolly, "All my husband does at home is talk about his work" [2]. This shows that there is a distance in their relationship and their conversation is humdrum and mundane. Lalitha is constrained by her desire to please her husband and so she actively participates in all matters where he demands her cooperation, at the cost of her own career. She is just an unambitious freelancer.

When Dolly asks Lalitha to leave, she says that she cannot go back home without Sridhar. It is odd because an urbanite Lalitha, upon witnessing the uncomfortable and strange circumstances in the Trivedi house, should have taken immediate leave. Lalitha says, "But we live in RT Nagar. The other end of the world. Sridhar thinks it is unsafe for women to move about alone at night. I hate to admit it, but he's right (sighs). They should have women auto drivers. You might still lose your jewellery, but at least you won't get raped" [2].

Dattani shows how a woman's freedom of movement is restrained, not only by her inner apprehensions and socio-cultural constraints but also due to the presence of anti-social, debilitating elements in society. Sridhar's concern about Lalitha's safety echoes his concern for his wife and is also reminiscent of the moral policing and prejudice which restricts a woman's freedom to move alone at night. Lalitha shows her fear of rape, the most dehumanizing crime against a woman. Dattani shows how contemporary society has failed to protect the dignity of women, by using their bodies as objects of pleasure. Lalitha is a victim of socio-cultural constraints. She agrees with Sridhar's rationalization mechanically. A woman's psyche is trained by society and culture to accept the opinion of men as superior and infallible.

Lalitha fills up her vacant hours with several things. But she has nothing tangible to mention. She calls her work „nothing great“ and reflects a feminine attitude which restrains women from acknowledging their achievements with pride and confidence. While women praise their husband's work liberally, they constrain from showering upon themselves the same adulations. In Lalitha's case, it is Sridhar who decides matters for her, because he is the breadwinner and hence the master of the house. Further, Alka belittles Lalitha's accomplishments, as merely "something to

do" [2], reducing Lalitha's achievements to minimality, almost to the level where she finds herself. She reflects the myopic vision of traditional Indian society.

Alka is one of the most battered and downtrodden females in the play. Through her, the younger daughter-in-law of the Trivedi family, Dattani exposes the multilayered hypocrisy and hollowness of urbanized and affluent societies and cultures. She is a victim of the weaknesses of two men, who hide their own sexual preferences and identities in order to fit into the regular social fabric and deceive unsuspecting women victims behind the garb of marriage and domesticity. Alka is cheated into marrying a homosexual man, Nitin, by none other than her half brother Praful who is later revealed to be her husband's gay partner. Her marriage is bereft of intimacy, security and stability. She has no mental, emotional or sexual gratification, but just isolation and loneliness in her married existence. She constantly yearns for companionship. She has to beg to Nitin, "Nitin, let us go somewhere. Just the two of us. . . just for a drive. Anywhere. There are so many things I want to discuss but we are never . . ." [2].

Nitin marries Alka to keep his homosexuality under wraps, and while he continues his sexual enterprises with several men, he denies Alka, the humanitarian right to motherhood. Dattani depicts that the inhuman denial of basic conjugal rights of women speaks volumes about the double standards of society. While men are free to roam and look for sexual succour outside their bedroom, women are considered immoral if they express their desire for physical satisfaction. Alka's yearning is quiet human.

The violent and insensitive subjugation of Alka began long before her marriage. Praful uses his masculine domination to deny Alka, the freedom and independence to choose a man on her own. He threatens her by almost burning her face and hair. Praful shows diabolically animalistic traits. He is a completely dehumanized, self-centred individual who ruthlessly desires to destroy the female face and identity. Dattani's portrayal of Nitin is completely relevant to modern Indian society, where acid attacks on females have become a regular feature. The victims of such violence are unable to come on terms with their trauma, the permanent disfigurement, and the loss of social acceptance. Violence on women in the form of acid attacks is a worldwide phenomenon, irrespective of race or geography.

Nitin is incapable of loving Alka as a husband but could have at least respected her in the capacity of a human being. Alka burns with contempt for Praful, but tries to win over Nitin and save her marriage. Dattani shows how women are conditioned by constraints to remain in the folds of marriage even if they have nothing to gain from it. Dattani portrays a social reality,

in which most mismatched couples, especially homosexuals who enter heterosexual marriages, prefer to hide their sexual preferences due to cultural restraints. Alka's heated argument with Dolly regarding Praful, shows the deep wounds on her psyche:

#### **ALKA**

*For you, he is descendent of a saint! A saint! (Laughs hard.) Like my husband. Such close friends! Friends from college. (Dolly gives her a look of warning.) I didn't tell you. That time when you came home to.....Nitin and Praful were talking. I came home from school with the neighbour's son on his scooter instead of walking with you. I told him to drop me before our street came. He didn't understand and dropped me right at our doorstep. Praful saw. He didn't say a word to me. He just dragged me into the kitchen. 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. Nitin was right behind us. Watching! Just... Praful said, 'Don't you ever look at any man. Ever' [2].*

Alka is violently subjugated by both men and women in her life. The mother-in-law, Baa, detests her and does everything in her power to destabilize her, going as far as branding her a whore. Dattani shows the absence of peer support in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Alka cries in anguish, "You know why I can't have children. You won't let me" [2].

Baa discovers an unnamed letter which reveals that Alka's mother was a singer and a mistress to Praful's father. The anonymous letter is symbolic of the reality that in society the evil doers have no face. They appear primarily to destroy lives and then disappear into thin air. The letter reflects the interference of outside forces in familial matters. Baa is an outsider in their marriage, and so is Praful. Alka becomes a virtual prisoner in her married life and drowns her sorrow in alcohol. She tries once to rebel against her claustrophobic existence and is kicked out of her home by her mother-in-law and husband for three months.

Dattani shows the strange contradictions existing in society. Jiten, who enjoys the company of prostitutes has the gullibility to call Alka one. Both the brothers cheat their wives but demanding complete submission from them. Jiten convinces Nitin to desert his wife and secure the property rights. Baa despite being a victim of marital abuse uses her sons to get even with her daughter-in-laws. Dattani shows that Alka is just a useless piece of furniture, an object. Objectification of women completes a woman's annihilation in the patriarchal world. Dattani shows how women are trampled upon in society like a piece of filth.

In a moment of faded glory, Alka identifies with the Rani of Jhansi and desires to assume the role of

the brave Queen, looking resplendent in her attire with an armour and a wooden sword, at the masquerade ball. But her bravery and heroism are limited to the masked persona she wants to acquire. The masked role of the brave Queen would only give her temporary relief from her badly lost battle. Alka is an extremely vulnerable and unprotected victim, trapped in the cage of domesticity. All that she tries to do in revolt is to drink and blabber. She is insecure and loathed in marriage, childless, blamed by her own siblings, and labelled an alcoholic. She is shorn of all respect and dignity in the prejudiced world.

Dolly is another female martyred in the Trivedi household. She is an iconic figure of male physical abuse, the reminder of which is Daksha, her deformed daughter. Physically abused by Jiten, Dolly is hit hard on the stomach during her seventh month of pregnancy and gives birth to a premature, handicapped girl child. Dolly, painfully reveals her daughter's identity to Lalitha:

#### **DOLLY**

*You want to see her dance? They teach her dance where she goes! Only they call it physiotherapy. I'll bring her tomorrow from her ... special school and she will dance for you! Like this... She demonstrates a spastic's uncoordinated arm and neck movement with her eyes dilated. Laughs and turns around [2].*

Jiten and Baa realize their mistake but have no chance to undo the grave crime. Baa entrusts the house to Daksha to dissipate the guilt. Jiten's, hitting his wife is a blatant reminder of the atrocities meted out to women in the safe confines of their homes. Baa is unable to stop this legacy from being passed on, despite being a victim herself. Instead of putting an end to this oppression she herself becomes an oppressor.

Dolly wants to appear in the masked ball as a *tawaiif* – a woman trained in feminine arts and accomplishments, whose main aim in life is solely to please men. She represents a female psyche conditioned to appease men. She is the stereotypical Indian woman, submitting to her subaltern status. She is nothing but a bonsai, a mutilated and stunted representation of the grand tree of womanhood. Kanhaiya, the young cook projected as her lover is merely a figment of her imagination, her unsatisfied desires.

Dolly admires Queen Naina Devi, the Thumri exponent. She loses herself in *Thumri* to escape from her sordid. Dattani has been very subtle in his admiration of women prowess. On one hand, he shows the blatant abuse of womanhood in the Trivedi home and on the other he deftly refers to females who bravely pursued their dreams and created their own identity in the male-dominated world. Dattani shows the impact of family and relationships in shaping the life of individuals. Naina Devi was highly talented, but she

also had the support of a loving and caring husband during her struggle for identity. Through this Dattani implies that companionship and cooperation is the core of all marriages. Dattani, in his plays, have depicted how familial discord suffocates the individuals.

Baa is another debilitating figure in the play, the main cause of several dehumanizing acts in the play. She was financially strong as she had her father's money with her, but she still has to steal money from her husband's pocket to give to her sons. She could exercise no will over what was rightfully hers. She continued to be beaten and abused in front of her children. She failed to revolt against her abusive husband when he beat her and failed to protect her children from their abusive father. When the husband dies, she uses her past torture as an emotional weapon, to control her entire family.

**BAA**

*Go away! You are not my son! You are bad, like him! (Again, as if to a child.) Nitin! You don't like your father, no? He's not nice!*

**NITIN**

*(With a heavy stutter) Nnn-nnn-nnn-no, Baa.*

**BAA**

*Good! You are my wonderful baby! You are my prince! (Again, as if to a child.) Nitin. You hate your father. Tell me.*

**NITIN**

*I- I- dddon't, I ddddon't...*

**BAA**

*There he is! He's coming! Go away! Leave us alone! (Screaming, to Nitin.) Tell me you hate him! He hits me! Nitin, tell me you hate him! Say it!*

**NITIN**

*(in a normal voice) Yes! I hate him! [2].*

Dattani shows that violence and abuse are cyclical. Restrained by her husband for years, Baa becomes the real oppressor. She refuses to allow happiness to seep into the cracks of her home, and carries out her tyranny from her first-floor room, in a bedridden state. She is fond of Nitin because he is fair like her, and disapproves of Jiten because he is aggressive like his father. She makes Nitin hate his father by reminding him about her exploited past. She is instrumental in influencing Jiten, encouraging him to hurt a pregnant Dolly. Baa torments her son's lives by making Praful, the trustee of her assets. Baa was denied the freedom to pursue her passion for singing by her husband. But instead of being sympathetic to her daughter-in-laws, she wrenches the music out of their lives. Dolly is fond of *Thumri* and Alka loves to dance in the rain, but the constantly ringing of the bell in

Baa's room and her shrill cries are the only sounds they hear. The ringing of the bell is a reminder of the brutal forces of patriarchy, which rules Indian families.

Dattani shows how a woman captivated by patriarchal restraints and repetitively dehumanized becomes a carrier of the same germs of violence. Baa becomes another name for destruction, destroying more lives than her dead husband. Dattani presents a stark reality of common Indian households where generations of traditionally constrained, chained women, become predators of violence in the very home that is supposed to be their heaven.

Thus, all the Trivedi women suffer from male domination and tyranny. Baa, Alka, Dolly, and Daksha, display abnormalities and are distanced from the present, lingering on in the imaginary world and anchored to past memories. Dolly feigns forgetfulness. Even Lalitha is imprisoned in the grotesque world of Bonsai. She is forced to participate in the horror show inside the Trivedi's house and must deal with her husband's one-night stand. The old beggar woman, visiting the Trivedi home is trampled over and over till she is dead. Her death signifies the crushing of feminine dreams in the Trivedi household. Dattani shows the Trivedi home as hell for all the women who ever got associated with it. He successfully creates a spooky and haunted atmosphere, giving a ghost-like existence to all women in the house.

Dattani's plays abound in feminine consciousness and delve deeply into the feminine psyche. He explores the dilemmas and doubts of women, their anxieties, and their sufferings at the hands of traditional and social restraints.

At many points the reader/audience question Dattani's portrayal of women in such shoddy light. Dolly and Alka are modern and educated urban women, living in upscale Bangalore and moving in high profile westernized society. Then why does Dattani portray them as totally weak and submissive? Dattani's modern women seem to suffer more than their older, traditional counterparts. Alka and Dolly fail to unite in their struggle against their dominating family and end up blaming and mistrusting each other. They could have easily escaped from the cruel clutches of their husband's and lead independent lives, but Alka chose to come back to the same house after being thrown out for three months. Dolly sympathises with Alka but does not provide her much support to fight the restraints.

The women seem to have resigned to the idea that they are doomed to remain within the folds of domesticity, at the cost of their lives. There is hopelessness and desolation. Dattani seems to be unsympathetic to the plight of his women characters. He has shown them completely dehumanized, with no room for struggle, let alone success. The claustrophobic

existence is overbearing. The women are content by merely projecting themselves as Rani Laxmibai and Queen Naina Devi, two queens who fought bravely in their respective war zones.

Dattani's characters mention the song on Laxmibai which commemorates her as „khoob ladi mardani, who toh Jhansi wali rani thi“. As Lalitha translates, “So bravely fought the manly queen” [2]. The word „mardani“ is limiting because in the patriarchal society valour and bravery is associated only with men. The bravery of Rani Laxmibai is “manly” because her act was beyond what society terms as “womanly” or feminine.

Dattani criticizes the so-called traditions that divide human beings as men and woman. Gender is not a biological trait, it is a social construct, a social constraint, dictating women to behave and think in a particular way. Dattani shows that these constraints are difficult to break even in the modern world. The title of the play is „*Bravely Fought the Queen*“, but the „queen“s bravery is acceptable to society only with the tag- „manly“. Women are fighting great battles on the domestic, social, economic and political fronts, but their heroic acts are still considered “manly”. Naina Devi, a queen desires to sing *Thumri* the art of the lowly. Laxmibai fights the British who by not recognizing her adopted son as the heir to the throne, challenge her right to motherhood. Alka too is denied the right to motherhood, and so she relates to the queen. Dattani shows that society puts constraints and restraints on women, regardless of their caste or class. Art is also segregated into “low” and “high” in society. This implies that the very act of socialization is demeaning and dehumanizing because it curtails individual freedom. The two queens stand out brave because of their defiance of social constructs and conventions of the times.

Dattani's reference to the two queens brings out the stark contrast of his own modern and weak women. As Aparna Singh says [3], “The reference to Naina Devi's royal lineage, her ability to transcend gender barriers, social taboos and emerge as a great *Thumri* singer reflects on the sorry plight of the two sisters, who have little at their disposal, except vain discussions”(museindia.com).

Dattani's females in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, surrender easily and suffer humiliation at the hands of innumerable restraints and constraints. The remoteness of the houses and Baa's constant ringing end all possibilities of the two sister's interaction with the outer world.

Daksha is an invisible victim of the male atrocities. She represents the deformed and retarded growth of female psyche in the animalistic society. Alka and Dolly's mother is tagged a called a “keep” [2],

but no one blames their father who refused to acknowledge their mother as a wife, despite cheating her and using her to satisfy his physical desires. Chastity has been developed as an instrument to terrorise women into total submission.

The bonsai Lalitha brings as a gift for Dolly becomes a central symbol in the play. It is a brilliantly used symbol of dehumanization. The bonsai represents cruel miniaturization of a wholesome, free growth. As Lalitha explains innocently to Dolly, it involves minimizing the amount of earth that the plant has to grow in. It also involves pruning its stem and branches and regularly snipping its roots so that its growth becomes stunted. The symbol is used by Dattani to refer to Indian women who are stunted in terms of the development of their independent, individual identities. As Dolly asks Lalitha:

**DOLLY**

*Does it need to be . . . cut or bound anymore?*

**LALITHA**

*Oh no. it' completely resigned to its new shape. I suppose something happens inside it and . . . it decides to change its size. All it needs now is a little nourishment occasionally. . . [2].*

The bonsai is a gift for Dolly, thus symbolizing her. It also points to Alka, who like the bonsai is fed on frugal meals, sans love and care, the essential nutrients of life. The women find the bonsai attractive because they too have become “resigned to their new shape” [2], but in the Trivedi's office, and on Sridhar's desk, the men find it “odd” and “grotesque” [2] because they have never been restricted or controlled.

The schizophrenic Baa is a constant reminder of the impact of emotional deprivation. The gradual disintegration of her body, mind, and soul symbolize the breakdown of rationality. She tries to control her son's lives but is herself under control of her past memories. The forgetfulness of Dolly is a repercussion of the devastating past experiences, which keep coming to her again and again. The drunken blabber of Alka depicts the senselessness of her existence. The death of the beggar woman implies the extinction of womanhood in a male-dominated world.

Oppression of the subaltern has been a reality of all civilizations, transcending space and time barriers. Dattani depicts that the revival of a women's dignity is a mammoth task, in a society playing power games. Change is not possible because people like Dolly and Alka resign to their subaltern status, and women like Lalitha, accept domination with a little modification and a few compensations. It has been well pointed out that:

The words subaltern and subalternity, of course, reinforce what the quest of critical historiography - Marxist, feminist, anti-colonial, subalternist, minority has long been about: the endeavour to recover lives, and possibilities, and politics that have been marginalized, distorted, suppressed and sometimes forgotten. They allow us to reinforce the point that not all „citizens“ (or human beings) are born equal, that many remain "second class" even when granted the formal status of citizens, that many are denied formal citizenship altogether- today, and of course over most of human history [4].

#### REFERENCES

1. Katyal, A. (2000). Of Page and Stage: An Interview with Mahesh Dattani. *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, 24.
2. Dattani, M. (2000). *Bravely Fought the Queen*. *Collected Plays*, Penguin, 227-315.
3. Singh, A. (2017). Dattani's Bravely Fought the Queen. *Muse India*, (72). <http://www.museindia.com/regularcontent.asp?issid=49&id=4198>, accessed 4 May 2017.
4. Pandey, G. (2006). The subaltern as subaltern citizen. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4735-4741.