

## The women who fought bravely: The absent women characters in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the women characters who are mentioned or connected to the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* in some way but are not seen onstage. It would be seen how Dattani uses the offstage presence of these women to connect to his theme. Connecting historical and cultural narratives, Dattani attempts to show the pervasive presence of patriarchy in the lives of the women in the play. The invisibilization of women actually is a potent dramatic device contributing to the atmosphere in the play.

**Keywords:** women, Rani Laxmi Bai, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Naina Devi, patriarchy, India

*Boy:* What am I to tell Mr. Godot, Sir?

*Vladimir:* Tell him . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . tell him you saw me and that . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . that you saw me.

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)

One of the most novel attempts to extend theatre to offstagespace occurs in plays that foreclose any attempt whatsoever at direct enactment of people or events; the simplest examples of such dramas are those where one or more characters are thematically significant yet remain physically unrepresented. *Waiting for Godot* is certainly the most famous example of such works. But plays about characters who never appear on stage are far more common in theatre history than one might think. If anything, Beckett's drama is not so much an exercise in novelty as a modern instance of a dramaturgical experiment that has been repeated numerous times throughout Western theatre history. Plays structured around a centralized "absent presence" include mainstream classical comedies such as Terence's *The Girl from Andros*, or *The Pot of Gold* and *Casina* by Plautus. Each of these three works features an important woman character who remains out of sight even as she is an object of active curiosity or gossip on the part of the people on stage. Deliberately withholding significant characters from the stage is a common twentieth century dramaturgical practice. Susan Glaspell, noted American playwright often structures her works around one or more missing persons; plays such as *Bernice* (1919), and *Alison's House* (1931) make use of characters who are entirely figures of spectators' imaginations, as does *Trifles* (1916), her most widely known work. All are plays about women who for both thematic as well as dramaturgical reasons are kept off stage. Fernando García Lorca pursues a similar technique with *The House of Bernarda Alba*, a play that dramatizes the power of men (or "masculinity") by excluding all males from the stage.<sup>1</sup> Such absent central characters may be found throughout plays written during the "postmodern" half of the twentieth century, in works such as Marguerite Duras' *Savannah Bay* or Maria Fomes' *Fefu and Her Friends*.<sup>2</sup> Mahesh Dattani uses this dramaturgical device in his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* to perfection and that is the subject of analysis in this paper.

*Bravely Fought the Queen*, first staged in Mumbai in 1991, deals with a dysfunctional family living in a 'posh suburb' of Bangalore. The play focuses on the lives of two brothers, Jiten and Nitin married to two sisters, Dolly and Alka. It moves from the private space of the Trivedi household to the public arena of the advertising agency where the men work, highlighting issues of patriarchal subjugation, marital discord and homosexuality with a relentless pace. What is significant is the fact that in the play there are references to women who do not participate in the action of the play but are ostensibly connected to Dattani's project of portraying the functioning of patriarchy. So there is **Subhadra Kumari Chauhan**, poet and freedom fighter whose paean on **Rani Laxmibai**, another freedom fighter lends the play its title. There is also **Naina Devi** whose voice rings out loud and clear, singing *thumris* throughout the play. The other women who are mentioned in course of the play but never seen are Baa, Daksha, a beggar woman, Revathi and Shirley. Through all these women, Dattani attempts to percolate the deepest recesses of patriarchal intervention in our daily lives. To begin with, it is essential to outline the thematic content of the play to see how these absent presences work to enhance the dramatic experience.

In an interview with Angelie Multani, Dattani observes, “With me it [source of energy] happens to be marginal people amongst others. Women interest me a great deal. I draw a lot of energy from the women I know” (“A Conversation with Mahesh Dattani” 166). *Bravely Fought the Queen* has essentially been described as a play that portrays women as victims of patriarchal oppression that operates across generations. Dolly and Alka, the two sisters, married to the Trivedi brothers, Jiten and Nitin are not happy in their respective marriages. Jiten is often violent, uses foul language, has no respect for women and utterly disregards everyone in the family. Nitin is a closeted homosexual and therefore his marriage to Alka brings no happiness to either. Then there is Baa, the matriarch, mother to Jiten and Nitin, who is never seen but only heard at times. Dattani mentions in the stage directions that Baa’s silhouette may be seen. Baa’s voice is heard at times, when she reminisces about the past and sometimes when she keeps calling Alka and Dolly. Jiten and Dolly have a daughter, Daksha, who is again mentioned but not seen. Daksha is a spastic child because when Dolly was pregnant with her, Jiten, instigated by his mother, kicked Dolly in the stomach. The play thus depicts how men use violence as a tool to ensure complete subservience of women. Alka and Dolly are controlled first by their brother Praful and then by their husbands. Alka gives a horrifying description of her brother’s callous behavior when she tells Dolly:

I told him[Nitin] 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.” (32)

Baa reminisces about the ill treatment she received at the hands of her husband:

You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! (Jerks her face as if she’s been slapped.) No! No! Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? Not on the face. I beg you! Hit me but not on...aaaah!.(57).

Women in the play lead lives designed by patriarchy and try their best to conform. The playtalks of pretence, of a performance that women carry out in their daily lives, pretending to be what they are not. So towards the beginning of the play Dattani brings in this idea of appearance versus reality in the conversation between Dolly and Lalitha.

Dolly. I’m sorry. I wanted to laugh but I was afraid.

Lalitha. Afraid?

Dolly. Afraid I would crack my mask (4).

Dolly is seen as wearing a mud mask. The “mask” in the play signifies performance as a way of life, adopted by women to live in the patriarchal society. Dolly is a performer who is performing the role of a happy middle class wife and a perfect mother.

Another potent symbol used in the play to represent patriarchal domination is the bonsai. The image of the bonsai, a plant whose growth has been arrested artificially through human intervention, assumes a dominant metaphor in the play in order to introduce the theme of stunting the mental and emotional growth of women.

Alka. You said you make bonsai?

Lalitha. Yes. I’ve got a whole collection.

Alka. How do you make them?

Lalitha. You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the root and bind their branches with wire and . . . stunt them (16).

The image of the bonsai, the detailed process of its creation, draws parallels between the stunting of a plant’s natural growth through unnatural and artificial means with the strategy used by patriarchy to arrest the natural growth of women, who are then reduced to artificial objects capable of exhibiting the superiority of the creator but unable to display the natural qualities it was endowed with. Women in the play thus suffer physical and psychological anguish, their wishes and dreams unrealised and unfulfilled, they lead lives of pretence masking their real emotions to fit into the mould patriarchy has designed for them.

The women characters who are not seen in the play are inextricably linked to the theme of patriarchal domination. *Bravely Fought the Queen* owes its nomenclature to Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's epic poem on the Rani of Jhansi. The oft repeated line in the poem "Khub ladi mardaani woh toh Jhansi wali Rani thi... (Bravely fought the manly queen)" has been appropriated by Dattani as the title. Rani Laxmibai and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, the two women who give the play its name, share a common history of protest against patriarchal delimitation and definition of gender roles. Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi, led her army against the British in 1857. The death of the king, Gangadhar Rao, had left the throne without a natural heir. The East India Company denied recognition to the adopted prince, and annexed the kingdom exercising the Doctrine of Lapse policy. Undeterred, Rani Lakshmi Bai took the reins of government, reorganised her forces and fought the colonizers. Rani Laxmi Bai has been celebrated as a freedom fighter leading her army against the British forces. Within the nationalist tradition Laxmi Bai has been vigorously celebrated as a model of valour, she is exceptional, *mardani* or masculine woman, the honorary man who is one of the models of Indian womanhood. The Rani is seen in the poem as stripping her feminine weaknesses and donning militant masculinity by picking a sword and plunging it into a sheath at her waist. However as Harleen Singh mentions in her perceptive study *The Queen of Jhansi*: "The many stories of Rani Lakshmi Bai do not extol women's aptitude to lead but are rather exemplary tales of women's ability to serve, in the tradition of the 'national family romance', the private and the public sphere as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters or even queens" 4). As an Indian woman who came out of the private space to rebel against the British, she posed an interminable problem of representation and comprehension. Had she been an Indian widow duly performing sati or shaved her head and dedicated herself to a life of hardship, she may have elicited a chivalric response, but as a royal widow who commanded troops and took British lives, she defied all norms of femininity. Rani Laxmi Bai had to be relocated in the framework of selfless service and sacrifice as a grieving mother and widow.<sup>33</sup> Jaishree Mishra's novel *Rani* (2007), based on Laxmi Bai's life, was banned in Uttar Pradesh for what the state government deemed was a sacrilegious representation of an interracial romance between the Rani and a British political officer. The mere suggestion that the Rani could have had anything but an antagonistic relationship with British men is unimaginable to the nation's public discourse. As narratives of the nation focus on women's roles in private and public sphere, India's most iconic historic female figure becomes a site for power struggle even today.

In another interesting cultural representation, the Time magazine carried a photographic montage of history's 'Top Ten Bad-Ass Wives' in the July issue of 2011 where the Rani of Jhansi came in at number eight.

In this connection, one is reminded of a little known biography of the Queen of Jhansi authored by Mahasweta Devi, *Jhansir Rani* (1956). In the interview, included in the English translation of the book, the author states, '**Frankly, I felt her widowhood liberated her in many ways**' (271). Mahasweta reads widowhood for the Rani as an energising experience: 'The Rani's personality had not found full expression when her husband was alive. Her character matured during the nine months she ruled Jhansi' (117). Mahasweta's narrative reinforces the persistent tropes of Indian femininity: 'A woman whose vermilion bindi had been wiped off her forehead by widowhood, whose mangalsutra had been torn off her neck, whose fatherless son was deprived of his rightful inheritance, had not taken to fighting motivated by a desire for her own personal success' (148). Unless the Rani is seen as a grieving and wronged mother fighting for her son's rights in the absence of the husband, it becomes impossible to justify her resistance to traditional gender roles.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem 'Jhansi ki Rani' (1930) is the most iconic representation of the Rani's life. It is significant also because the poet was one of the very few women authors in a pre-independent India. So the poem is a tribute to a female legend and a resistance to the male authors of the period. Written in a ballad form, the poem is an integral part of the school curriculum in India. The poem charts the progression of the Rani's life from a young girl to a warrior fighting for the rights of her people juxtaposing it with the nationalist movement. Chauhan describes 'the spear, the shield, the sword and the knife' [*Barchi, Dhal, Kirpan, Katari*] as the Rani's 'childhood friends'. Trained in the stories of the brave Shivaji, [*Veer Shivaji ki gaathayen uski yaad zabaani thi*], the Rani is both an avatar of the goddesses of war [*Lakshmi thi ya Durga thi who swayan veerta ki avatar*] and the brave daughter of the Marathas. However, she is 'mardaani' or manly because she clearly forfeits her femininity when she fights a battle valiantly. Again, the poet Subhadra Kumari Chauhan was the first woman *Satyagrahi* to court arrest in Nagpur in 1923 when she was just eighteen and pregnant. She had joined the Non Cooperation movement headed by Mahatma Gandhi with her husband. Despite very great affection for her children, she did not accept the friendly advice of curtailing her political work (which would invariably lead to a jail sentence) even though her husband was already in

jail. So she had to go to jail leaving her three children led by the eldest daughter, Sudha, to their own fate (although helped by some friends). Secondly, when in jail with her physically challenged baby, Mamta, she devoted all her motherly affection to protecting and nurturing her to the extent possible in the grim conditions of the jail. But even in these circumstances, when she heard about the denial of food to 'C' class prisoners, she rushed to somehow provide food to them, regardless of the known fact that this will result in punishment to her, resulting in more difficult conditions for her and so for her daughter as well. Dattani thus recalls two very brave women who resisted the stereotypical representations of femininity to fight against oppression. Interestingly, one does it in the absence of the husband and another with the full approval of the husband, in fact with him. So the resistance is either sanctioned by patriarchal authority or in total absence of patriarchal authority.

Naina Devi or Nilina Sen (1917–1993) was born in the family of Keshub Chandra Sen, nationalist leader and social reformer. She was married at a very young age to Maharaj Ripjit Singh of Kapurthala. The legendary exponent of *thumri* couldn't sing after marriage because there was an objection to women from good families practising this art as *thumri* was traditionally sung by *tawaifs*. Naina Devi's daughter Rena Ripjit Singh says, "I never heard my mother sing at Chapslee [their family home], not even a low hum. We had heard that she had a beautiful voice, but none of us heard it here." In a paper titled "Women in Traditional Media," presented in 1991 at a consultation in Bangalore, Naina Devi had said, "There was no question of a rani singing, even for her own pleasure. I sang to myself when I was alone in my room" (Khurana, "The Lost Song of Naina Devi"). Naina Devi's *thumri* is heard throughout the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The significance is multi-layered. *Thumri* celebrates the eternal love between Radha and Krishna, the iconic lovers in Indian mythology. So the women in the play listen to music celebrating love and, at the same time, painfully experience its very absence in their lives. Again, we learn that from Dolly that their mother was fond of singing, "Our mother was... tried to be a singer. When she was young. We never heard her sing" (79). This is an echo of what Rena Ripjit Singh says about her mother. Even Baa mentions that she would sing to her husband but she was not allowed to sing publicly: "He asked me before marrying him if I will sing! He knew I could sing! You want me to sing only for you?... I will sing for everyone! Why are you so angry?" (69). Naina Devi could sing only after her husband passed away and she had to shift to New Delhi in order to protect the dignity of her in-laws. Dattani thus represents three women in the play who do not appear on stage but are connected to the women who actually appear onstage. All these women share a history of patriarchal domination. In case of Rani Laxmi Bai, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan and Naina Devi, the resistance to patriarchy is allowed in presence of a patriarchal authority figure or in total absence of such a figure.

Among the other absent women characters, we have Shirley, a model who works for Nitin and Jiten's advertising agency. While discussing an upcoming product launch, the men plan a ball and Jiten proposes, "[...] get this Shirley girlie to strip at the end" (41). Shirley is very flippantly objectified by Jiten. We also see that Dattani mentions that the office has a 'huge photograph of a sensuous model' (40). At the end of the act, Sridhar is asked to 'pick up' a woman for Jiten. Sridhar does exactly as he is told, but he also enjoys himself with her before handing her over to Jiten: 'She's young and fresh... And she is great. I had her on the back seat. You can have my leftovers' (72). The term 'leftovers' associated the woman with food, something that is to be consumed. In all three instances, the women are framed and objectified by the male gaze and positioned as an object of heterosexual male desire. The women are denied any sort of agency. In fact this is reiterated in the conversation that the men have regarding public opinion to their advertising campaign about a lingerie brand they plan to launch. When Sridhar informs Jiten that women who were shown the advertisement found it 'highly offensive' because it objectifies women, Jiten completely ignores the response and decides to go ahead with the campaign anyway because

'[men] have the buying power [and] so there's no point in asking a group of screwed-up women what they think of it. They'll pretend to feel offended and say, 'Oh we are always being treated as sex objects.' (54)

Dattani also mentions Mrs Revathi Sharma, the Chairman's wife, who gives the lingerie brand its name 'Re Va Tee.' Again, one can only be curious about Mrs Revathi Sharma's wish to be associated with the brand, but one will never know. Finally, we have the beggar woman who is reported to be seen outside the Trivedi house time and again throughout the play. In the final act, Sridhar reports that Jiten is running the car over and over her. This act of extreme violence follows Dolly's speech describing the act of violence committed against her during her pregnancy that resulted in the birth of her spastic daughter, Daksha. From the objectification of women, to perpetration of



violence in the private as well as public spaces, Dattani paints a very vivid but terrifying picture of women's position in patriarchy. Daksha, who is also not seen in the play, but whose uncoordinated movements are imitated by her mother Dolly, in a moment of heightened theatrical irony, is linked to the bonsai, the miniature version of the women in the Trivedi household, whose mental and physical growth has been stunted.

The many women who remain invisible or unnamed in the play contribute towards establishing the idea of women's location at the margins, condemned to silence and also the sameness of the situation through generations. The play really builds up a very claustrophobic atmosphere from which there seems no escape. The use of absent women characters adds to this sense of an irredeemable and unremitting claustrophobia. Dattani, in the title of the play, omits the very important word 'manly' while translating the line '*Khub ladi mardaani...*' This omission is of course deliberate, pointing towards history's elision of Laxmibai's femininity which would be ill at odds with glorifying her as an icon of nationalism. This forfeiting of femininity is integral to qualify as brave – 'brave enough to qualify as a man.' We see how Alka wants to dress up as Laxmi Bai but with a tin plate armour suggesting that even if she aspires to be as brave as Laxmibai, it would mean giving up on her femininity, her humility, modesty, breaking the code of silence imposed by patriarchal norms and Alka dare not do all of that, she will fight a mock battle with a tin plate armour, something which would not disturb the carefully ordered patriarchal universe. The women in the play are thus fighting their battles in their own way. What is significant is nobody appears to be 'brave enough to qualify as a man.' Of course so because years of social conditioning into being a woman as a selfless creature prioritizing the family and husband, a woman has ceased to think about her problems. Their life is an endless struggle to fit into the mould that patriarchy designs for them and bravery does not agree with the stereotype. Dattani connects these women in the play with three women who were brave enough to resist patriarchy's definition and delimitation but as we have seen that too happens with patriarchal sanction. Incidentally this leads us to a very bleak proposition, that is, one cannot escape patriarchy's delimitation and definition into specific gender roles. Dattani probably wants to say that one can resist patriarchy but within limits. One cannot subvert or transcend patriarchy because that is everywhere, insidiously feeding on our minds. It seems fit to end with Sujatha Venkatraman's poem on the Rani Laxmi Bai resonates with all women across all generations:

Several centuries

Have slipped by between our thin fingers  
The Rani of Jhansi asks me from the grave  
Are we free and equal at last?

I hang my head: there is so much to do.  
My feminine paranoia has no cure,  
Some drunken husband is beating his wife,  
Some female child has seen her starving grave,  
Some woman went with only half the wages  
Some woman was raped and could not fight  
Some woman married an irregular old chap  
And I still have to prove everything I do.  
And you call this a hyperbola of my fantasy?

Two droplets of summer  
Three teaspoons of hope  
Two tablespoons of courage  
A jug of education  
A sprig of equal laws  
Ten sticks of economic liberty

Will you concoct me this elixir  
So I may tell the Rani that she may breathe?

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup>Lorca allows for their presence only by means of offstage sounds that represent masculinity or male sexual desire: at one point spectators hear the singing of a group of reapers coming as if from nearby fields, and at another point some of the women on stage are startled by heavy thuds from the hooves of a stallion who is apparently trying to kick down the walls of his stable to get access to the mares in heat. In this way the men who inhabit the imaginary spaces of Lorca's drama, even though they are not seen, constitute nevertheless an important, even central, part of the text.

<sup>2</sup>*Savannah Bay* takes the form of a protracted conversation between two women who attempt to "summon up the memory of the girl who died in the warm sea of Savannah Bay" (Duras, *Four Plays* 112). In *Fefu and Her Friends*, similarly, men are frequently referred to as objects of jealousy, surprise, or ridicule, but they never actually appear onstage.

<sup>3</sup>Jaishree Mishra's novel *Rani* (2007), based on Laxmi Bai's life, was banned in Uttar Pradesh for what the state government deemed was a sacrilegious representation of an interracial romance between the Rani and a British political officer. The mere suggestion that the Rani could have had anything but an antagonistic relationship with British men is unimaginable to the nation's public discourse. As narratives of the nation focus on women's roles in private and public sphere, India's most iconic historic female figure becomes a site for power struggle even today.

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