

# Deconstructing Socio-Psychological Prejudices: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's "Bravely Fought The Queen"

<sup>1</sup>JAGDISH BATRA

***Abstract:** Mahesh Dattani is a leading Indian playwright who writes in English. He is the first such writer who has been bestowed the national SahityaAkademi Award for his contribution to the field of English drama. What distinguishes him from run-of-the-mill dramatists is his reformatory zeal, something that puts him in league with the likes of G.B. Shaw. His themes are invariably linked to present-day problems of socio-cultural importance. Thus, Dattani's plays touch upon gay and lesbian relations, status of the marginalized sections like neuters, women, children and physically challenged people. Besides, he has written on victims of AIDS and communal riots. In the play "Bravely Fought the Queen," we come across his sharp disapproval of social hypocrisy as reflected in various rules governing women, family and social life. He rips the veneer off the face of people leading inauthentic lives in matters of sexual preference and loyalty towards life partner. In addition to it, Dattani also underlines the immoral lure of the lucre which is prioritized over all moral values even as people feign otherwise. My paper aims to bring out this characteristic of Dattani's approach taking into account the impact as made out from critiques.*

***Keywords:** Indian English Fiction, Postmodern Drama, Homosexuality, Gender Trouble, Hypocrisy.*

## **I. Introduction**

Mahesh Dattani is India's first playwright writing in English to be awarded the national SahityaAkademi award for his contribution to literature. The subjects of his plays reflect life in its different colours, even those which the society feels shy to speak of like homosexuality, neuters (hijras), AIDS – victims, child abuse, oppression of women, communal politics, as well as the dilemmas and tensions of the differently able, the transgendered, the gay and the lesbian etc. Other themes taken up by Dattani are social conflicts, realpolitik, psychology of artistes etc. He has chronicled the social vices and follies, foibles and prejudices of Indian society.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of English, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, India.

Dattani has touched all socio-psychological as well as socio-philosophical dimensions. In the words of Mahesh Dattani himself, "Thematically, I talk about the areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand 'this' space. They live on the fringes of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe-space for themselves as they can." (Nair) The statement by Dattani is one of the most definitive descriptions of his themes and concerns. All his works so far, the plays, films, screenplays focus on the marginalized entity and his or her struggle to re-define the centrality of Dattani's protagonists question the dominant values that construct social and gender identities.

## II. Discussion

Dattani's play "Bravely Fought the Queen", although set within a family refers to the psychology of the society – its fetishes and taboos, its preferences and dislikes, in short, its value system and deconstructs it to lay bare its weak foundations. The play examines the domain of values as exemplified in an upper middle class family. In these times of change, the demands of a changing lifestyle dictated by an upwardly mobile middle class household present a piquant situation for the members of the family. "A cry for the acceptance of shifting Indian values, this play portrays the clash between traditional and contemporary cultures that has created a new social landscape", says Tanu Pant (Dhawan 41).

The women also suffer due to the homosexual tendencies of men, in this case, the relationship between Nitin and Praful. Jatin is heterosexual but he suffers from the double curse of being an aggressive violator of marital bonds. As a result, not only his wife Dolly but also his younger brother's wife Alka suffers. He can be compared to the character Jimmy in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Jatin is a brute and a sadist who derives pleasure by hurting others. To him, the dignity of his employee Sridhar is immaterial. He is also an unfaithful husband like Jimmy and wants Sridhar to procure a girl for him.

The title "Queen" is bestowed upon Dolly Trivedi, even as her role in the Fancy Dress show as the historical Rani of Jhansi is proposed to be played later by her sister Alka. The complete title of the play is the English rendering of a line in a famous Hindi poem penned by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan which is normally prescribed in Hindi text books for junior classes. In this poem, the poet refers to the Queen of Jhansi who is reported to have bravely fought against the British forces during the first freedom struggle of the country way back in 1857. Thus, the struggle of Dolly Trivedi is given heroic proportion although the context is totally different, but, all the same, the new values dear to her require a measure of bravery in the conservative Indian society.

The play opens in the living room of Jiten and Dolly Trivedi. The audience witnesses a well-stocked bar, a music system and other effects that make the room plush. The music system is playing a Thumri. We are introduced

to Lalita, who in contrast with these fashionable housewives, has an intellectual bent of mind as she explains: “Oh, I keep myself occupied, I do a bit of writing. Freelance. I write an occasional woman’s column for the Times. Sometimes I review cultural events. I am into meditation. And, oh yes, I grow bonsai plants – I’ve been growing them for years. I do a bit of creative writing as well. You know, poetry and stuff like that. Nothing great, but...” (243). According to a critic, she has been brought brought as a parallel character for “using her as a pun, or comic relief to unravel the hidden recesses of the characters against the backdrop of their silence in the society, hence, the facet of neglect and marginalization of women” (Kumar 167).

Lalita had been asked by Jatin Trivedi, the boss of her husband Sridhar, to meet his wife Dolly that very evening in connection with an advertising campaign to be launched by his firm. However, Dolly shows ignorance of the whole thing. Her husband had forgotten to tell her of the impending visit of Lalita and at that particular moment, she was actually getting ready to go out somewhere with her husband. Jatin’s brother Nitin and his wife Alka were also to accompany Dolly and Jatin. Both Dolly and Alka are sisters – Dolly the elder and Alka the younger one. Dolly had been asked to discuss arrangements for a masked ball dance that was to be a significant event on the occasion of the launch of ‘ReVaTee’ – a new range of ladies nightwear. Sridhar, being an employee of Jatin and Nitin’s firm, is also involved in the venture and is working to acquire this new account. Both the brothers’ families reside in adjacent houses “in the middle of nowhere”.

Along with them lives Baa, a senile old lady. She keeps on shifting from the house of one brother to the other as is normally seen in such circumstances. The old times when an old mother would have been living peacefully and lovingly in a joint family are gone. In this transitional phase, the brothers divide their responsibility to host their mother in turns. Maybe the next phase would be the American one in which the old people become the responsibility of the social security system run by the government and the children of such old people visit them in age-care homes or hospitals once a year on the occasion of Father’s Day or Mother’s Day!

While Dolly and Lalita are talking, Alka arrives; she is also to accompany Dolly and is dressed up for the occasion. The audience comes to know that both the sisters and even Lalita like rum even though Alka admits only casual addiction to it. Clearly, in the kind of society in which we live, women are not expected to take liquor. Even though Dolly and Alka belong to the upwardly mobile section of middle class, they dare not take liquor openly as that would be breaking a social taboo. Dattani thus, comments on the sham morality practiced by the middle class. There is something more in store for the audience. Dolly has employed a cook who is presently on leave. He has a nineteen year old son who is supposed to be the elusive Kanhaiyya with whom both the sisters have secret meetings in the kitchen.

There are references to Praful, brother to both the sisters. Dolly loves her brother but Alka is not so kindly disposed towards him. She finds him to be a patriarchal tyrant. The reason for this feeling is that when she was a school girl, she had been escorted home by a neighbour's son. Praful considered it to be very improper on Alka's part to have come in the boy's company and for this misdemeanour, he punished her by holding her beautiful hair down on a stove and singeing them. Naturally, she could not have forgotten the lesson all her life, but it also caused a reaction in her and she grew up into a rebel. Two years ago, we are told, Alka had taken a liberal quantity of alcohol and under its influence had felt free to ask her mother-in-law if both her sons had the same father because they had such different attitudes. For this, she was thrown out of the house.

Mahesh Dattani, by including these incidents in the narrative, means to prepare ground for a new kind of morality that is not tied down to irrational conventional do's and don'ts. However, a perfect artist that Dattani is, he would not lay down the tenets of new morality like a moralist. All that he does is to hint at the irrationality of our taboos and dogmas and then lets us decide whether to stick to them or not.

Apart from these characters, the audience is also introduced to a certain beggar woman who comes again and again to the compound even after being shown the gate. As it becomes clear later, the beggar woman represents the conscience that is mostly neglected in this materialistic age. For that matter, all the other three women stand for certain qualities. Lalita is the representative of the normal outside world, something so sadly lacking in the Trivedi abode. Dolly is an object of pity, married as she is to an uncaring and unloving husband. Being the daughter-in-law of the family, she has to look after the mentally not-so-sound Baa. She often rings the electric bell provided to her to call attention to her needs. This naturally intrudes into the private space of Dolly again and again.

After having introduced the key female characters and imparted a feel of the ambience in the Trivedi household, the second act promises to focus on the psyche of men and therefore is titled 'The Men'. In this section, we are introduced to Jatin, Dolly's husband and Nitin, Alka's husband as also to Sridhar, Lalita's husband. Dattani is known for his innovations in dramatic art. The action in Act II is the counterpart of the action in the earlier act. What it means is that whatever took place during the time span of Act I with the female characters around, is staged once again with the male characters around. So, we get to know what transpired in the office of Jatin and Nitin while the women were doing whatever they did at home during the same time period. This means if the audience did not know what the man calling his wife actually said, it would now be able to know it all. But Dattani would not be Dattani, if this were the only compounding feature of the stagecraft. Baa is common to both the acts. It can be excused considering the fact that her room is elevated at the back of the stage. Her presence in both the acts has been used as a common thread. The space occupied by Baa is illuminated whenever action pertains to her. Another feature common to both the acts is the bar used by Alka in the first act and Jatin in the second act.

In the beginning of the act, Nitin is shown going through the firm's accounts. He is not satisfied with the company's progress and comments that they are always facing losses despite the gross income going up. Jatin is present but all that he can think of is borrowing more money from his brother-in-law Praful. This is despite the fact that both the brothers hate Praful publicly and maltreat him as is borne out by the following comment by Jiten:

“We insult him and treat him like a piece of shit but he, when his turn comes, actually helps us out. Right? (No response) Sentimental fool. (Drinks.) I can take his money and still treat him like crap. He is nothing. The very fact that he needs to show he is capable of helping us proves he is nothing. He is so inferior that he has to prove himself by loaning us ten lakhs!” (267)

So, when it comes to sponging Praful for money, they do not mind approaching him. The duplicity in the brothers' attitude towards Praful is borne out by another dialogue that Jiten has with Praful: “We won't be home till very late. I'll tell you what. It's not fair to make you come all the way. We will come to your hotel tomorrow morning...Dolly and Alka? No, they've gone to Ooty with some friends...Oh well, why should I hide anything from you, [...]. Of course, Baa is to blame as well. She shouldn't keep bringing up your background.” (268). It is pointed out here that Praful and sisters' mother was a prostitute.

The company is in the process of bagging an advertising campaign for ReVaTeeladies nightwear. At the moment however, the effort is not paying off. The latest presentation made for ReVaTee products has not got the desirable response and has been dismissed as “tasteless” by the women whose response was sought. Even the Board of Directors of the company manufacturing the nightwear has rejected it. Jiten, like any insensitive boss, threatens to sack Sridhar if he is not able to fetch this business. He is a perfect businessman who can act as a man of steel and change into a flattering sycophant the next moment. His point in fetching business in the line of ladies nightwear can be appreciated from the following comment:

Men would want to buy it for their women! That's our market. 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 screwed-up women what they think of it. That'll pretend to feel offended and say, ‘Oh, we are always being treated like sex objects.’ (276)

This is the morality of the advertising world and, by extension, of the larger business world. What the capitalist is interested in is profit and for getting profit every strategy is fair. While the two are in the office and Sridhar considers himself free to call it a day and go home, Jiten detains him. Sridhar gets an order from his boss to get a prostitute for him. He is aghast at this demand. He protests but the boss tells him, “You call yourself an

advertising professional and you don't want to pimp?" An interesting conversation follows that throws light on the code of conduct valid for employee-employer relationship in this age, into which Jiten, the lecher, is initiating Sridhar:

Sridhar: This is insane! (To Nitin) Do you think this is fair? (No response. To Jiten.) Look, I can listen to you and carry out your orders as far as owkr is oncerned. I may not agree on many things but professionally, you are my boss. But this... I\_I'vegota reputation to... I means what if someone sees me and tell smy wife? (Pause.) And it's starting to rain.

Jiten: (picsk up the keys). Good. They'll pile into the car even before you stop. (Holds out the keys.)

Sridhar: A man has his tolerance limit, you know! And this is something.. me pick up a woman for you! (287)

Sridhar is in tears but has no option. So, he snatches the keys and rushes out. Nitin, however, grudges Jiten's telling Sridhar that both of them picked up girls.

Lest it is taken as a meek surrender by the employee, the following comment, more in the nature of a soliloquy, throws light on the hurt that Sridhar has received: "She's young and fresh! (Under his breath) And she is great. I had her on the back seat. You can have my leftovers" (291). Sridhar has staged his little revolt and shown his disapproval of the value code of his employer.

After Sridhar is gone, Jiten raises the issue of selling Baa's ancestral house. Actually, it has been left in will by their mother to Daksha, Nitin's daughter, but Baa has to be brought round because of the past tiff between Nitin's wife and Baa. At this point, Jatin comes out with the ruling for Nitin to throw out Alka permanently, so that Baa signs the property papers in favour of her sons! This, to say the least, is the depth of materialistic thinking. Dattani lays bare the priorities of this age, in which no value is attached to sentiments in the life of a married couple.

Baa's character is also revealed in a series of flashbacks. She was married to a domineering person who had not only prevented her from singing in public but also beat her up regularly besides ill-treating his sons. Jiten had inherited the violent trait in his character from his father. Baa maintains a firm grip on her sons. Nitin resembles his mother in appearance as also in his submissive nature

Extra-marital affairs are a taboo in a family set-up even though a partner could be indulging in it on thesly. In Act III captioned "Free for All," Dolly and Alka talk about Kanhaiyya. Lalitha, the outsider wonders if Daksha

also has affair with her mother's lover. As in the first scene, the background music relates to a thumri. Dolly tells Lalitha about this singer or the "queen of thumri" as she refers to her who had dared to sing love-songs normally sung by prostitutes. As is wont in our society, she was taken to be a prostitute herself because of her fondness for these songs. The reference to the singer sets off the train of thought in Lalitha's mind and she is reminded of the famous poem about the queen of Jhansi normally pursued in schools. The poem translated into English means: "We had heard her praises sung so often/ So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi/ So bravely fought the manly queen."

At this point, Alka, who is drunk again, has a dialogue with her sister in which Dolly invites Alka to dance in the rain and show off her physical beauty. However, while dancing in the courtyard, Alka slips and falls and gets covered all over in mud just as her husband, brother-in-law and Sridhar arrive from office. Jiten insists that Nitin tell his wife about their decision to throw her out but it seems Nitin has some qualms of conscience and refuses to do it forthwith.

At this moment, a conversation is heard from the upper level where Baa lives. Nitin is confirming from his mother if she would give the house to him if he sends his wife back for ever.

Clearly, in the materialistic world in which we live, money makes the mare go, and human relationships as sacrosanct as it once was between husband and wife are also held ransom to material gain.

But Baa had nominated Praful as the trustee to the property which she had willed to Daksha. Nitin is beside himself with anger upon this: "What have I done to deserve this? Oh God! All my life I have listened to you and obeyed you. Only once I have gone against your wishes, and you punish me for that? But he is to blame. Praful tricked me into marrying her" (305)! It is clear that in these times, a son wants to be rewarded for going along with mother's wishes. He does not want Praful to be around to run his life in case Baa really makes him a trustee. Further, he is also least concerned about his wife: "Alka can stay here, or go away, or drink herself to death. I don't care. It doesn't make a difference to me!" (305)

Jiten is a conventional male chauvinist who considers women as inferior beings and treats them merely as sex objects. His sadistic nature reminds us of Jimmy of Osborne's play *LookBack in Anger*. Jimmy also torments his wife Alison and has an affair with Helena. He is a savage and brutal person. Baa is also not a modern woman. So, she is not able to put up with the revelation that Dolly and Alka's mother was a 'keep'. She is, however, ignorant of the other part of the revelation that Dolly's mother herself was in the dark about the existence of first wife of her husband. But given the traditional mindset in most Indian families, it is unlikely that the knowledge of the second revelation would have brought about a change in her thinking.

Mahesh Dattani's women characters belonging to the present generation do not take to the modern thinking and ways of living sheepishly. Alka has the guts to question the authority of her husband and ask for an explanation for his disloyalty. She also rebukes her brother Praful for hiding from her the facts: "Our saint of a brother used to warn us against men like you. (Points to Jiten.) And what does he do? The saint gives sister to the sinner and disappears! (Makes a motion of wiping her hands.) Finished. Matter over. Or is it? The saint has another sister who is (slaps her own face) bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend! The sinner's brother turns out to be his best friend. Not much coincidence." (300). Indeed, "Dattani's play challenges society's stereotypical constitutions of male and female identity" (Dhar 92). We have seen it in Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* also, whose heroine evokes Bernard Shaw's heroine Raina of *The Arms and the Man*. (Batra)

The position of Kanhaiyya has been kept ambiguous. In all probability, this is the pseudonym given by Dolly and Alka to somebody with whom either of the two or both of them or even Nitin had sexual relations. He could be cook with whom Dolly and Alka were involved or the auto driver with whom Nitin was involved. There is no doubt about Nitin's sexual preference as he admits to it towards the end of the play while Alka is asleep under the influence of a liberal dose of liquor:

He tricked you too, didn't he? How can you still love your brother after what he did to you...? That's right. Don't answer. Just sleep. (Laughs.) You always were a heavy sleeper. Thank God. Those times when I used to spend the night at your place, I used to sleep on his cot. [...]. I loved him too. He ... was attractive. And he responded. Oh! But how ashamed he made me feel after!....He told me to get married ..How could I? And to whom? (315)

That leads one to the conclusion that the characters are leading unreal and inauthentic lives as Michael Walling points out:

For all its naturalism, the play is itself a performance, and one which makes a case for its own significance by highlighting the prevalence of performance a way of living in modern Indian (and indeed human) society. Dolly, talking to Lalitha about Daksha, is creating a fiction – writing and performing her own life-play, in which she performs the character of the contented, successful middle-class Indian wife. She has suppressed the reality of Daksha's disability and the violence of her birth under the fiction of the dancer-daughter who is away at school. [...]. Nitin performs the heterosexual husband – in denial of his sexual truth. (Multani 68).



However, the women are not simply to be laid or ignored. They are ready to fight back for the new set of values that demand acceptance by society in this postmodern age. Therefore, Alka, the worse sufferer of the two sisters takes from Dolly the role of the Rani of Jhansi. With an imaginary sword dangling from her waist, she dreams of cutting swathes of male heads like what the famous queen is said to have done during the First War of Indian Independence in 1857. The fighting spirit of his characters is intentionally underlined by Mahesh Dattani himself as can be deduced from his interview given to Lakshmi Subramanyan: "They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I focus on is the powerlessness of these people..." (Dhawan 45).

The story of Naina Devi, the singer whose cassette is played again and again in the house, is relevant in this very context. She was married into a royal family. She could have lived her life comfortably in royal grace. In due course of time, she would have been revered as the 'Rajmata' or Mother Queen. But she wanted to pursue her interest in music and sing thumris – something that only the 'tawaifs' or the whores did. Naturally, it raised eyebrows. "The queen wanted to sing love songs sung by whores! Why? Nobody knew. She'd seen a performance by a tawaif in her youth. The sound of the sarangi and ghungroos remained with her forever. She went ahead and sang!" (295).

Fortunately, she had an understanding husband who supported her despite the fact that at times she was mistaken for a tawaif! She carried on with singing thumris and now she is called the queen of thumri. So, she still retains the honorific of queen, maybe in the field of music rather than in politics. If we contrast the fate of the thumri queen with that of Alka who likes to dance, we realize the enormity of the problem. She has a husband who is docile and cannot face his brother even if he is right. Her mother-in-law has her own prejudices against Alka and Dolly because of the report that their mother was a keep. Perhaps, this also helped in endearing the thumris, which are generally sung by prostitutes, to the sisters as is borne out by Dolly's comment that her mother "tried to be a singer." (297) This way they felt they were staging their little rebellion against the established code in society.

Dolly is also a rebel though she is not able to hold her fort against her husband when Jiten rudely asks Lalitha to leave. She protests. Upon this, Jiten says that he has not asked Dolly herself to leave to which she retorts that he dare not throw her out. But Jiten challenges her on this count. "Want to bet?" he asks. This leads to recount of past complaints like Jiten's action in stopping Praful from paying visits to his sisters. But even after threatening to walk out on Jiten, Dolly withdraws: "You know I can't! You know very well I can't walk out on you! You know it, so why should I pretend you don't?" (309) She, however, shows her husband his place later when she refers to Jiten's torture of her which was responsible for the premature birth of a spastic child Daksha. Jiten is so frustrated by his guilt complex that he rushes out and vents out his frustration on the beggar woman outside whom he crushes under his car.

Lalitha, the other female character, is in a somewhat better position. She can choose to stay back even when the husband wants her to hurry out of the house. Her views regarding male attitude are clear from the following conversation centering round the Hindi poem about the heroic deeds of the Rani of Jhansi:

Alka: 'Khoobladimardaniwohto..

Dolly: Bravely fought the manly queen?

Lalitha: Silly, isn't it? I guess it sounds better in Hindi.

Dolly: Why manly?

Alka" Because she was brave.

Lalitha: I always laugh when I remember that poem. I guess it just means that she was brave. (296)

So, the quality of bravery need not be pre-fixed with the adjective 'manly' which would simply mean that men folk are always brave and women are only sometimes brave. Another socio-psychological obsession that needs to be put to rest! Men and women are expected to imbibe new values in life as SubirDhar points out, "Dattani's play challenges society's stereotypical constitutions of male and female identity. The locus of this awareness is cited in the phrase about the Rani of Jhansi: 'Bravely fought the manly queen.' The implication contained herein is that a woman has to be 'manly' – that is, conform to the construction of manliness as propagated by patriarchy – in order to be recognized as brave" (92-93). Much depends on how we assign values to different things, individuals or actions in society. Thus, the same critic talks of a "liberated" Lalitha: "A little more free in her relationship with her husband is Lalitha who is "liberated" enough to enjoy the 'not-so-occasional' drink. The point to be pondered here is whether we can call a woman 'liberated' simply because she has an occasional drink?

As to why the women of upper middle class take to the uncharted path and take booze and indulge in extra-marital sex secretly, Sangeeta Das says that their frustration drives them to experiment with what society denies to them: "Bravely Fought the Queen is a play which deals with women from rich families who enjoy recreating themselves with beautifying themselves and indulging in vigorous shopping sprees, parties, balls etc. Basically they are highly disappointed and distraught ladies who try to find solace in such activities. Alka and dolly are two such ladies who make untiring and useless effort to drown their sorrows in booze and sex." (Dhawan 114) It means that when one is dissatisfied with one's life, one can go against the social norms. It supports the view that moral principles are ideals by which people are expected to lead their life but when their expectations from life are not met, they lose faith in the principles which society holds in esteem.

### III. Conclusion

There always is a very small minority in any society that refuses to toe the line of the majority in any matter. If the moral principles are held to be sacrosanct, it simply means the majority has faith in them, but the scope for a different view is never totally eliminated. In this case, the root cause of frustration is revealed in inebriated condition of Alka and Nitin in turn. There is much merit in the observation that even behind the screen of civilized lifestyle, exploitation of women goes on without any restriction: "Dattani through his play, "Bravely Fought the Queen" presents the ways in which exploitation is now couched in terms of culture and refinement." (Nagpal 78) In this context, the position of Baa becomes interesting and significant. Although a woman, her role in torturing her daughter-in-law because her mother was a 'keep', is no less condemnable. Nagpal comments: "Dattani presents patriarchy in its varied manifestations as he shows the insecure Baa taking over the reigns of the family. She exercises patriarchal control over the affairs of the family. She is the legal inheritor of the family property. From having been disinherited earlier, as it was her husband who was in control, she has gain regained control over her life. But hits time it is with a difference. Baa is not merely a woman; she is a patriarch in the guise of a woman. She has become a repository of all the male values in the family. This is why she urges Jiten to bet up Dolly even though she is pregnant" (89-90). Clearly, her role is negative and destructive and cannot be defended in a society which is fiddling with new morality. The play is a strong disapproval of the old value system which is still harboured by our society leading to many socio-psychological biases which present a hurdle in the true modernization of society. It is a wake-up call to recognize reality and not to sweep under the carpet the lifestyle, practices and norms of the young generation even as it does suggest examination of all these in a truly intellectual manner by the young generation.

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