

Masks of Morality: Infidelity, Disintegration and Identity Crisis in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*

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Abstract

The paper explores the moral disintegration, negation of values, and emotional splintering in Mahesh Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, a play which is reflective of turbulence of contemporary urban life. In modern society, marked by alienation, infidelity, schism and identity crisis, people draped themselves in a mask of gentleness. Through Jiten, Dolly, Nitin and Alka, Dattani exposes the gap between aura and artificiality. The play reveals the pervasive hypocrisy in marriage, the emotional effect of hidden sexuality, the generation gap between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and fraudulence. The emptiness and moral vacuum that defines much of modern existence is exquisitely explicable through the struggle of each character. The main focus of this paper is to unravel how repeated deception not only disintegrates the very fabric of Indian society but the very bonds of family and human connection.

Keywords: Disintegration, Negation, alienation, infidelity, identity crisis, hypocrisy, fraudulence.

In the age of science and technology, people become machines, devoid of compassion, emotions, empathy, generosity, love and loyalty. They become fraudulent, roam freely by draping themselves in a mask of delicacy. Their lives also seem trapped in oblivion, standing in sharp contrast to the pursuit of enlightenment. In this age, there are radical changes in the desires and moral values of people, resulting in a lack of morality and integrity. In a society where a woman is given the status of 'goddess' often faces hard realities. In an Indian society "she was treated only as a lifeless doll devoid of the 'will' and 'choice'. Her sphere of activities are confined to the four wall of the house dedicated to the welfare of the family. The home confined space beyond geographical locations has become the mental space of feminine psyche" (Agarwal 70). The roles expected of a woman are not natural but imposed upon her, compelling her to assume identities crafted by the Patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir, a radical feminist very explicitly exhibits these divisive roles in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, where she explains how a society forces a woman to adopt some roles and thereby constructs her identity. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. The human

female takes on no biological, psychological, or economic destiny to show up in the society; it is the civilization as a whole that makes the creature,” (Beauvoir 273). Literary writers try to encompass all these murky aspects in their literary canon as literature is at bottom criticism of life. This dark picture of Indian society where a woman’s freedom is restricted like a bonsai is also brilliantly captured by Mahesh Dattani in his play *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Mahesh Dattani was a societal critic, criticizing the societal construction of gender embedded in Indian patriarchal society. He uprisers the social status of a woman from an invisible unheard stance to a firm stance in dominant discourse. He not only singles out the contemporary issues of the society but places women at the forefront of his fictional world. “Dattani is part of a group of writers who placed women at the forefront of their fictional universe and can be described as avant-garde feminists” (Jha 31). The characters he portrays struggle to assert their freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural construction of gender and repressed desire. He uncovers many serious societal problems, such as segregation, infidelity, as well as the strife between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, of contemporary existence in this work. The most important aspect of Dattani’s plays is that they focus on the invisible issues of contemporary Indian society which were earlier left out by the writers. Issues like homosexuality and lesbianism which are unacceptable to Indian society even today, find a prominent place in his writings. “By pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of ‘India’ and ‘Indian’ as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre” (Das 7).

Bravely Fought the Queen revolves around four main characters namely Jiten, Dolly, Nitin, and Alka. Jiten and Nitin are two brothers from a prosperous family named Trivedi family married to two sisters Dolly and Alka. Through the interactions of the two brothers, their wives and their mother Baa, Dattani offers an honest portrait of city life by revealing patriarchal oppression, and hidden struggles with infidelity, alcoholism and abuse. He carefully captures the full spectrum of emotions experienced by these four people to expose the harsh realities of Indian society. Each of these four characters represents two selves - one that reflects their true self and another that conforms to societal expectations rather than genuine identity. With the fight of ‘manly queen’ and the touch of gay, Dattani singles out a new frontier that he would like to explore in his later writings.

Mahesh Dattani first explores the lives of each of the four characters individually to reveal their internal intricacy and personal relationships. Jiten, who is married to Dolly, does not fulfil his responsibilities toward her. He engages in numerous sexual relationships outside of his marriage, which Dolly remains unaware of. His infidelity becomes glaringly apparent when, feeling restless and agitated in his professional life, he instructs Sridhar to procure a prostitute for him at his workplace. When Jiten inquired about the look of the prostitute, Sridhar said she was young and lively. Jiten felt no guilt over his unscrupulous behaviour with other women, nor was he even remorseful for having cheated. Dolly also cheated her husband by keeping a secret affair with her servant Kanhaiya.

Dolly, who was considerably older than Kanhaiya, gave Lalitha the suspicion that Kanhaiya (nineteen) and Daksha (fourteen) were in a romantic relationship. When Lalitha expressed her suspicions to Dolly, it crushed her morale. In return, Dolly attempted to clarify the situation by describing the events and circumstances of her relationship with Kanhaiya. Nitin seemed to favour deviant interests or strange activities. His fidelity in marriage was also questionable. The main reason he married

Alka was to avoid the stigma associated with being gay. In the play's conclusion, although his homosexuality remained a matter of concealment, references to a black man's arms indicated that this was his true sexual orientation.

NITIN. ... I saw the driver come running out of a tea shop, screaming at us. Ordering us to get out of the car. He was really... (drags out the word, perhaps sensually) violent-looking. ... (60)

Upon finishing his actions and settling all the conflicts and getting settled in, Nitin was happy to finally be reunited due to meeting the man he was truly seeking after. He shared one event that happened in his past where he went wild. Namely, he said that he learned about a strange sexual life sleeping at Praful's house during nights spent there prior to his marriage. At such moments, he lay down on Praful's cot while Praful himself slept on a mattress on the floor. When the lights were turned off, he would slip back into Praful's room, his body close to Praful so that his breath felt Praful's face. To begin with, Praful's response would wake him up and embrace him lovingly. Nitin too had affection for him. So, he engaged in his initial physical relationship with Praful, who had recently become his brother-in-law. To avoid any societal judgment, Praful entrusted the hand of his younger sister, Alka to Nitin.

Jiten and Nitin betrayed their brother-in-law, Praful, with the intention of manipulating him to maintain their business status. Their motives were thoroughly corrupt as they aimed to deceive Praful by requesting a substantial loan. Jiten exhibited greater hypocrisy in this situation, skilfully ensnaring Praful with his flattering words. Initially, they resolved to borrow ten lakhs and later increased the request to twelve lakhs without interest. They also reassured one another that this arrangement would remain undisclosed to their wives, fearing it might disrupt their marital harmony. Their expectations came to fruition as the situation unfolded.

Dolly struggled with her own moral integrity regarding her true self. Caught in the constraints of maintaining a dignified, upper-class lifestyle, she felt too embarrassed to share information about her daughter, Daksha, who was born with a physical disability. Typically, parents take pride in their children or at least find solace in being able to acknowledge their existence. A child's physical imperfections should not diminish parental dignity or feelings of pride. However, Dolly was profoundly dissatisfied with her daughter and preferred not to disclose her existence to others. This became evident when Alka offered Dolly a choice about whom she would like to talk about; despite Daksha's presence, Dolly opted for Kanhaiya, which somewhat shocked Alka.

Alka betrayed Dolly by revealing her personal details to Lalitha. There are personal experiences, relationships, or emotions in everyone's life that should be shared only with trusted close friends or loved ones who can be trusted to keep such information secret unless you give permission to share it. However, Alka acted contrary to this principle during a conversation with Lalitha concerning the mask ball at Dolly's residence. At the mask ball, Alka revealed the relationship between Dolly and Kanhaiya to Lalitha against the permission of Dolly.

Praful was unfaithful to Alka by engaging in a secret relationship with Nitin, who is gay, and he manipulated his younger sister Alka as a means of protection. Following their inappropriate encounter at night, Praful urged Nitin to marry quickly. However, after that incident, Nitin felt a deep sense of shame that brought him to tears. This

experience left a lasting impact on his emotions, and he found the idea of marriage confusing and distressing. He convinced himself that it would be impossible for him to marry anyone after what had transpired, questioning whom he might even consider marrying. At this point, Praful proposed that Nitin may marry Alka and expressed his full support for the union. This suggestion was inappropriate given that Praful was her brother; nonetheless, in an attempt to shield himself from societal judgment, he involved Alka in a situation that ultimately led to marital discord.

The play “dramatizes the emptiness and sham in the lives of its cloistered women and self-indulgent, unscrupulous men, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception and hypocrisies (Chaudhuri 32). Each and every major character in this play at a time or another caught up in a cycle of infidelity and moral degradation. Jiten and Dolly were having serious marital problems after cheating on each other. The internal dissonance and conflict bubbled up in them and slowly decimated their lives from the inside out. Trust and fidelity between them had evaporated, reaching a high point at the close of the play when Jiten decided to expel Dolly from his home after a fight. In the case of Nitin and Alka, their marital problems stemmed from Alka’s brother’s infidelity and Alka’s unhealthy worldview regarding family. Baa totally opposed their marriage, imploring Nitin to end their marriage. Nitin’s only condition for ending their relationship was that Baa transfer all her property to him. This clearly showed that their relationship did not have any basic elements of a bond of love, agreement or mutual respect. Further complicating matters in the marriage was Alka’s drinking habits. She was described as an irresponsible person who consumed much alcohol. Various tumultuous relationships, instances of infidelity, discord in married life, and perversion leads to a conundrum in Trivedi family that disintegrates the harmony and very fabric of Trivedi Family.

In contrast, Sridhar’s life remained removed from this turmoil and confusion. His marriage was founded on genuine love, mutual respect, agreement, and loyalty. There was no space for betrayal or deceit in their union. As a result of these qualities, their relationship was free from conflict, division, or the loss of harmony. At one point, Sridhar fell victim to Jiten’s disruptive behaviour and chaotic circumstances; however, by the conclusion of the play, he liberated himself by resigning from his job and reclaimed his dignity and self-worth.

The play exhibits a world beset by betrayal, repressed desires, and emotional dislocation. It uses its complicated characters to show how moral degradation is normalized when a concern for outward appearance is looked up. Jiten and Nitin’s long-standing affairs, Dolly and Alka’s emotional betrayals, Praful’s manipulation, and Baa’s internalized cruelty all work to define a world where self-preservation and hypocrisy have supplanted loyalty and compassion. The unravelling of marital bliss does not appear as an abrupt break with harmony but rather as a gradual result of repressed guilt, ruptured trust, and an unstable sense of self. With Sridhar, however, the story shows that people in relationships based on respect and honesty are not so much constrained by social pressures. Sridhar’s life, by contrast, shows that relationships based on mutual respect and openness can survive society’s pressure to conform. The play ultimately suggests that the modern crisis of identity is rooted in the persistent denial of one’s true self. Dattani’s narrative serves as a powerful reminder that the survival of the family and of one’s own sense of integrity depends on confronting truth rather than concealing it behind socially acceptable masks.

The use of bonsai tree in this play is not merely a background but a metaphor for gendered oppression or identity crisis. Through the recurring image of bonsai tree Mahesh Datta exposes how women are carefully pruned, shaped and restricted like bonsais by external forces to suit patriarchal tastes. A bonsai is not naturally a small tree, but it's made small to suit the room. People used to keep and admire bonsai in their room for aestheticization, not for their potential natural growth. Eventually, a bonsai accustoms to the room environment, no longer needs external force to stay as it is. Like a bonsai, women are forced to belittle their potentiality except what is acceptable. Despite trimming, a bonsai survives and pleases the eyes of the onlookers. So, after losing naturalness and originality, a woman internalizes expectations, loses her true self and identity, and acts on the stage where she gets admiration for appearance and presentation. Here characters like Dolly and Alka are pruned like bonsai to show their lives and identities are deliberately restricted and shaped by other patriarchal forces, not allowed to express their original potentiality and talent. Patriarchal forces continuously suppress their independence, control their emotions and choices, and deny their self-expression. They are shaped and pruned to look acceptable and elegant at the cost of their natural growth and originality.

In conclusion, *Bravely Fought the Queen* emerges as a fierce attack on Indian modern society where modernity, delicate appearance and sophistication mask the negation of values, emotional emptiness and gender oppression. Through the fragmented self of Trivedi family, Mahesh Dattani reveals the brutal reality that patriarchy, social pretence and fear of failure to follow the norm stifles individual freedom and originality. The recurring metaphor of the bonsai tree explicitly encapsulates the lives of women like Dolly and Alka whose lives are shaped and restricted to suit the patriarchal expectations. The play reveals that moral decline itself is not a private failure but a consequence of everyone's survival in the face of socially sanctioned masks. But in characters like Sridhar, Dattani also provides a contrary perspective, relationships based on honesty, respect, and integrity can withstand a corrupt social order. Finally, the play is a warning that the real liberation lies in confronting uncomfortable truths and find real and truthful self rather than hiding themselves behind patriarchal veil and survive as a carefully bonsai.

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