

Women as Both Victims and Perpetrators of Patriarchal Structures in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*

Prof. Dr. Ashok Kumar¹, Ramesh Kumar Singh²

¹ Supervisor Professor, Department of English Patliputra University Patna Bihar

² Research Scholor, Department of English Patliputra University Patna Bihar

Abstract—Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) is a powerful exploration of gender, sexuality, marriage, family, violence, and the oppressive structures underlying the apparently respectable Indian middle-class household. While much criticism of the play has concentrated on the victimization of women under patriarchy, Dattani's representation of women is more complex than a simple victim-versus-oppressor binary. The female characters particularly Dolly and Alka are victims of patriarchal authority, but they also participate, consciously or unconsciously, in the reproduction of the same structures that constrain them. This paradox constitutes one of the most significant dimensions of Dattani's dramatic treatment of gender. Dolly's relationship with her husband Jiten demonstrates the devastating consequences of patriarchal marriage, while Alka's position reveals the psychological and social consequences of being measured according to masculine expectations of femininity, domesticity, and sexual conformity. The present paper examines how patriarchal ideology becomes internalized by women and subsequently operates through their behaviour, relationships, attitudes, and expectations. The women in the play are not simply passive victims; they are also products and, at times, unwitting agents of a patriarchal system. Their participation does not absolve patriarchal authority but demonstrates its ideological strength: a system becomes most powerful when its values are internalized by those whom it oppresses.

Index Terms—Patriarchy, Victimization, Complicity, Domestic-violence, Internalized Patriarchy, Female Agency, Indian drama, Gender Roles

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian drama has increasingly become an important literary space for representing social contradictions that remain concealed within apparently respectable families. Among contemporary Indian dramatists,

Mahesh Dattani occupies a distinctive position because his plays expose the suppressed conflicts of urban middle-class life. His theatre brings questions of gender, sexuality, class, family, violence, and social hypocrisy into the dramatic foreground. Rather than presenting society as an abstract institution, Dattani locates social oppression within intimate spaces homes, bedrooms, marriages, family conversations, and interpersonal relationships. The family in his drama therefore becomes a microcosm of larger social structures.

Bravely Fought the Queen, written in 1991 and later published by Penguin Books, is particularly significant in this respect. The play examines the apparently conventional household of Dolly and Jiten, while simultaneously exposing the psychological and sexual tensions that lie beneath the surface. The play is structured in three acts "The Women," "The Men," and "Free for All!" a structure that itself establishes a movement from gendered separation to the collapse of the boundaries between public and private identities. Critics have noted that Dattani uses the play to interrogate gender, sexuality, family politics, and patriarchal authority simultaneously.

The women in *Bravely Fought the Queen* suffer in a society where marriage, motherhood, domesticity, sexuality, and feminine behaviour are regulated by patriarchal expectations. Dolly, Alka, and Lalitha inhabit a world in which their identities are significantly determined by their relationships with men. Yet Dattani does not present women only as helpless victims. His dramatic method is more complicated. Women can internalize patriarchal assumptions and reproduce them in their relationships with other women and within the family. This does not mean that women are equally responsible for

patriarchy. Rather, it demonstrates how deeply patriarchal ideology penetrates consciousness. The distinction between being a victim and becoming an agent of oppression is therefore central to an understanding of the play. Patriarchy survives not merely because men exercise power over women but because patriarchal values become normalized. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the women frequently struggle against restrictions that they have not themselves created, but their behaviour also reveals the extent to which those restrictions have been internalized. Dattani constructs his female characters within a complex continuum of victimhood, adaptation, resistance, and complicity. Dolly and Alka are undeniably victims of patriarchal structures, particularly within marriage. At the same time, their responses to patriarchy reveal that oppression does not operate exclusively through direct male violence. It also operates through expectations, social conditioning, emotional manipulation, gender stereotypes, and the policing of other women. The play consequently invites readers to ask a difficult question: how does a system of domination survive when even those who suffer under it participate in maintaining its values? This paper examines this question through the concepts of internalized patriarchy, gender performance, domestic power, female complicity, patriarchal marriage, and resistance.

II. DISCUSSION

Patriarchy is not merely a system in which men possess authority over women. It is also an ideological structure that determines what is considered appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour. Women are taught to understand themselves through socially prescribed roles such as wife, mother, daughter, caretaker, and sexual partner. Consequently, patriarchal power operates not only through external coercion but also through internalized beliefs.

Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* demonstrates that women's subordination has historical, social, and institutional dimensions. Similarly, feminist theorists have shown that gender is produced through repeated social practices rather than simply inherited as a biological fact. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is particularly useful for understanding

Dattani's drama because the characters repeatedly perform socially expected versions of masculinity and femininity. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, marriage becomes one of the primary institutions through which gender is performed. The ideal wife is expected to adjust, tolerate, care, remain sexually available, protect family honour, and avoid public confrontation. The ideal husband, on the other hand, is expected to control economic and domestic affairs and to demonstrate sexual and social authority. Dattani exposes the artificiality of these expectations by showing the emotional destruction produced by them. His characters cannot comfortably live within the roles assigned to them. The result is frustration, violence, secrecy, resentment, and psychological fragmentation.

Marriage is perhaps the most important patriarchal structure represented in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Dolly and Alka are married to the two brothers, Jiten and Nitin. Their marriages outwardly conform to conventional middle-class respectability. Dolly is the more visibly damaged of the two sisters-in-law. Her physical condition, emotional instability, and history of reproductive trauma are closely connected to the oppressive environment of her marriage. Her relationship with Jiten illustrates how marriage can become an institution of ownership rather than companionship. Jiten's masculinity is expressed through control and aggression. He expects Dolly to conform to his understanding of what a wife should be. His violence is not merely individual cruelty; it is connected to a wider cultural structure in which masculine authority is associated with control over the female body. Dolly's body becomes the site on which patriarchal expectations are imposed. Her reproductive history, sexuality, and motherhood are not treated as matters belonging to her alone. Instead, they become objects of masculine judgement. The private sphere of marriage therefore becomes a political space. The violence suffered by Dolly cannot be understood as an isolated marital disagreement. It reflects what feminist critics identify as the structural nature of domestic oppression. The family, which is conventionally imagined as a safe and private institution, becomes a site where power is exercised without public scrutiny.

Dattani's representation is especially disturbing because Jiten's violence exists alongside the family's middle-class respectability. This juxtaposition reveals

the hypocrisy of a society that celebrates family honour while concealing violence within the family. The women therefore become victims of two interconnected systems: patriarchal authority and the ideology of family respectability. They are expected to protect the family even when the family itself becomes the source of their suffering.

Alka's character demonstrates another dimension of female victimization. Her marriage to Nitin is outwardly different from Dolly's marriage to Jiten, yet it is equally shaped by patriarchal expectations. Alka is emotionally frustrated because she cannot receive the intimacy and recognition that she expects from her husband. Nitin's homosexuality creates an additional layer of complexity. His inability to fulfil the heterosexual expectations of marriage does not simply produce an individual marital problem; it reveals the coercive nature of a society that assumes heterosexual marriage to be compulsory and normative.

Alka becomes a victim of this system because she is placed in a marriage whose emotional and sexual foundation is deeply unstable. At the same time, Nitin himself is also oppressed by heteronormative expectations. This is important because Dattani does not create a simplistic opposition between male oppressor and female victim. The play therefore presents patriarchy as a structure that harms individuals differently. Women experience misogyny and marital subordination, while men who do not conform to dominant masculinity experience another form of marginalization. Recent scholarship similarly emphasizes that the play exposes patriarchal domination affecting both male and female characters. However, recognizing Nitin's victimization should not erase Alka's suffering. Instead, Dattani demonstrates how multiple forms of oppression can coexist within the same domestic structure.

Alka expects the conventional emotional and sexual rights associated with marriage, but her expectations are themselves shaped by patriarchal norms. Her understanding of what a husband should be is largely derived from the same social system that restricts her. This is one of the most important contradictions in the play: the oppressed person may demand liberation while still thinking within the vocabulary of the oppressive system.

The title of the present study requires a careful distinction. To call women "perpetrators" of patriarchy does not mean that women are equally responsible for the historical creation or institutional maintenance of patriarchal power. Patriarchy remains fundamentally a structure of unequal power. However, women can participate in its reproduction. This participation may take several forms: Enforcing traditional gender expectations; judging women according to patriarchal standards; Encouraging female submission; policing sexuality; reproducing stereotypes about masculinity and femininity; teaching younger generations to accept unequal gender roles; and accepting male authority as natural. This concept is especially important in interpreting Dattani's women. Their victimhood does not prevent them from becoming participants in the ideological system that victimizes them.

Patriarchy is strongest when it does not need constant external enforcement. When women themselves begin to believe that women should behave in particular ways, patriarchal authority becomes internalized. The women in *Bravely Fought the Queen* therefore occupy an unstable position. They resist oppression but have also been shaped by it. Their consciousness has been produced within patriarchal society, making complete separation from patriarchal ideology difficult.

Dolly is perhaps the clearest example of the paradox between victimhood and complicity. She suffers under Jiten's patriarchal authority, yet she also participates in maintaining the emotional and ideological environment of the family. Her conduct toward other characters cannot be separated from her own psychological wounds. Victims of oppression may reproduce patterns of domination because those patterns are the language through which they have learned to understand relationships. Dolly's relationship with Alka is particularly significant. Instead of producing uncomplicated female solidarity, the household often becomes a space of tension and competition. The women are positioned against one another by the patriarchal family structure. This is a crucial feature of Dattani's feminist critique. Patriarchy can divide women by making them compete for male approval, emotional security, social respectability, or domestic authority. When women judge one another according to

patriarchal standards, patriarchal power is reproduced without direct male intervention.

Dolly's suffering therefore cannot be reduced to physical abuse. Her deeper tragedy is the internalization of a system that defines her worth through marriage, motherhood, and her relationship with men. She has been trained to see herself through patriarchal categories, and consequently her attempts to gain control may themselves take forms shaped by the same system. This paradox complicates the conventional image of the "good victim." Dattani refuses to make Dolly completely innocent or morally transparent. She is damaged, but her damage does not eliminate her capacity to affect others.

Alka's character is similarly complex. She displays a stronger desire for emotional freedom and challenges the restrictions placed upon her. Nevertheless, her understanding of marriage remains influenced by conventional patriarchal expectations. Her dissatisfaction with Nitin is partly connected to her expectation that a husband should provide heterosexual intimacy and emotional security. Her anger is understandable, but the play also demonstrates how social expectations shape that anger. She wants freedom, but she has inherited a cultural definition of what freedom within marriage should mean. Her resistance therefore operates within the boundaries of the same institution she is questioning. This does not make her resistance meaningless. Rather, it illustrates the difficulty of resisting a structure whose values have become part of one's identity. Feminist criticism has long recognized this contradiction. Women may challenge individual manifestations of male domination while continuing to accept broader assumptions concerning femininity, marriage, sexuality, and family. Dattani dramatizes precisely this contradiction. Alka's character therefore represents the transitional woman: she is neither completely submissive nor completely liberated. She is attempting to negotiate an identity within a social order that does not easily permit female autonomy.

The home in *Bravely Fought the Queen* functions as an invisible prison. The characters are not physically confined within a prison cell, but social expectations restrict their movement. Dolly cannot escape her marriage easily because of family expectations. Alka struggles against a marriage whose fundamental structure denies her emotional needs. Nitin cannot

openly acknowledge his sexuality because heterosexuality is socially compulsory. Jiten performs aggressive masculinity because he is expected to be a "man" according to patriarchal standards. Thus, both men and women are prisoners, though they are imprisoned differently.

Recent criticism of the play has described patriarchy as an "invisible prison" in which characters experience lifelong trauma and oppression. This formulation is particularly appropriate because Dattani's characters are not simply controlled by individual villains. They are controlled by social expectations. The most effective prison is therefore the one that exists inside the mind. One of Dattani's strongest achievements is his treatment of domestic violence as a structural issue rather than a private matter. In patriarchal societies, domestic violence is frequently concealed under concepts such as family honour, marital adjustment, compromise, and women's duty. The victim is often expected to remain silent to preserve the family. The silence surrounding Dolly's suffering illustrates this mechanism. Silence becomes a form of social discipline. A woman who speaks about violence may be accused of destroying the family. A woman who remains silent is praised for sacrifice. Women themselves may participate in this culture of silence because they have been taught that endurance is a feminine virtue.

This is where the category of "perpetrator" must be carefully understood. A woman who tells another woman to tolerate violence is not equivalent to the man committing the violence. Nevertheless, she may contribute to the ideological conditions that allow violence to continue. Dattani's play therefore encourages readers to distinguish between primary power and secondary reproduction of power. The primary patriarchal authority belongs to the structures that establish male privilege. Women may nevertheless reproduce those structures through everyday behaviour.

The concept of internalized patriarchy provides the strongest theoretical framework for understanding the women's contradictory positions. Internalized patriarchy occurs when individuals accept beliefs that support a system that disadvantages them. Women may come to believe that male authority is natural, that women's sacrifice is virtuous, or that female sexuality must be controlled. In the play, this internalization explains why resistance is incomplete.

A woman can reject a violent husband while still believing that marriage defines her social worth. She can desire freedom while still judging herself according to patriarchal standards. She can criticize male domination while reproducing gender stereotypes. Such contradictions should not be interpreted as hypocrisy alone. They are symptoms of ideological conditioning. Patriarchy becomes difficult to dismantle precisely because it operates through consciousness. The women of *Bravely Fought the Queen* therefore demonstrate that liberation requires more than escaping individual men. It requires questioning the beliefs through which gender hierarchy is understood.

III. CONCLUSION

Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* presents one of the most complex representations of patriarchy in contemporary Indian drama. The play exposes the violence, emotional oppression, sexual regulation, and psychological suffering experienced by women within patriarchal families. Dolly and Alka are clearly victims of a social system that restricts women's identities and privileges male authority. Their marriages reveal the devastating consequences of treating women as wives, reproductive bodies, and bearers of family honour rather than as autonomous individuals. The play does not stop at victimization. Dattani also demonstrates that patriarchal structures survive through internalization. Women can reproduce the values that constrain them. They may judge other women, reinforce gender expectations, protect family respectability, or accept traditional definitions of femininity. Their participation, however, must be understood within the unequal power relations of patriarchy. Women who reproduce patriarchal values are not therefore equivalent to the men or institutions that possess structural authority.

The women of *Bravely Fought the Queen* consequently occupy contradictory positions. They are victims, but not merely victims. They resist, but their resistance is incomplete. They suffer, but they may also transmit the ideology responsible for their suffering. They seek autonomy, yet they sometimes measure themselves and others through patriarchal standards. This contradiction is not a weakness in Dattani's characterization. It is the central insight of the play. Patriarchy survives not only through overt

male domination but through the normalization of gender hierarchy in everyday life. Its most powerful achievement is the transformation of social expectations into personal beliefs. Once domination becomes internalized, it no longer requires continuous physical force.

Dattani therefore encourages his audience to look beyond the visible perpetrator and examine the structure itself. The problem is not simply Jiten's violence, Nitin's inability to fulfil heterosexual expectations, or the individual frustrations of Dolly and Alka. The deeper problem is a social order that defines masculinity and femininity through unequal expectations. The significance of *Bravely Fought the Queen* lies precisely in this structural critique. The play asks us to recognize that liberation requires more than changing individual behaviour. It requires challenging the cultural beliefs that make domination appear natural.

The women of Dattani's play are thus both victims of patriarchy and unwilling participants in its reproduction. Their contradictory positions reveal the psychological depth of oppression and demonstrate that patriarchal power operates most effectively when it becomes embedded within the consciousness of those whom it subordinates. Through Dolly, Alka, Lalitha, and the symbolic world of the play, Dattani transforms the domestic household into a political space and reveals the hidden structures of gendered power operating within it. Ultimately, *Bravely Fought the Queen* is not merely a story about unhappy women or dysfunctional marriages. It is a dramatic investigation of how social systems enter private lives, how violence becomes normalized, and how victims can unknowingly participate in reproducing the very structures from which they seek freedom.

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