

# Beneath The Mask: Unmasking the mask(s) in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*

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## Abstract

'Mask', as an object/cultural element/symbol, has got a history of existence that is rich both in its length and versatility. Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* takes into account the 'common' cultural element and uses that to show various dimensions of human nature and relationships through performativity and performances of the characters. This paper takes into account the usage of mud mask, alcohol, and Bonsai among the central characters as they dance around each other in their masked and unmasked state. It also tries to find out how Dattani uses the notion of 'space', both in his play and on stage, to portray the (crisis of) identity of the characters of this play. By probing into different states of the characters' relationships with each other, this paper tries to explore the idea that the characters of this play are so engrossed in the act of carrying on their façade that instead of themselves making their masks, it is more likely that their masks have been making them.

## Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is a man of multifaceted (and 'successful') identities. He is a Gujrati who grew up in Bangalore, writes in English, and carries the identities of a playwright, director, film-maker, and actor. Dattani is also the person who 'simply rejects the concept of choice...For him, his writing is reflective of the 'here and now', of modern contemporary urban India...'<sup>1</sup>. A recipient of Sahitya Akademi award, Dattani sees himself as a part of the urban Indian society and states that his plays are 'geared to cater'<sup>2</sup> to the urban and middle class audience of the society of which he thinks he is a part of. In that segment of the society, the crisis is not necessarily of basic needs; the characters are not suffering from lack of food or shelter, but they are suffering alright. The genius of Dattani lies in the fact that he manages to bring that particular suffering in his works while maintaining a sort of 'neutral' ground. It is to be noted here that the word, 'neutral', is used simply to state an observation. Dattani

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1. Angelie Multanis introduction for *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani*

2. Anindita Chatterjee, see works cited

himself said, in an interview with Anita Nair, “Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre. Theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began.” (Das, 245) This observation made by Dattani helps us to understand why he prefers his plays to be performed. Despite his preference for performance, Dattani’s plays do not fail to deliver the charm when they are being read. Multani observes, “One of the most striking aspects of Dattani’s characters is that they use an English which is neither stilted, nor archaic, nor uncomfortably directed only towards a really elite and upperclass audience” (12). This is probably one of the reasons why Dattani is one of the most commercially successful Indian English playwrights. Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* follows all the qualities that are evident in his plays. The play posits layers of meaning while refraining itself from pushing one particular view or solution. So, it can be said that the play itself has layers of masks.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* revolves around three trios – Jiten-Dolly, Nitin-Alka, and Shridhar-Lata. Hovering around them, without noticeable stage presence, are Baa (the mother of Trivedi brothers), Praful (brother of Dolly and Alka, and lover of Nitin), Kanhaiya (a young cook who is the subject of Dolly and Alka’s fantasies), a beggar woman, and an auto driver. The play dwells with the conflict that exists between these characters and within the characters themselves. Each member of the trio has his/her own mask. By understanding the nature of the mask, we can realize the crises that exist in the play - the crisis between the role given and the role desired; the crisis between family members; the crisis between employer and employee; and the crisis of the self.

### **The Mask**

“Afraid I would crack my mask” (p.234).

Masks in general are interesting objects. Literally speaking, they are objects that cover the face (or parts of face) for protection, disguise, entertainment, ritual practices, and variety of other reasons. Also, masks are made of various materials or substances, depending on the use of these. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word ‘mask’ is thought to originate during the 1530s from the Middle French *masque* “covering to hide or guard the face”, from Italian *maschera*, and from Latin *masca* “mask, specter, nightmare” (N.pag). Metaphorically speaking, a person said to be wearing a mask (even if s/he is not wearing an actual one) can imply that s/he is hiding his/her true nature.

Considering Shakespeare's often quoted lines, from *As You Like It*, in which he says that all the world is a stage and that men and women are merely players, it will not be entirely inaccurate to say that we go through our lives wearing different masks that help us to fit into the specific role that we chose to play (or, that is forced upon us) at a given time.

On that particular note, Dattani's play can be said to be an embodiment of those lines from *As You Like It*. It is a play written to be performed on the stage where the characters carry on to wear masks, both literally and metaphorically. Interestingly, the mask which we encounter at the beginning of the play is one that is put on the face for beautification. It is known also as a facial mask. In addition to that, the very first idea that is associated with that mask (as uttered by Dolly) is that it might 'crack'. Two things are at play here; one, an artificial product that has been used in order to enhance beauty, which suggests that the natural state of things is not satisfactory or desirable; two, the character is worried that the mask might crack and, thus, allow the world to see the undesirable (and, which is natural) state of things. Even if we consider that beauty masks are sometimes put on to accentuate natural skin tone or just to freshen the face, the questions remains that had it not been put would the face be undesirable or not. Thus, at the very beginning the mask is playing a role that is multifaceted. On the surface level, we see that Dolly is using it for beautification and that she is living in a state of worry that she might not get her desired effect out of it if the mask cracks. And, on a different layer we can understand that the characters are not entirely what they seem; they might be pretending to be someone different by wearing masks of some other persona to hide the (probably undesirable) true condition of themselves and that there is a chance of that masked persona cracking.

The layers of meaning of this facial mask do not just stop there. Apart from being a symbolic clue about the play's nature, the mud mask also delivers (or acts) as a 'hyper-realistic' image. As Michael Walling says,

The mud mask is an empty white surface, which suggests a blankness in the character. In performance, the effect is very disconcerting. This is particularly the case, given that the mud mask is white, and the performer's skin is darker in colour...it is into an "ambience of psychodrama" that Dattani throws his black actors and their white (or coloured, or sequined) masks. Moreover, the mask/make-up mask is a basic symbol of performance, particularly in the traditional Indian dance theatre, which Dattani loves. (68)

Walling also mentions that a black performer in white mask 'gives a lateral and visual realization' to the *Black Skin, White Mask*, written by Frantz Fanon. It is true that a white mask has the ability to evoke an ethereal feeling. But, it is also true that the cracked version of the mask carried by dark skinned actors has the capacity to make that ethereal feeling (quite) uncomfortable. Keeping in mind that Dattani believes that the audience must finish what the playwright has started, it might be safe to say that this possibility of evoking discomfort is intentional. The mask alludes to not only how the characters are disguising their true nature, but its functionality remains for the performance also. It could be a token of appreciation for Dattani's love for Indian dance theatre; or, it could be Dattani's way of making the audience slightly uncomfortable, and, thus, keeping them 'alert'. One thing for sure is that the introduction of the mud mask at the very beginning works as a very potent device to ensure (or warn) that the play has got layers of meaning.

### **Mask by Alcohol**

In the play, Dattani uses alcohol in a way which makes it difficult for the audience to pass any judgment. Usually, usage of alcohol makes one unreliable since a drunk character/narrator/actor is not someone who is believed to provide a logical explanation. In Dattani's play, however, alcohol can be seen as an instrument which serves twofold purposes. Alka uses alcohol to 'be free'; she drinks it and then speaks 'truths', which she probably wouldn't have said during her sober state. Alka does this to cope with her marriage and also her existence; she knows that speaking truth about her marriage and life will bring chaos, but not speaking about them will probably make her life unbearable. She chooses to speak about those 'uncomfortable' subjects during the time when others think that Alka is under the influence of alcohol. It is a situation in which alcohol is more likely to be blamed for the things that Alka said instead of she (Alka) herself (253).

On the other hand, alcohol can also be responsible for Jiten's abrasive behavior. In the play, Jiten can rarely be seen without holding anything to drink. Though it is evident that Jiten is somewhat violent by nature and hints (or evidence) of him being beaten up by his father during his childhood are there in the play, one might argue that Jiten's temper and tendency to commit violence has worsened through his continuous consumption of alcohol. Thus, alcohol acts as an instrument that can be considered to be partially responsible for Jiten's aggressiveness. This can be considered as another way of Dattani's act of staying neutral, though we see that Jiten was the subject of violence

from his father during his childhood, which probably is instrumental in him being what he is in his adulthood. We can never say that that is the only reason because of the presence of alcohol. Alcohol is there to show that not everything can be categorized into simply black and white, just like we cannot simply blame Jiten's childhood for his present condition (309).

Alcohol is also essential to see the fallacy of the society in which Dattani's characters live. The women 'are allowed' to attend parties with their husbands. But, drinking is still considered to be bad for women. Dolly reprimands Alka about her habit of drinking 'often'. Sridhar does not mind Lalitha drinking as long as he is around her during that time. Despite the fact that we hardly ever see Jiten without a drink, throughout the play we do not see him get reprimanded for that. The liquor is, thus, seen as a thing to be consumed by men only. Women can drink, but, it is preferable that they do so under the supervision of men.

### **Bonsai as Mask**

Women being associated with trees is not a very uncommon thing. Usually, trees are used as allusion to refer to women, thus suggesting that women have the same kind of nurturing and protective qualities like those which we identify with the image of trees. Dattani, too, uses trees to depict the condition of women in his play. The difference in his approach is that instead of using 'regular' trees, Dattani opts for Bonsai. Regarding Bonsai in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Anindita Chatterjee writes –

Implementing the techniques of pruning, root reduction, grafting and defoliation, small trees are grown that mimic the shape and style of full grown trees. In the course of the play the symbol of the miniscule plant or bonsai goes on to assume a profound significance with respect to the lives of the characters depicted in the play. The art of wiring and trimming of the plants symbolically alludes to the process of control and domination of women by the laws and tenets of patriarchy. The stunted growth thus becomes suggestive of the restrictive life of the women in the play as well the women of the Indian society in general who are forced to fit into the pre-ordained identities of the mother, the daughter, and the wife throughout their life. (2)

The 'restrictive life' which Chatterjee mentions regarding women is quite evident in the play. All the women in this play are restricted in one way or the other. Baa is restricted in her bed; and, we see through the recollections and flashbacks that her married life was probably restricted of happiness because of her abusive husband. Dolly, it seems, showcases

a situation that can be said to be a newer version of Baa's conjugal life; she has a relationship with Jiten which is almost devoid of communication and mutual respect. Moreover, Jiten does not refrain himself from hitting Dolly; in fact, Jiten's act of hitting Dolly during her pregnancy is the reason behind their daughter Daksha's condition. Alka is restricted in her life by a husband who prefers men over women as lovers. Lalitha is the luckiest of the lot; but, that can be said only if we are speaking in terms of comparison. Lalitha is childless; it is she who painstakingly makes the bonsais. She possess a sense of diligence which Alka lacks as she comments that the process of making Bonsai sounds very tedious. The dwarfish figure of Bonsai is relevant to almost all the characters of the play. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri writes, "The stunted growth, the bizzare shape, the grotesque reality of the bonsai becomes resonant in the existence of all the characters in the play" (54).

The existence of the Bonsai in this play works as a referent. Jiten is critical about the Bonsai's grotesqueness; but, despite that Sridhar is still fond of it. Lalitha gives her time to create the Bonsai. It is an act which Alka thinks to be tiresome and timeconsuming. The bonsai clearly resembles Daksha, Dolly, and Jiten's daughter; it is also a gift (that Lalitha gives to Dolly) which Dolly finds unusual. The Bonsai, thus, acts to give an insight into the masks which these characters are wearing. Jiten and Dolly's views regarding bonsais show that despite their best efforts, none of them are comfortable about their daughter and that she is 'unusual' to them. The bonsai also gives a sense of optimism. Though the bonsais are dwarfish in nature, they can grow fruits and look mature. Dattani is probably suggesting that in spite of all the restrictions, the characters have the potential to be productive and be their own selves; but, for that they need to let go to their masks and be their true selves.

### **Mask of 'Space': Presence/Absence**

Dattani mentioned that he writes his plays to be performed; and, according to the sense of performance the space utilized on the stage is crucial. Aparna Singh notes that "In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani uses onstage absence not in opposition to presence, but as an inevitable pointer to it. The absence of characters from onstage action provides stimulus for the events that occur."

It is seen that Baa is presented throughout the play (while being absent on the stage) by the sound of the bell. The ringing of the bell continuously ruptures the presence of the three female characters and gives us an idea of her imposing control in her daughter-in-laws' lives. The absence of men allows women to talk uninhibitedly about men and

vice versa. In Act Two, the conversation of men shows how brutally patriarchal their way is. The patriarchal superiority complex is particularly striking in Jiten, who makes no effort to hide his attitude and utters –

“...Men. Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power. Yes! So there's no point in asking a group of screwd-up women what they think of it” (276).

This sense of machismo ultimately becomes so overpowering even for Jiten that he had to drive himself away to find out his own space. The other characters, too, deal in their own ways to find out their own coveted space. Dolly and Alka, both frustrated with their married lives, engage themselves in fantasies about their young cook. Nitin looks for his 'rightful' in the powerful arms of another man. Moreover, both for men and women in this play, it seems we get to know about them during their absence than when they were present. Thus, the space itself can be said to wear a mask. The act of physical occupying of the space is the masked identity. The characters, while present on the stage, show us their masks, which they want us to see. Only through the characters' absence, we can get a glimpse of who they really are; and, that too from the account about them provided by others. It can also be problematic because the account of others might be biased. This shows that there in order to understand a character there needs to be a balance between what a character says about itself and what others say about that character.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* begins with a mud mask and gradually progresses to venture down a path where the multifaceted identities of masks emerge like layers within layers. Dattani depicts a place where the characters' masks are integral part of them; and, an understanding of them is incomplete without taking into consideration the masks they wear. The question remains though that whether it is truly possible to know all the masks one wears. This is probably the point which Dattani wants his audience to contemplate about.

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