



## **The Concept of Gender in Contemporary Indian Theatre in English: A Study into the Plays of Mahesh Dattani**

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### ***Abstract***

*'Gender', today, is not seen as a creation of different properties of physical bodies but is a creation of social beliefs, behavior and practices. The concepts of 'Gender' and 'sex' are among Feminism's most central debates, yet there is no consensus on how these concepts can be defined or how to theorize their inter-relationship. The term 'Gender discrimination' can be defined as person of either gender is treated unfairly within the society on the basis of his/her gender. The present study, however, would specifically focus on 'female' gender as it is represented in Mahesh Dattani's plays.*

*Indian society has always been male dominated and masculine-oriented one. One always finds men to be at the zenith of power and domination, while the women remain 'marginalized' and always, with a handful of exceptions, at the background. The male-child in the family is supposed and believed to be the 'symbol' of 'prosperity' which is always in tune with the tradition of male-domination in India. It is supposed that the male-child of the family plays the role of 'protector', 'preserver' and 'provider'. Even today, this patriarchal code denies accepting any deviation on the part of the male-child.*

**Key Words :** *Gender Discrimination, Indian Theatre in English, Marginalization, Concept of Self/Other*

### **Contemporary Indian Theatre in English : An Overview**

Contemporary Indian Theatre in English is subtly experimental and extraordinarily innovative as far as its thematic and technical qualities are interpreted in the light of the World Theatre. Moreover, it does have its qualities pressingly rooted in the contemporary socio-cultural perception. It is deeply concerned with it and further it has laid the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the history of World Theatre by focusing on history, myth, legend, religion and folklore with context to contemporary socio-political issues.

Modern Theatre hoped that by making serious interpretations of life, it could restore drama to position of importance in theatre and literature. This kind of drama could receive attention and acceptance gradually, opening hostility from critics, moralists and the general spectacle as in such drama human problems were being balanced, weighted and judged.

A cumulative theatrical tradition evolved by Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sirkar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan and Girish Kirnadh prepared the background of contemporary Indian Theatre in English by imaginatively treating the contemporary themes. The contemporary Indian English Drama sought to explore and interpret India significantly in its various aspects - social, political, economic, historical and cultural. They have started to focalize on the contemporary issues, problems and challenges that prevail in the contemporary Indian society. Motivated and inspired by the political and social questions arising from the changed historical situation they began to study the relationship of man and his surroundings in a new and more realistic manner. This realization on the part of the Indian English playwrights resulted in the creation of a socially purposeful literature remarkable for its intellectual maturity and artistic/aesthetic vision all fused into an organic whole.

### **Representation of Women in Dattani's Plays : An Overview**

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Indian society has always been male dominated and masculine-oriented one. One always finds men to be at the zenith of power and domination, while the women remain 'marginalized' and always, with a handful of exceptions, at the background. The male-child in the family is supposed and believed to be the 'symbol' of 'prosperity' which is always in tune with the tradition of male-domination in India. It is supposed that the male-child of the family plays the role of 'protector', 'preserver' and 'provider'. Even today, this patriarchal code denies accepting any deviation on the part of the male-child.

The women characters portrayed in Dattani's plays are subject of patriarchal discourse rooted deeply in their psyche and persona that they fail to raise voice against them. Differences between men and women arrive from pre-existing social norms and perceptions. Dattani brings out the roots of gender discrimination either by making the woman the destroyer of the other woman's life, as in *Tara* or by oppressing them by strict adherence to patriarchal code of conduct, as in *Where There's a Will*.

Writers like Dattani try to uncover the repressive forces behind the construction of the notion of gender by families, society, cultural practices, literature and art. His characters represent specifically the marginalized women whose struggle for some kind of freedom that could

lead them to define their 'self-hood' and happiness under the oppressive weight of tradition, culture, and repressed desire. The plays of Dattani deal with the narratives of various families. *Where There's a Will, Bravely Fought the Queen, Dance Like a Man, Tara* are some of his plays in which the painful narratives of various families are represented as the bizarre reality of women in their homes.

Dattani is rightly considered to be the spokesperson of the unprivileged section of our society. He has examined and analyzed the problems of women, children, eunuchs and minorities in his plays. His works offers a fine study from socio-psychological dimensions. He presents socio-political realities of our time. He has redefined the tradition of Indian Theatre in English with his brilliant and innovative art and masterful craft.

### **Reading 'WHERE THERE'S A WILL'**

The play *Where There's A Will* has many trademark attributes of Dattani's plays. Like his other plays, the play *Where There's A Will* has Gujarati milieu and successful runs on the stage. The play presents how women in their own homes are 'marginalized'. Though the kitchen or home is described as the 'space' of women (or self-identity of female-persona), such 'space' is also discoordinated and overshadowed by masculine presence. Instead, 'women' are pushed on the margins of invisibility (the absence of existential presence). The play depicts how women are subjugated and suppressed by their male counterparts in patriarchal social setup.

Sonal Mehta is the most tragi-comic character in the play. She lacks self-confidence, allowing 'others' to dominate her own life. In the play she is constantly dependent on her sister Minal in every matter that concerns her life. This is probably the primary reason for her tragedy and moreover she is blamed by every other participant of the play on one or the other reasons. After the arrival of Kiran in her house, her condition becomes more pathetic in the sense that now she has to depend upon the mistress of her own husband, whose name shapes her existential identity in the socio-cultural domain. However, she finds a good friend in her soon. Hasmukh Mehta, Sonal's husband, has no respect and love for her and she is to him good for nothing. In fact, she is an 'obedient' wife, but what Hasmukh expects from a wife is something which is absolutely disgusting. At one point he says,

*...then I should be a very happy man. I've got a loving wife who has been faithful to me like any dog would be.*

His words are the ample evidence on the fact that Hasmukh's notion of faithful wife is as good as a faithful dog that acts as per provided training without using her own discretion. At heart, Sonal is innocent and ignorant woman who does not know about his extra-marital affair and continues to be a devoted and descent wife, but her husband is perverted and a rude creature, who cannot but think beyond his own self.

Hasmukh criticizes his wife by calling her 'dry' and 'good for nothing'. To Hasmukh, the only person who possesses guts, the shrewdness and proper spirit, is Kiran Jhaveri, who is



quite commanding and courting as well as daring and diplomatic. Kiran Jhaveri is a very well preserved woman who looks 'anywhere between thirty and forty years'. Her husband was a drunkard, especially fond of imported whisky. He was suspended from the job for this malpractice. Sacked from the job, he cannot afford buying the whisky so he allows his wife meeting and seeing Hasmukh. Hasmukh has all praise for her. She has fine body to cater his physical desires and a brilliant mind to run his business in an effective manner. No one knows about their affair until he dies. After his death the reality comes out, that Kiran has succeeded his accolades. All others have lost his sympathy and confidence.

The dramatist mainly reflects on the issues of gender discrimination and evil of patriarchy. Hasmukh blames his wife for his own extra marital relationship. It seems that initially he succeeds in his intentions. Gradually, he realizes that his desire to control over his death is collapsing slowly. The play focuses on the emptiness and uselessness of strict adherence to patriarchal code.

Modern education has made women aware of their rights and duties. Now they are in the position to observe their deeds, decision and position very minutely with concern to the patriarchal society. So if required they contend with patriarchal unjust authority for their right and equalities. In the play Kiran and Preeti are very good examples of it. No doubt they are always not moving on in right direction but can be satisfied with their decision power and actions they are taking on even though they represent modern women's materialistic approach. They are shrewd, materialistic, scheming and cunning. The play even shows that there is no significant improvement in the plight of the women as though there are spread of education and progress of mankind in almost all the human sectors. It seems that male-pride or male-ego is the root cause of the present plight of the women and can be done through imparting proper education and employment. The play depicts that education and economic empowerment have failed to improve the quality of women's lives in our society. This is quite explicit through the conversation between Kiran and Sonal. Kiran is well-educated and employed in the office of Hasmukh Mehta. Sonal is not fortunate enough to have proper access to education. So she considers Kiran a fortunate lady. This is how Kiran falsifies Sonal's notion by narrating her unhappy past. They converse,

*Sonal: You are so lucky. You are educated, so you know all this.*

*Kiran: Wrong. I learnt lessons from being so close to life. I learnt my lessons from watching my mother tolerating my father when he came home every day with bottles of rum wrapped in newspapers...*

It is quite identical that women are suffering on account of no fault of their own. Nor are they exclusively suffering due to lack of education and employment; rather, they are the victims of man's vain pride and false ego. They strive to avoid the male-dominance.

Dattani is considered as the spokesperson of the marginalized people. His plays display his deep concern for 'gendered subaltern' i.e. the marginalization of women. Firstly, there is a woman who suffers throughout her life : Sonal Mehta has been victimized and exploited by

the patriarchal social systems; she is a silent sufferer. Secondly, they are women who condemn with patriarchal unjust authority for their rights and equities : Kiran Jhaveri and Preeti are bold and assertive; they don't let patriarchal authority to rule over their lives; Kiran is very sharp and open minded; She could be successful in observing Hasmukh's mind very minutely. Through her experience with him, she tells Sonal,

*He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He wanted me to run his life. ...He saw in me a woman who could father him! Men really never grow up.*

Thus Kiran has maintained her relation with Hasmukh only to satisfy her need. She has no sentimental attachment with her. It shows her self-centeredness which is also one of the characteristics of Modern woman.

Dattani reflects on the issue of gender roles and their miserable plights. Even, in modern times woman are treated as 'sex-objects' and are 'exploited' physically and psychologically. Feminine 'self' has not been restored yet. The wrath and anguish of the dramatist can be perceived through the following utterances of Kiran :

*Kiran: Isn't it strange how repetitive life is ? My brothers. They have turned out to be like their father, going home with bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers. Beating up their wives. And I-I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard and I listened to his swearing and I too have learnt to suffer silently.*

The play ends with Sonal's assertion of confidence in Kiran denoting the newly developed bondage of mutual understanding and trust between the wife and the mistress. Both of them join hands to eradicate the evil of male dominance and their lustful intentions. They are endowed with the ability to assess and subsequently shacking off the unjust shackle of patriarchy.

### **Reading 'TARA'**

*Tara* is one of the most masterfully crafted and narrated plays of contemporary Indian Theatre in English. This play takes on the invisible issues of Indian society. *Tara* centres on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the preference of their mother and grandfather towards the male (Chandan) over the girl (Tara). Tara can be seen as a feisty girl who is not given the opportunities given to her brother. Chandan escapes to London, changes his name as Dan and attempts to repress the guilt he feels over his sister's death.

There is a difference between sex and gender. Sex is a biological term, where as gender is a term that has been attributed the socio-cultural interpretation of the 'unprivilege'. Dattani has depicted the aspects of the gender discrimination in this play through representation of the character of Tara. Right from the beginning the spectacle or reader can see this discrimination

between male-child and female-child. For instance, in one of the scenes, it can be observed where Bharati has finished her “puja” and Mr. Patel in getting ready to go to “work”. These are the stereotypical gender roles in the existing Indian society. Another such instance would be evidential to this argument. The reader can observe such perspective when Tara explains to Roopa about the conversation between father and son, she says that,

*The men in the house deciding on whether they were going to hunting while the women looked after the cares.”*

This example again shows how the Indian mentality perceives the role of a man and a woman in a specific social domain. It perceives man’s role as a ‘provider’ and a woman’s role as a ‘providee’. This is how Mahesh Dattani represents the status of women in contemporary society as evident in the mentioned quote. There is another example in which we can see this gender perspective of male dominance. When Mr.Patel says to Chandan,

*I was just thinking...it may be a good idea for you to come to the office with me.*

These words of Mr. Patel represent the male dominance in and within the Indian society. Mr. Patel insists Chandan to join the office, and there is not a single instance when Tara is encouraged to step out of her misery and create her on ‘existential space’. When Chandan says that both would like to come to the office, at that time, Mr.Patel denies since he believes that joining office is good for Chandan and *not* for Tara. For Tara, the only good thing is to stay back home and help her mother. These are the parameters to which a male-child and a female-child has to adhere.

Dattani establishes that mother and daughter relationship is ultimately subordinated to the directives of patriarchy. It makes obvious that women’s lives are organized and manipulated by the patriarchy in all ages, all cultures and all countries by establishing values, roles, gender perception and prescribe unequal means to the ‘status/identity of women’.

The play revolves around the theme of favoring the boy and frowning upon the girl with exceptional originality of conception. Mahesh Dattani, in one of his interviews, says :

*I see ‘Tara’ as a play about the male self and the female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst.*

Gender hierarchisation comes in the way of science. Bharati and her politically powerful father, without any consent of Mr. Patel, decide to give the third leg to Chandan. The doctor is persuaded by giving some acres of land in Bangalore by Bharati’s politically influential father. As Patel explains,

*A scan showed that a major part of blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl.*



The leg is provided to Chandan with which he could survive only for few years, while with it Tara would have survived for a long time. It does not mean that Mr. Patel is devoid of fault. He is also a party to gender discrimination, since he too does not take sincere efforts to think seriously about Tara's future.

There is an unprecedented development in the field of science and technology. It has blessed mankind with speed, pleasure and perfection. If we look at the other side of coin, we shall come to know that it is also used to cause suffering and pain in lives of many people. When such machines come in the hands of selfish and materialistically driven people like Dr. Thakkar, who operates the machine for his subjective motives and desires, it could definitely cause serious unbalance to the natural laws of existence. The play *Tara* shows us how medical profession and technologically enhanced equipments are used to subjugate the woman.

Tara's maternal grandfather has also cheated her. He was in politics and came very close to becoming the Chief Minister. Dattani cleverly tears off the mask from the faces of Indian politicians. On the one side they promise for women security, education for girls and prevention of female infanticide and they are being partial enough in their own family on the other side.

*Patel: He(Grandfather) left you a lot of money.*  
*Chandan: And Tara?*  
*Patel: Nothing*  
*Chandan: Why?*  
*Patel: It was his money. He could do whatever he wished to with it.*

Patel's attitude has also been negative. He blames his wife and father-in-law for the damage done. The fact that male is always given a greater chance is obvious from Patel's planning for Chandan's education and future prospects. Tara is the victim of this collective social system. Her father is not much different from his wife, though Bharati is guilty of a more serious crime against Tara. He continuously and persistently favors Chandan when it comes to giving him higher education abroad.

*Patel: You are turning them against the whole world.*  
*Bharati: I am doing that?*  
*Patel: Yes! look at the way you treat Tara. As if she is made of glass. You coddle her, you pet her, you'd spoil her. She is grown up feeling that she doesn't need anyone but you.!*  
*Bharati: What do you want me to do?...*  
*Patel: Let go. Just let go. And let me handle them.*

Bharati is a pathetic victim of patriarchy. She exceptionally cares for Tara to overcome her own guilt. Patel makes Bharati responsible for everything and gets an escape from his responsibilities. He seems much stressed,

*Yes, call me a liar, a wife beater, a child abuser. It's what you want me to be!  
And you... You want them to believe you love them very much.*

Again he tells Tara at one point,

*Tara, please believe me when I say that I love you very much and I have never  
in all my life loved you less or more than I have loved your brother. But your  
mother...*

When Tara comes to know that it was her mother who made such a decision whom she trusted the most, she couldn't bare this truth and this shock takes her life away. She is not dead, but she was victimized to death by the society and moreover by her own family members.

Nevertheless, Tara could have made her boldness and her strength to fight the society to engrave a place of her own. Even though she is more intelligent, sharp and witty and would have performed much better than the male child would, if only she had been given a chance. Before her death, she thought that she would spend rest of her life feeding and clothing those millions starving and naked children everywhere. That may give purpose to her existence. She was discouraged from the very first day of her life. She was bubbly and energetic girl who had all the qualities of a normal girl. If her parents had given her moral support, she might have shown like a star as her name signifies.

### **Conclusion**

Mahesh Dattani has been making conscientious efforts to showcase the issues and problems of contemporary Indian society making them the integral part of his dramatic credo. His dramatic world presents the issues like communal tension, plight of the women in our society, problem of career and marriage, socio-political exploitation, politics of patriarchy, gender politics, a shift in value system and people grieving under the stroke of destiny etc.

In *Where There's a Will*, both men and women of the Mehta family suffer considerably due to the patriarchal authoritative head of the family. It portrays the plight of the women resulting from the unjust patriarchal norms and conditions. However, the play also shows women's uprising against the scheming and cruel society. In *Tara*, the girl Tara suffers acutely due to the scheme of the society for giving preference to a male child. The play shows how women are crushed cruelly under the pre-determined evil designs of society which subscribes patriarchal devilish pattern. Bharati Patel, her husband Mr. Patel and their son Chandan undergo acute mental pain and agony for the past guilt which can be deemed as a response to the scheme and pattern of the society.

There is no exaggeration in saying that Dattani is one of the few male creative writers who have given a fresher and authentic insight into the women's consciousness. His women characters are imbued with high degree of susceptibility to their suffering and courage to protest against the ill treatment meted out to them. Thus, the projection of women in



Dattani's plays is quite different. He is not trying to define the concept of ideal woman of Indian culture. Nor does he try to present the model of new woman who is quite assertive and bold. His perception regarding women is socio-cultural and psychological as well.

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