

# Gender and Marginality in Mahesh Dattani's Select Dramas.

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## Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, a contemporary playwright who received an honourable Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998. He had started his carrier as an advertising copywriter and later he shifted towards drama. It was evident that the successful theatre group PLAYPEN was formed by him in 1984, and he directed many plays from classical Greek drama to contemporary plays. Almost in his plays, he deals with suppressed and exploited people's lives. Dattani portrayed the marginalised, underprivileged and subaltern people who are treated cruelly and denied even the basic rights by the society. He highlights their problems, difficulties and questions the society throughout his plays.

Key words: Gender, marginalised, subaltern, underprivileged

Mahesh Dattani is a worthy successor of Girish Karnad and he dealt various themes in his plays such as sexuality, gender discrimination, child sexual abuse and the cruel treatment given to the HIV Positive people by the society. Dattani is a successor of Girish Karnad but unlike Karnad he has not taken myths in his plays. M.K. Naik rightly said,

“Karnad's favourite subjects are Mythology and History whereas Dattani crafted his characters from real society, and mostly concentrated with middle class people, often controversial themes” (Perspectives on Indian Fiction in English).

Dealing such themes Dattani often encourages the upcoming playwrights. In India talking about feminism is acceptable whereas concerning with gay issues or housewives' extra marital affairs are forbidden. Those themes are not Indian, and they are against our cultural beliefs. Once he mentioned in an interview that Indian culture has both merits and demerits equally, so it is needless to mention that the upcoming writers should deal these challenging issues honestly to give their worthy contribution to the world.

Dattani is a successful playwright as well as a celebrated director, the reason behind his success is an exploration of themes. He always perceives the pulse of the audience and deals with them effortlessly.

The theme of this play 'Tara' revolves around the physical and emotional depart of two conjoined twins Tara and Chandan. The twins had three legs, and it was essential to do a surgery to separate them. The mother Bharathi played a crucial role with the help of maternal grandfather and they both wanted to favour the son Chandan rather than the daughter Tara. As Kate Millet rightly states, “Patriarchy's chief institution is the family”. However, Chandan's body did not accept the leg after the surgery as it was best suited for Tara.

“whatever the ‘real’ differences between the sexes may be, we are not likely to know them until the sexes are treated differently, that is alike” (Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*)

Eventually, they both had one artificial leg, and later due to many physical ailments, Tara died soon. After the death of Tara, soon Chandan migrated to London with his uncle and changed his name as Dan. Both Tara and Chandan knew the details of the surgery, and Tara was clearly understood the patriarchal society so she did not have any complaints about the operation and struggled throughout her life and died.

“It is interesting that many women do not recognize themselves as discriminated against; no better proof could be found of the totality of their conditioning” (Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*)

Dan was deeply mourning for her twin sister Tara, and her loss was irreparable to him, soon he realized that the life was unpleasant and incomplete without his sister so he started writing his autobiography to bring back the memories of his sister. Dattani narrated the cruelty done to the girl babies by Gujaratis through a character named Roopa in this play. The female babies were drowned in milk and declared death due to choking by the Gujarati society. The portrayal of Tara’s character was not an individual character, and it emerged as an archetype of the Indian girl children. Incidentally, this icon helped the readers to understand how the girl babies were being cruelly treated by the patriarchal society. The very thought was expressed by one of his characters in this play,

“It’s all right while she is young. It’s all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate 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! Oh God!” (pp 348-49).

Dattani concentrated the underprivileged woman in this play. The protagonist of the play Hashmukh Mehta, who was a rich successful businessman. He was not happy about his son Ajit who was spoiled by her mother Sonal and his wife Preeti. Due to many health issues Hashmukh died early and on surprise of his family he had created a trust and appointed his mistress Kiran as a trustee. Kiran’s father was a drunkard and because of his nature her mom had suffered a lot and the same thing repeated in her life too.

“On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in her strength, not to escape herself to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself – on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger” (Simone de Beavoir, *The Second Sex*).

Kiran was shrewd and she had got Hashmukh Mehta’s relationship and wisely advised him in business and become the trustee of his wealth after his death. Kiran shared her bitter experiences with Sonal and Preeti.

“I learnt my lessons by being so close to life. I learnt my lesson from watching my mother tolerating my father when he came home every day with bottles of run wrapped in newspapers. As I watched him beating her up and calling her names! I learnt what life was when my mother away from my

father, so that in return he would remain silent for those three hours when he comes home, and before he fell asleep on the dining table, too drunk to harm us anymore. I served him those drinks, waiting for that moment when he would become unconscious and I would say a prayer....Thank God he was too drunk to impose himself on us! Yes Mrs. Mehta. My father, your husband – they were weak men with false strength. (p.508).

The word ‘Will’ in this title has double meaning, the physical legal document and the mental strength to stand on one’s own feet of Kiran, Sonal and Preeti.

The two plays depicted women in different circumstances. The patriarchal society defeated the woman in the play ‘Tara’ whereas the woman had utilized the circumstances and fought against the exploitation and injustices in ‘Where There is a Will’.

For the first time in Indian drama a writer boldly dealt themes like gay love and partnership, trust and betrayal. In this drama, ‘On a Muggy Night in Mumbai’, the protagonist Kamalesh had a gay relationship with a guy named Prakash, and Kamalesh was betrayed by Prakash so moved to Bangalore. Kamalesh and Prakash felt ashamed of their relationship because the society rejected their relationship.

“In itself, homosexuality is as limiting as heterosexuality: the ideal should be to be capable of loving a woman or a man; either, a human being, without feeling fear, restraint or obligation”.

(Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*)

Later Kamalesh consulted a psychiatrist and he was advised to get rid of gay relationship, and the deep rooted heterosexual Indian society did not approve the homosexual relationship. To quote Kamalesh,

I knew I needed medication. I chose the psychiatrist out of the Yellow Pages. He pretended to understand. Until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while, I believed him. Because the medication helped me cope with my depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself (p.69).

In the same play, Dattani narrated a difficult and humiliated life of a divorcee, a character named Kiran and happened to be the Kamalesh’s sister defended herself like,

Being divorced doesn’t help. Everyone seems to know all the details. Or think they do. At that party, I felt their stares, as if they were saying, “That’s Kiran. The one whose husband dumped her.’ Kamalesh, take my advice. Don’t let people know about you. You will spend your whole life defending yourself. If I had the choice, I would stay invisible too (p.91).

Dattani discussed clearly and expressed awful lives of divorcees and homosexual people in Indian society as they were not prepared to accept those people as such. Through Kiran’s voice Dattani suggested that the true relationship will have to be hidden from the peering eyes of society.

Dattani's another controversial drama, 'Seven Steps Around the Fire', he explored the lives of another subaltern group of people who were always ill-treated and humiliated by the society. Dattani depicted the marriage between a normal man and a eunuch. The normal man named Subbramanyan in short Subbu was a son of a minister and his wife Kamala was a eunuch. Kamala was murdered and the charges were falsely put on another eunuch, Anarkali. Through a character, Uma, Dattani investigated the lives and origin of eunuchs. Uma had indicated eunuch a 'she' and corrected herself to address a eunuch as 'it', because they do not have gender identity. Uma mentioned them as "invisible minority" (p.21) and also stated that "they only come out in groups and make their presence felt by their peculiar hand clap" (p.22). She claimed that the eunuchs found themselves insecure and they tried to register their identity through such peculiar hand claps. The eunuchs were conscious of their social ostracization.

Dattani dealt the theme of homosexuality and the title 'Bravely Fought the Queen' aptly described the theme. He beautifully portrayed the feminine characters and their inner strength as suggested by the title of the play. The three ladies (major characters) suffered mentally and physically due to irresponsible behaviour of their respective husbands.

"The curse which lies upon marriage is that too often the individuals are joined in their weakness rather than in their strength, each asking the other instead of finding pleasure in giving" (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*)

Even a fourteen-year-old girl also a victim of male domination and struggled a lot in her life. She was affected when she was in her mother's womb, due to that cruelty she arrived into the world as a premature child to lead a physically challenged life forever. All these four women characters struggled and fought against the odds of life. So the title 'Bravely fought the Queen' suggested their mental strength. Dattani bravely portrayed these characters struggle in this male patriarchal society. In an emotional outburst through a character named Dolly readers come to know how Daksha, a fourteen-year-old girl became a disabled child,

And you hit me! Jitu, you beat me up! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up!....At the hospital you told them I fell from the stairs! Daksha was born – two months premature. With the cord around her neck! I saw her and knew her! I knew instantly! Your mother loved her more than was natural! Praful loved her. More than was natural. You love her. You love her more than Baa or Praful! Because you felt the most guilt! (pp.311-312).

Dattani's dialogues and characterisation brought out the patriarchal society. The underlying irony and pathos of human predicament also beautifully brought out by him.

These plays actually dealt psychological aspects and certain specific behavioural patterns of the underprivileged people. They eventually search for identity, security and struggle to get the approval of society and they want to be true to their identities. All the characters understand that the Indian society needs time to accept them as they are and it is not yet prepared to accept them. The dramatist knew that the themes which he has opted definitely become controversial issues still he dealt such themes very boldly and keep the readers

and audience to ponder over such themes. Dattani's plays are staged across countries and everywhere those themes are getting universal appeal. Once he said in an interview, "I see myself as a craftsman not as a writer. To me being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating with this dynamic medium" (2001).

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