
Social Normativity and Subversive Identities in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*

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Article Received: 05/08/2025**Article Accepted:** 09/09/2025**Published Online:** 10/09/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.206

Abstract

The present paper investigates how Mahesh Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen* critiques social normativity that fosters regressive and codified behavioural patterns governing marginalised identities. The play foregrounds the complex and pressing issues of gender inequality and domestic violence within the Indian urban middle class, which is often perceived as educated, liberal, and progressive. It underscores that the idea of urbanity and modernity is misconstrued, as the prevailing normativity in this class limits the development of its characters, and imposes gender performativity by negating autonomy and equality. The conventional social matrix vehemently controls the lives of women, despite their situatedness in a modern urban space. Dattani exposes the emptiness and hypocrisy of this class by delving deeply into the fractured selves of characters who live with latent subversive identities and eventually voice their resistance against exploitation. This paper applies a feminist theoretical framework to examine the continuity of entrenched societal norms and patriarchy, alongside the mechanism of resilience and reclamation female agency.

Keywords: Social Normativity, marginalised identities, patriarchy, homosexuality.

Mahesh Dattani, a celebrated playwright of the contemporary period, is best known for his realistic portrayal of the intricate social, cultural, and psychological issues faced by Indian urban middle-class families. *Bravely Fought the Queen*, staged in 1991, showcases the lives of members of a dysfunctional family, where every character exists without any familial bond or harmony. The play foregrounds the serious issues engendered by the dynamics of gender and power, highlighting the perpetuation of societal normativity. The devastating effects of this normativity compel these family members to maintain an outward appearance of normalcy, masking a hidden, decimated family fabric at a time when the middle class is experiencing transformation and beginning to reap benefits from economic

liberalisation. The liberalisation seems to be encouraging inclusive development and prosperity, by lessening the gaps between various opposite binaries. The play demonstrates how the ideals of liberalisation prove failure, when it comes to gender and power dynamics in this middle-class families, which offer no freedom and individuality to its family members. The framework of modernity appears to be liberating and offering space to the marginalised and disadvantaged as well, but *Bravely Fought the Queen* underscores that in India it operates only on the surface of so called civilised and decent middle class, in the form of outward appearances only. Houses, offices, buildings, and other infrastructures in urban spaces are gradually being transformed in modern styles, yet no paradigm shifts are visible in the dynamics of social normativity. The middle class continues to grapple with age-old patriarchy, social control, the subjugation of women, violence, and psychological trauma. Dattani uncovers the realities of this class by delving deeply into the personal and the psychological.

The story of the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* portrays a family consisting of two brothers, Jiten and Nitin, married to Dolly and Alka, respectively. Both brothers run a joint advertising agency. Dolly and Alka, who are sisters, are well-educated and live with their husbands and their mother-in-law, Baa, an old bedridden woman. The play explores the debilitating effects of patriarchy through these women. It shows how gender-based domestic violence—such as beating, harassment, and torture—is treated as normal but leaves an indelible impact on the psyche of women. This normalized violence by patriarchy distorts their well-being and manifests in fractured selves. The play also focuses on a few male characters who practice homosexuality, but due to fear of being ostracised dare not to openly accept and confront the society. Patriarchy controls desires and sexualities of individuals irrespective of their gender and orientation, endorsing heterosexuality and penalising homosexuality or any other form of subversion or “heteronormativity” (*Michael Warner*). The norms of society are reproductive in nature (*Pierre Bourdieu*), and derive their agencies from religious and dominant ideologies that originate with the idea of controlling and exploiting the vulnerable thereby formulating written or unwritten laws, which perpetuate and operate in society. The play unearths the exploitation of the women in this family as victims, and to some extent as perpetrators and supporter of patriarchy, as in the case of Baa.

To maintain the façade of progressive middle-class family normativity, the women of Trivedi household suffer by being submissive and passive, but they adopt alternate latent worlds to fulfil their desires. Dolly’s marriage with Jiten projects disgusting face of devastating patriarchy. Jiten’s beating of Dolly reflects the hollowness of their conjugal relationship. What his father did to his mother, Baa, he repeats with his wife in order to maintain the patriarchal control. She exasperatingly and sarcastically states, “I am the perfect wife.” His kicking Dolly in her pregnancy leaves their daughter, Daksha, mentally and

physically disabled, and Dolly psychologically disturbed. Daksha, due to her disability, is sent to a boarding school far from home. She becomes the worst sufferer of patriarchal torture, as her disability is compounded by the absence of parental love and care. But this torture is kept secret to project the image of family as decent, therefore, the façade of respectability masks oppression and injustice within this family. The responsibility of taking care of the invalid Baa is given to Dolly, which restrains her freedom by binding her to the household to take care of her. The play critiques Jiten for being unaccommodating and unkind; his actions as a patriarch grant him the perceived privilege to treat his wife like a commodity.

It portrays how a woman's sense of self is crushed under the burden of household responsibilities, through the denial of respect, autonomy and individuality. Dolly recounts, "Alka was told not to talk too much. Women should be seen, not heard." The absence of love and consideration in the family drifts Dolly to escape into fantasies about Kanhaiya, the household cook, and the thumri raga. Her love for thumri raga by Naina Devi, a queen who becomes singer, symbolises her subversion. This flight from the pain and guilt of her life offers an inner view into Dolly's emotional world. Her masking for the ball party symbolises her attempt to maintain an outward appearance of decency, satisfaction, and submissiveness, while concealing her pain, oppression, and lack of control. Jiten's actions reinforce the idea that male vulnerabilities often manifest as violence toward their wives and children, as he tries to maintain dominance through control and physical abuse. His inexplicable apprehensions, personal shortcomings, or desire to appear as a successful businessman—though not the central focus of the play—may have led him to justify his violent behaviour. Baa, victim of toxic patriarchy, turns perpetrator by supporting her son's act of beating Dolly. Baa's fractured and damaged psychological and physical state makes her petulant and desirous of inflicting the same treatment on her daughters-in-law. She cannot endure any healthy relationship between Jiten and Dolly, as her own life has been deeply troubled and emotionally unsettled. Baa becomes an embodiment of jealousy and a fractured psyche. Her statement that "men can afford to be careless, women can't" highlights her own repression. Kete Millett in her *Sexual Politics* opines:

"Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both the mirror and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole."(Millett 33)

Dolly's silence and submissiveness demonstrate the denial of female agency, even within an educated and modern middle-class family. Dattani problematises the naturalisation of established social norms and their perpetuation by enabling Dolly, at the end of the play, to subvert patriarchal authority. Dolly's revelation of Daksha's disability is another powerful act of subversion. The play highlights a crucial aspect of women's oppression: it distorts their

well-being, renders them irritated, and, in many cases, emotionally deranged, as they are unable to give vent to their psychological conflicts. Dattani underscores that urban middle-class family dynamics, regardless of gender, lead highly controlled, stifled, and suffocating lives, avoiding genuine social interaction. Their energy is consumed in maintaining pomposity and flamboyance—both in material possessions and in personal relationships.

Alka resorts to alcoholism and smoking as coping mechanisms in response to the betrayal by her husband and her brother, Praful. Dattani highlights the issue of homosexuality involving Nitin and his brother-in-law Praful. At that time, same-sex orientation was criminalised and could not be openly accepted. Therefore, Praful arranges Alka's marriage to Nitin to conceal his homosexual relationship with him. Although Praful remains absent from the stage throughout the play, his presence is felt through references and his shadow over the relationship between Alka and Nitin, keeping him close to the central characters. Alka recalls Praful's treatment of her when he becomes infuriated upon seeing a classmate dropping Alka at her gate. There is no questioning or attempt to ascertain whether any such relationship exists that would justify suspicion towards her. This deficit of trust among family members in the urban middle class exposes the hollowness of their relationships, leading to a lack of care, commitment, and consideration. The beating of Alka by Praful, in Nitin's presence, to enforce patriarchal boundaries even without any apparent provocation, reflects the toxicity of patriarchal control. She says:

“He just dragged me into the kitchen. He lit the stove and pushed my face in front of it”. Praful said, “Don't you ever look at any man. Ever” (Dattani 227)

Praful and Nitin's homosexual identities remain hidden, as they are conscious of their latent non-conformity to societal norms and the consequences if this were to be disclosed. They perform gender performativity by projecting the image of perfect males and destroy Alka's life by withholding the truth about their relationships from her. Their actions are tantamount to those of both victims and victimisers; they are victims of a rigid social matrix and dare not reveal the truth about their relationship. Alka does not have a happy conjugal life or children. Her torture and marginalisation by Praful, Nitin, and Baa render her an emotionally distorted figure. She is forced to perform as a submissive and passive wife. The concept of gender performativity popularised by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* states:

“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” (Butler 25)

Baa received a house in dowry from her father, which gives her financial security, as material possession is the sole basis of society. Baa exercises her power through her son

over

her daughters-in-law, whose lives are shaped like the bonsai plant that Lalitha grows in her kitchen garden. The bonsai serves as a metaphor for debilitated and marginalised identity. The bonsai plant embodies the lives of those who are cast in a frame and denied the realisation of their full potential. However, her reply to Alka's question about what she does highlights that her state is different from that of the Trivedi sisters. She replies:

“Oh, I keep myself occupied. I do a bit of writing. Freelance. I write an occasional women's column for the Times. Sometimes I review cultural events. I am into meditation. And, oh yes, I grow bonsai plants—You know poetry and stuff like that. Nothing great but...” (Dattani: 214)

Lalitha's autonomy and realisation of her self-potential make her a suitable woman in the contemporary world, in contrast to Dolly and Alka. Through Lalitha, Dattani exposes the static state of the Trivedi family. Her presence in the play serves as a catalyst for change, where women begin to claim their space. They contribute to society and the family, rather than remaining trapped in decay. The play offers a stark contrast between the two parallel worlds of the Trivedi sisters and Lalitha—portraying the former as stifling, debilitating, decaying, and lacking moral direction, while presenting the latter as modern, progressive, and fulfilling. Lalitha's inquisitiveness prompts Dolly and Alka to realise the hollowness of their existence and their unfulfilled sense of self. Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai's indomitable courage and resilience in fighting against oppression make the women realise the extent of patriarchal control and motivate them to reclaim their agency by bravely resisting societal forces. Dolly's angered revelation of her marginalisation and Daksha's disability highlights her resistance and resilience, while Alka's passionate dance in the rain breaks her image of being decent and docile wife, and it serves as an act of liberation and subversion. Her consideration that “even a bonsai must be allowed to grow” seems to be materialised as she declares “I want to be what I am. Not what others want me to be.” During frenzied dance in rain her cloths get stained in mud; her feet got injured, but the pleasure of freedom overpowers all her pains. She fights like Rani Lakshmi Bai against all repressive and oppressive familial and societal structures. The entire false façade is dismantled through the exposure of immorality, tensed relationships, and fragmented identities in this class.

Conclusion:

The paper explores how *Bravely Fought the Queen* lays bare the false façade of the urban middle class, which grapples with a host of fundamental issues such as the oppression of women and other marginalised identities during the 1990s in India. Dattani boldly brings to the surface the need for progressive ideas that foster cohesion in family by offering individuals autonomy and a sense of independence. The character of Lalitha, to some extent, serves as a prototype of such a woman—one who relatively enjoys her autonomy in a constructive and fulfilling manner. Although her family's financial situation is not as sound

as

that of the Trivedi family, she nevertheless leads a satisfying life. The essence of happiness lies in the sense of self-worth that one realises when granted autonomy. Finally, the women of Trivedi family achieve autonomy by bravely fighting like the legendary queen of Jhansi against their oppression and disabling social normativity. Their subversion is both emboldening and empowering, as they claim their agency. Baa's declaration to transfer her property to the disabled Daksha highlights that economic independence empowers women and protects them from subordination.

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