

An Understanding of How Gender Ideology Shapes Human Identity in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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ABSTRACT

In Indian theatre, dramatists like Tagore, Tendulkar, Karnad and Dattani have made literary endeavours to explore how pernicious has been the effect of gender conditioning on the human psyche. The contemporary playwright, Mahesh Dattani has attempted to reveal with great sensitivity the impact that gender stereotypes tend to have not only on the psyche of a man or a woman but also that of Eunuchs to exemplify how gender, which is nothing but a social construct could mar human life and cripple individuals in the process. His plays thus provide a realistic depiction of the struggles of such individuals who struggle to register their will and voice, in their endeavour of self-preservation and survival. However, human sensibility and human resistance are above any gender-centric approach. The present paper aims to examine selected plays of Dattani to highlight the sublimity of human will that strives to overcome the oppressive systems of gender ideologies.

KEYWORDS

Gender-centric; human sensibility; marginality; social paradigms; gender ideology.

Contemporary Indian English drama, by shedding its earlier tendency of imitation and translation, has been steadily earning critical acclaim and an identity of its own. It has opened up new vistas by enabling the articulation of those voices who were condemned to exist in invisible spaces muffled by feelings of shame, guilt, humiliation and discrimination. Mahesh Dattani rocked the Indian stage with his stated agenda of bringing theatre close to the lived experiences of the vulnerable members of the society who have been subjected to trauma and the politics of power structures. Dattani's plays depict with great realism the divided moralities,

fragmentation of human consciousness, and the suppressed agony of helpless victims of various social inhibitions who are doomed to lead their lives on the margins owing to gender politics, operative within the social system of India.

Gender ideologies and gender identities in the postmodern discourse on the human condition have been mediated as a mechanism for the suppression of a certain section of humanity with a nefarious design of subjugating them as deviant members not following the codes or rules of a normative society. Alice Walker in one of her observations categorically mentions that a person

cannot be a friend if he demands 'silence' as a basis of survival in society and denies others the right to grow. The conditioning of the human mind through socially constructed gender categories creates an imbalance in personal relations, often generating agony and intense suffering.

Mahesh Dattani, a radical new voice on the literary scene opened up new horizons in Indian theatre exhibiting great imagination in the choice of themes that are rooted in the pain of the suffering and marginalized communities. By dramatizing the terrible agony of such hapless individuals, who are the victims of power-centric politics, who struggle with their environment and are denied opportunities of self-growth, Dattani has produced highly thought-provoking and socially impactful plays like *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Morning Raga*, *Ek Alag Mausam*, *Brief Candle*, *Where Did I Leave my Purdha*, *Final Solutions*, *Muggi Night in Mumbai*, and several other plays. Through his plays, Dattani articulates the internal conflict and confusion of those who are treated as 'others', or 'invisible minority' or 'half humans' because of their sexual orientation.

Down the ages, in the course of civilization, human identity, that of a man and a woman has been socially defined along gender norms, with set expectations of distinct behaviour for the male as against the female members of the society. Given these social paradigms, human beings were designated to their restricted spheres that have in due course of time lead to the colonization of their minds and bodies. These paradigms direct different spheres of activities and any desire to go beyond these is treated as an aberration.

It is universally acknowledged today that sex identity is a biologically determined fact whereas gender is a socially constructed phenomenon. Hence, gender-centric discrimination leads to human suffering, for it is a burden

weighing on the consciousness of a man or a woman. On the question of female identity, the eminent French existential philosopher and feminist critic. Simone De Beauvoir stated that a woman is not born but becomes one. Gender ideologies, therefore, play a vital role in the formation of gender-specific identities.

Without confining himself to a discussion of merely the sentimental creed of feminism, Mahesh Dattani has portrayed a wide gamut of gender-centric power politics operative within the social system. He proceeds with the assumption that gender ideologies are responsible for the marginalization of women, the humiliation of males and the contemptuous treatment of the third gender variously referred to as the Eunuchs or gays. He dramatizes their social segregation, emotional turmoil and psychological suffering with great empathy. In Dattani's own words:

The function of drama in my opinion is not only to reflect malpractices of society, but to act like 'freak mirrors' in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all passes for normal in our world, it is ugly but funny. (Roy, 2002)

For critical analysis, this paper will focus on Dattani's *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The play *Tara* is a pathetic exposition of the suffering girl child where discrimination against women remains rooted in human consciousness. In the play *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani dramatizes the terrible mental conflict of a dancer who being a male gets no support from family for self-growth as a dancer. Dattani with radical theatrical idiom provides spaces for Eunuchs to protest for human identity.

The play *Tara* is one of the most poignant dramatic renditions of the silence and suffering that a girl child is subjected to in a typically male-dominated society. The play received much acclaim

and was hailed as the poetry of the soul that shocked the consciousness of the custodians of society. It is a dramatic account of a pair of identical Siamese twins 'Den' and 'Tara' brother and sister who were compelled to survive in "forced harmony" only to die in shame, isolation and helplessness. In the plot of the play, Tara and Den were driven to forced separation for their personal survival. After being separated from his sister Tara, Den reveals his suppressed consciousness. He admits:

Moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurdled into space, doomed to crush with some unknown force. I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move without meaning. I forget Tara. I forget. I had a sister – with whom I shared a body in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... and separated. (CP: 376)

This poignant expression of Den is a testimony to the truth that separation or discrimination owing to social ideologies is a mark of civilizational sickness and a wearisome burden for both men and women. The central plot of the play revolves around the familial conflict of Mr. & Mrs. Patel where Mr. Patel, being a patriarch retains an upper-hand in the family and relentlessly controls the decisions of his wife. The psyche of Mrs. Patel remains rooted in Gender-centric notions and therefore, denies the inner urges of her own will, she expresses her preference for a male child. She conceives the dream that the birth of a male child will ensure dignity, freedom and self-respect for her. She gives birth to conjoined twins who are separated through surgery. Dr. Thakkar gives his consent for surgery but he makes it evident that only one child will be able to

enjoy perfect health while the second one might end up with crippled limbs. The choice is left to Mrs. Patel who suppresses emotional longing for the daughter and agrees to bestow a healthy life to Chandan. Dr. Thakkar neglecting his commitment as a doctor accepts the proposal of granting a healthy life to Chandan and poor Tara is left to survive and suffer in silence. In the play, Dattani dramatizes the elaborate procedure of operation. Tara in her helpless miserable existence challenges Chandan, "What would you be without me?" and Chandan unable to withstand the mockery of his existence cries out, "Tara stop saying such things." (CP: 334) Similarly, Mrs. Patel surrenders her will under the compulsive directives of social forces. However, after the operation, she becomes nervous and has pangs of guilt with the realization of her own responsibility for Tara's suffering. Her shivering, broken thoughts and suppressed sensibility work as an index of her own guilt. She becomes desperate to ensure happiness in the life of Tara without being constrained by gender paradigms operative in the society. In the play *Tara*, all the four members of the Patel family bear the brunt of externally imposed gender consciousness that permits no emancipated spaces for self-survival. Dattani animates and dramatizes rather poignantly the psychological dimensions of gender identity which restricts human will.

Within the framework of the drama, while negotiating the issue of gender identity and human dignity, Dattani sheds light on the treacherous existence of a community of eunuchs who are said to have a genderless identity or rather a 'confused identity' caught between the characteristics of two genders. Biologically they are neither male nor female and therefore, they are forced to survive in invisible spaces subjected to every sort of humiliation, negligence and ridicule in society. They are often defined

as 'transsexuals' or 'bisexuals' because they have no socially accepted gender roles or gender identity. They are forced to survive, though the society refuses to grant them their human potential and the right to self-growth and self-affirmation. Under the oppressive and traditional stereotypes of gender roles, their identity gets brutally crushed. Through a sensitive portrayal of their predicament, Mahesh Dattani tries to uphold the identity of the eunuchs in civil society.

In the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani proceeds with the assumption that gender roles are not absolute but are fluid because gender identities could transform based on the social environment one is reared in. However, it is instrumental in the formation of human personality and underpins social and psychological living. Dattani like the poetess Kamala Das takes the view that the eunuchs have a sexual deficiency and it is a curse of nature. However, to deprive them of their human potential and relegate them to dark, invisible spaces depriving them of all personal relations or stunting their ability to receive and respond to human emotions, is treachery on the part of society. Dattani explores how their presence is permitted on two important occasions i.e., at childbirth and marriage ceremony but they are deprived of these two pleasures because they are compelled to survive under the curse of God. The possibilities for intellectual development and professional skills are closed to them.

The plot of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* revolves around the incident of the mysterious death of Kamala, a beautiful hijra who was secretly married to Subbu, the son of a powerful minister. Since he was the son of a minister his relationship with Kamala was deemed to be a crime. Consequently, there was hatched a conspiracy to burn Kamala to death. Anarkali, another hijra performs the role of a protective guardian for

Kamala and sets out to avenge the unfortunate death of Kamala, Uma, the wife of Suresh pursuing her research in Sociology takes it upon herself, as her duty to investigate the murder mystery of Kamala. As soon as she comes in contact with Anarkali, she becomes resistant to the power politics in the name of caste, class and gender operative within the society. She tries to take revenge on Subbu's family, as an act of resistance against Anarkali. Anarkali becomes an icon of the human potential for the eunuchs and tries her best to take affirmative action as prompted by her rational self. The apathy with which eunuchs are treated in society, who are seen to possess an innate ability to express warmth in human relationships is touched upon in the play. Anarkali addresses Uma as her sister. With sympathy, Uma, Champa and Anarkali are inspired to cooperate in the investigation to seek justice for the lost life of Kamala. Champa expresses her feelings over Kamala's loss with her vehement expression, "If I had the money I would throw it on that Superintendent's face and get her back..." (24). When Champa learns that Uma is childless, she feels sad for her and expressing her sympathy admits, "Though just for a while... Oh poor woman..." (23) The tremendous human sympathy of Champa and Anarkali for Uma is a justification of the fact that gender insensitivity cannot crush human emotions and latent human sympathy that the eunuchs possess. In spite of anger and desire for revenge, Champa showers her blessings on Uma and prays, "May God bless this house with many children, may God always smile upon this house." (38) In the course of the play, we find Anarkali craving for various relations like a brother, sister, mother and father suggesting how the eunuchs have a consistent longing for 'belongingness' in their personal relationships. Anarkali wants to develop sisterly relations with

Uma. For her security for the sake of Kamala, she denies to accept any money. Thus, in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Uma and Anarkali become instrumental in seeking out the truth related to the murder mystery of Kamala. They along with their team go to Subbu's wedding to make their presence felt. Subbu unknowingly becomes a part of the performance forgetting his present status. He unwittingly reveals the truth related to the death of Kamala. In the dance sequence, Subbu meets his tragic death. His death is pathetic but inevitable to expose the triumph of human emotions over and above social conventions related to gender centric-roles.

Mahesh Dattani proceeds to prove through the world of drama world, a comprehensive realization of the oddity of human existence. Driven by this mission, he conveys that gender discrimination is equally burdensome and dangerous to male autonomy, hampering their self-growth based on personal desires. The play *Dance Like a Man*, which was performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore is a powerful defence of the crisis of male identity in a society where a man is shown unable to chart out his own path to existence because he is bound to live with gender determined roles. The plot of the play revolves around the agony of Jairaj who is projected as a perfect dancer devoted to the art of Bharatnatyam. However, this classical dance form is supposed to be a female art and the choices of males are restricted in this respect. Jairaj's father, Amritlal reared in a rigid patriarchal tradition discourages his son and motivates his wife and friend Ratna to discourage Jairaj from pursuing this dance art because such womanly performances are neither encouraged nor respected for men in society. Dattani focuses on the consciousness of Jairaj and explores the psycho-cultural conflict he undergoes as a male dancer which leads to the fragmentation of his personality. In

the play, Dattani dwells on how each individual is expected to prepare himself to fit into the fabric of life by observing the ideological framework of the gender binary. Torn between the desire to pursue his passion for dance and belong and be accepted by society, Jairaj reflects on the conditions of the past and future. Unable to sacrifice his passion for dance, he challenges the conventions of society. He constructs an image for himself that goes beyond social consciousness and cultural dynamics. To foil his choices, Amritlal motivates Ratna to prevail upon Jairaj to suppress his obsessive passion for dancer and retain his personality as a 'manly man' because dance is supposed to be a weak and womanly art. Jairaj becomes almost crippled in striving to fulfil his father's dreams and recalls how his patriarchal father chipped down his passion by motivating him to abandon the art of dancing. His father taunts him, saying that it is suitable only for women who dance like 'Devdasi'. He said, "Where will you go being a dancer? No where? What will you get being a dancer? Nothing! People will point at you on the streets and laugh and ask." (397)

The crisis of Jairaj in psychological terms can be defined as 'discontent of civilization.' It leads to insecurity. The conflict in the life of Jairaj in the company of his father has certainly its roots in the gender-centric social order. Amritlal is overbearing to his son because he finds it difficult to conceive of a self beyond a gender-based identity. He is so conditioned to view the world through the gender-specific lens that he even berates the long hair and the particular gait of the 'guruji' of Jairaj. Ratna ignoring the sentiments of her husband is elated to inform that in the *Kuchipudi dance*, the man dresses up as a woman. (422) It was her unconscious agenda to make spaces for herself as a dancer. She earns success as a dancer but unconsciously, she ignores

her call of femininity, her responsibility as a wife, as a woman and as a dancer.

The second part of the play *Dance Like a Man* produces the self-discovery and self-realization of Jairaj. He becomes conscious of two distinctive dimensions of his personality i.e., that of an 'artist' and that of a 'man'. As he recalls the memories of his past, he becomes restless to construct the image of himself as a dancer in his childhood. He admits, "We dance perfectly in union not missing a step or a beat. We talk and laugh at all the mistakes, we made in our previous dances." (447). The play thus exemplifies how the strong choices of gender roles dominating human

behaviour are nothing but the products of social conventions which restrict the process of natural growth and exert a negative impact on the human psyche.

Thus, Dattani highlights though he displays how gender-centric conventions are not external facts but a reality rooted within the framework of human consciousness. Moreover, it contributes to the shaping of the human psyche. Dattani's realization of gender apathy is comprehensive and dynamic with a deep realization of how the destruction of the human self is brought about amid the absurd conventions of gender ideology.

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