

ROLE OF WOMEN IN MAHESH DATTANI PLAYS

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Abstract

The plays of Mahesh Dattani are well known for their freshness, vigor and radical approach towards analysis and resolution of Indian social problems. As he himself admits in one of his interviews, his purpose as a dramatist is to shock and startle his audience from their sense of complacency that all is well with the world and there is nothing to worry about. He is a reformer and a crusader for social justice using the plays to promote higher social awareness among his audience. One specialty of Dattani is that he not only chooses uncommon and unusual themes for dramatic presentation but also never repeats his themes twice, vindicating his enormous creative potential and catholicity of outlook on society. More than anything else, it is the condition and status of Indian women from girlhood to ripe old age that draws the special attention of Dattani. In almost every drama he includes one vital woman character, who is vigorous in spirit and individualistic in outlook to project that in a dominantly patriarchal society where women are permanently relegated to second class citizen status, women are not passive playthings in the hands of men but resist and question whenever their individuality is being invaded or suppressed. They suffer but do not surrender it is in the sufferance that their strength lies. On the other hand, they are smart, resourceful, and quick to adapt and respond to any exigency that may arise. It is this new facet of Indian women, fighting the ethos of oppression and subordination that Dattani highlights in his plays. In almost all the plays women indicate their spirit of individuality. This paper presents Dattani's perception of Indian women as creatures of spirit whom centuries of indoctrination did not entirely succeed in snuffing out the spirit of questioning again and again till their rights and freedom are restored.

Key Words: freedom, individuality, male, norms, patriarchy, rights, society, spirit, women

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most leading contemporary playwrights in Indian writing in English. Dattani creates a real world Indian society, infamous for bringing atrocities against its female members and also introduce a dream world at the end of the play when Tara and Dan are seen hugging each other in some other place. A perfect combination of the real world and the dreamworld in Tara helps the dramatist pave a new way for projecting his views on gender discrimination. A patriarchal society is perfectly presented in Tara where the important family decisions are taken by its male members. In a patriarchal society, a woman's identity is defined by others in term of her relationship with man. Patel, the representative of patriarchal

authority in the play, clearly differentiates the role of his son from that of his daughter. Certain gendered roles are accepted in the society as natural and hardly does anyone bother to go beyond those accepted norms. This proposed paper aims at how women are dominated and looked down upon by the patriarchal society.

In the very first debutant play, *Where There is a Will* that he wrote Dattani produced a brilliant woman character 'Kiran Jhaveri', who is smart, clever, and adaptive. She is the mistress of an industrialist Hasmukh Mehta who is impressed by her competence and intelligence and entrusts her as a director to his entire properties in his will, as he does not trust his daughter-in-law and has a poor opinion of his wife and son. Kiran proves to be not only efficient, but also honest and wins the love and goodwill of the family by her integrity and openness. She is the dramatist's idea of a modern, educated Indian woman who can hold her own in any company, and has the patience and mental stamina of traditional Indian women, who can combine the virtues of both Indian family and western society. He proves that, given an opportunity, Indian women are in no way inferior to men, and it is an only society with its male-dominated social order that deprived women of their rightful share in society, confining them to their homes and crippling their abilities. Kiran is everything that modern society expects its member to be educated, smart, intelligent, honest, and unprejudiced and having the strength to take on the ebb and tides of life with equal poise. She is the ideal woman of Dattani.

In the second play *Dance Like a Man* Dattani produces a complex woman personality 'Ratna', who is smart enough to achieve what she wants in life, in spite of heavy odds against her by the opposition of her father-in-law who is of the firm opinion that dancing is a degraded form of occupation meant only for *devadasis*. He objects to her practising dancing and more so his son participating in and practising dancing. He fears that it is unmanly activity and not suited to a young man coming from a prestigious family. After much argument and debate, he agrees to allow his daughter-in-law, to practise dancing, provided she helps him to make a man out of his son. Towards the end of the play, Ratna succeeds in achieving what she wants through careful planning and out-witting both her husband and father-in-law though without committing any harm to the family. Ratna is a dynamic and vibrant character who highlights the capacity of women for independent thinking and capacity for negotiation through all obstacles of life.

In the next play, *Bravely Fought the Queen* Dattani outlines the independent spirit of women and their refusal to surrender to the force of circumstances. When things do not go smoothly and comfortably, especially for women, a family frame becomes a trap suffocating their individuality and strangling their identity. The dramatist portrays such a situation in the family when Dolly the housewife is harassed and persecuted by both husband and mother-in-law for no fault of her own but has to bear the brunt of anger of the misdeeds of her father. As women in family circuits are easy targets for men to ventilate their anger and frustration, Dattani sympathises and actively supports the cause of family women who are quite vulnerable and defenceless against the hegemony of men, Dolly, in the play, fights to the end to defend her individuality and independence of mind and suffers silently for the crassness of her husband. She fights bravely her persecution though she knows that she is on the losing side as society is in favour of men. The play is quite popular with the audience for the exposition of the family politics and how women are permanently placed on the margins of power to be at the beck and call of men.

The Sahitya academy winner, *Final Solutions* (1993) is a play that deals with a

perennial unresolved problem of post independent India, the fracture between Hindus and Muslims. No leader or movement was able to heal the split as no final solution has been discovered yet, but which reveals the role that can be played by women in the healing process. Dattani highlights that women are more flexible in the attitude and mentality and are amenable to reason but due to the traumatic events of partition their minds were permanently scarred for one generation. Even though the central theme is not connected to the issue of women, the dramatist provides more space for women to play their role in bringing the society back to normality. The play introduces the attitudes of three generations of women Hardika, Rama, and Smita and how generational change is brought about and also the role of education in bringing about incremental changes.

Dattani's career as a dramatist with social concern reached a pinnacle with staging his play *Tara* which is a patent highlighting of the condition of Indian girls as second-class citizens and less desirable human beings. The play deals with Siamese twins with opposite gender with three legs between them. The blood supply to the third leg goes from the girl's body but due to the prejudice against the girls and preference to boys, the third was allotted to boy's body which eventually dies due to lack of blood supply. There cannot be a more blatant discrimination against girls other than denying and depriving an organ given by nature due to hardbound prejudice of society. The play sent shock waves into the readers, researchers, and audience as it highlights the clear gender divide in Indian society and how parents exhibit clear preference to boys at the expense of girls well-being. The protest of the dramatist is that women are the undeserving victims of male hegemony which has become encrusted into the Indian value system. By this shocking play, Dattani was able to underscore how biased and skewed the gender value system is and how it is time to restore healthy gender balance if society is to progress.

In another of his plays, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani deftly problematizes the components of the identity of an educated woman in a patriarchal set-up. Though the play mainly focuses on the low status of the transgendered in society, it also provides glimpses into human relationships in the institution of marriage and gives thought-provoking moments to the readers regarding the traditional sanctity of marriage by laying bare the fault-lines in marital bonding.

It is the high position of her husband that places Uma higher in the social hierarchy more than her identity as an educated woman. It is Suresh's position of authority as Superintendent of Police that helps Uma to carry out her investigations in jail. The fact that Suresh remains firmly rooted in patriarchal tradition is evident when he enjoys his rights as a man with his wife in many ways. He does not fully understand and recognize the independent identity of his wife as an educated woman. That is why, he does not appreciate Uma's humanistic approach to the eunuchs. His superior position is reinforced by the control he exercises over finances of the house. Uma cannot use his money to help Anarkali. Her remark that "My husband won't let me" (p. 14) makes the situation amply clear.

However, a close scrutiny of Suresh's personality reveals that he is a weak character, who becomes a party to the crimes of rich and powerful politicians, though inside the house, he controls everything. He even tries to dissuade his wife from doing her research on hijras and from entering their secret lives. Uma is fully conscious of her social roles and responsibilities as a woman in patriarchal set up. She is determined to finish her investigation even if there is a danger involved: "...if my family throws me out..." (p. 29). Her remark

reveals her insecurities and limitations.

The playwright subtly hints at Suresh's inadequacy as a man capable of fulfilling his reproductive role. That is why, he is not ready to go to the doctor for sperm count in spite of Uma's requests. The dilemma of modern woman is depicted through Uma's character. Though she is an educated woman with great potential, her role in society is only seen as a wife, an object of sexual pleasure. Her predicament is that she is childless, but the husband does not own the stigma of his own weakness responsible for his wife's barrenness.

Miruna George comments rightly that Uma's role in a patriarchal society "...as a wife has nothing to offer, except to be fit for motherhood, a social appendage, and an object of sexual pleasure. As a wife, loyalty, obedience, and motherhood are the qualities expected of her."⁸ Yet Uma proves the fact that she values her own inner self, independent of the imposed social roles. She works hard to prove Anarkali's innocence and becomes an agent of positive change in society by expressing her emotional bond with the transsexuals. She even bypasses her husband in her concern for establishing justice. This emphasizes the fact that women characters of Dattani dare to think independently of their male counterparts.

The accepted norms created by the patriarchal society some years back, and still the norms rule women as they are subordinate to men. And the accepted norms says that women have to do all the odd jobs at home such as sewing, cooking etc. and the man must come out of home to be engaged in other works. Tara taunts this age old concept Roopa enters the room and asks if she disturbs them. Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave. (CP 328). Here the obvious reference to the Stone Age and Tara wants to say that man still follows the norms of the Stone Age when women were usually staying inside the caves rearing children and the men remained busy in hunting outside. Though the world has advanced in so many ways, people still cling to the myths of active male and the passive female this is one of the basics and they long for thirst and emancipation from the patriarchal society.

Though Tara is no less intelligent than Chandan, Patel thinks only about Chandan's career, when Chandan says that he will not go to college without Tara and that if Tara has to lose one year for kidney transplant, he too will lose one year, Patel is really unhappy. He repeatedly says that he has some future plans for Chandan, but he hardly shows any interests in Tara's future, here Dattani portrays and imports the patriarchal society whereas nobody in the families of Indian society will bother about the welfare of the girls as Dattani reflects through Tara's character in Tara. Though both of them are crippled, Tara's position is precarious. In Bharathi's comment on Tara, her helpless condition becomes clear. Bharathi says to Chandan, the world will tolerate you. The world will accept you- but not her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty. So mother alone can understand the sufferings of her daughter then what about her father! (349) and in each and every instinct of life there will be a conflict between man and woman. So definitely there will be a clause between them and it is never going to end. Bharathi's father, who gave all his money to Chandan after his death, did not bother to think about his crippled grand daughter who badly needed some financial help for survival. What Bharathi does not utter is that despite her intelligence and optimism, Tara has been rejected by the male community because of her physical deformity.

In Tennessee William's *Glass Menagerie*, set in America in 1930s, one hears almost a similar anguished voice of a mother for her crippled daughter. The mother wants her daughter

Laura to be smart and graceful forgetting her physical defects so that she may marry a gentleman and get settled. She tells her daughter, “why, you are not crippled, you just have a little defect hardly noticeable, even! When people have slight disadvantages like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it- develop charm and vivacity that is all you have to do!” (247) The mother’s concern for her crippled daughter remains the same in any patriarchal society, be it America of the 30s or India of the 90s. The girls are viewed as consumer goods and defective goods are rejected altogether.

If Tara were like any crippled girl (like Laura in *Glass Menagerie*), her story would be a pathetic one, drawing sympathy from others. But Tara’s case is tragic as it is revealed to her that there was a conspiracy behind her deformity and that her mother whom she has loved most and who has so long expressed her concern for her daughter, contributed to that conspiracy. It is indeed a tragic revelation that the Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, possessed three legs and that the third leg, which was naturally related to Tara’s organs, was transplanted on Chanda’s body at the time of operation but his body could not accept the leg, which had a better chance of survival with Tara. Tara was denied the chance of having both natural legs only because she was a girl and her guardians wanted to give the boy a chance instead, at the cost of being unethical. The preference for the male child is so common in the society that the surgeon could be easily managed to do the wrong to the girl child. The conspiracy was the matter plan of Bharathi’s father, who being rich and influential in the society, badly needed an heir and as he was without son, his grandson was the next preference and he tried his best to see his heir standing on two natural legs. The surgeon was bribed for doing the unethical job and since the medical science has not yet been able to have a total control over nature, the operation was unsuccessful and both the twins had to depend on artificial leg. Surprisingly, Bharathi agreed to the proposal of her father and Patel too, did not protest. Bharathi was tortured by a sense of sin child should come forward to sacrifice her leg for her brother willingly as sacrifice is in the very nature of women. In the book *The Myth Women’s Masochism* Paula Kaplan discusses how the myth that “women enjoy their sufferings” becomes “responsible for profound and far reaching emotional and physical harm to girls.”

Conclusion

Through the depiction of women characters, who refuse to be eternally in bondage to dead relationships, the playwright redefines the idea of marital morality, implicitly demanding the realignment of the parameters on which traditional marriage functions. His women characters are projected as rebels against established values of male-dominated orthodox society. The changing image of wives, from the suffering women to the asserting ones, redefining selves and defying traditional mores are incisively depicted in his plays.

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