

**PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AND THEIR PREDICAMENTS
IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI**

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Abstract

In the last few decades, the passion of creative writers to investigate feminine mystique and to relocate the position of woman in Indian society has resulted in representing the inner world of female consciousness. The image of women stretches from silent and submissive to aggressive and violent women, struggling to register their protest against oppression and injustice. In the crusade of feminism, the four stages of its development can be traced : (a) the awareness about the subjugated status of women, (b) to resist the forces of oppression including religious conventions, social taboos and economic structure, (c) to enlighten and encourage women to break the barriers of silence and to exhibit the best of their individuality and (d) to discover the inner world of female consciousness. The paper seeks to discover women images conceived by Mahesh Dattani in his plays which is unconventional beyond the periphery of the sentimental quest of feminism. He presents them in the background of familial relationship who are often the sufferers, sensitive to preserve their identity and self-respect. They are endowed with the essential tributes of femininity and simultaneously sustain their independent identity and protest against the irrational myths and conventions of society. Bharati in Tara, Smita in Final solutions, Ratna in Dance Like a Man, Shanta in Thirty Days in September, Sonal in Where There is a Will, Uma in Seven Steps Around the Fire, Aruna in Ek Alag Mausam and Swarnalatha in Morning Raga are some unconventional women characters presented by Dattani.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani-tributes of feminity-women images-sustain independent identity and self- respect.

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In the last few decades, it has become a passion with the creative writers to investigate feminine mystique to relocate the position of woman in Indian society. Women writers by virtue of the identical experiences of womanhood in patriarchal social order have seriously represented the inner world of female consciousness. They represent the images of women stretching from being silent and submissive to becoming aggressive and violent, struggling to register their protest against oppression and injustice. Along with the textual representation of these women, they are encouraged to speak of their rights and choices. Within this crusade of feminism, the four stages of its development can be predominantly traced : (a) the awareness about the subjugated status of women, (b) to resist the forces of oppression including religious conventions, social taboos and economic structure, (c) to enlighten and to embolden women to break their so called barriers of silence; thereby exhibiting the best of their individuality and (d) to discover the inner world of female consciousness. However, the images of women as conceived by Mahesh Dattani in his plays are unconventional, beyond the periphery of the sentimental quest of feminism. He presents them, along with a background of a familial relationship. They no doubt, are often the 'suffers' but they are also 'sensitive' to preserve their identity and self respect. They are endowed with the essential tributes of femininity but simultaneously they sustain their independent identity and protest against the irrational myths and conventions of society. Bharati in *Tara*, Smita in *Final solutions*, Ratna in *Dance Like a Man*, Shanta in *Thirty Days in September*, Sonal in *Where There is a Will*, Uma in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Aruna in *Ek Alag Mausam* and Swarnalatha in *Morning Raga* are some unconventional women characters presented by Dattani.

In the play *Tara*, the creation of Bharati and Tara, opens up the gate to appreciate Dattani's idealism of womanhood. Tara and Chandan are conjoined twins and they are to be

separated through a surgical operation. Mr. Patel, the symbol of parental authority plans the future of his son Chandan but ignores the interest of Tara. Both Tara and her mother Bharati, appear as the victims of gender bias and patriarchal authority. In case of Bharati, the emotional and mental torture is more intense than that of social humiliation. Bharati feels guilty for the handicap of Tara but on the other hand, Mr. Patel does not even permit her to make a confession of her own guilt in the company of her children. Bharati appreciates Tara for her confidence and intelligence, “....she has her talents, she can be very witty and of course is intelligent” (CP 348). To save Tara’s, she is even ready to donate her kidney. However, out of the fear of Mr. Patel, She remains silent and does not express her desires. Mr. Patel seems to be sadistic in his directive, “I don’t want you to have the satisfaction of doing it” (CP 344). The attitude and authority of Mr. Patel reflects his pride of his hegemonic power. He confidently boasts that there are distinctive work spaces for a girl and for a boy. He prefers that Tara should take interest in the works like ‘knitting’ and Chandan should be going to college and office. In contrast of his authority, Bharati emerges as an image of a subjugated woman; although, she is very much aware of her decisions and gathers courage to assert herself for the sake of Tara. She is not free in the conventional society but she is conscious that a girl should also be provided with every opportunity for self development. However, this contradiction is seen in her attitude also. She fights for the happiness of Tara but is helpless in getting rid of the myth. When Roopa, one of her friends asks, “What would you do if you had to choose between a boy and a girl”, she replies with confidence, “A boy definitely” (CP 364). Through the conflict of Bharati, Dattani establishes that woman being committed to family and society, can’t go beyond it. Tara in spite of being a victim of social apathy presents a perfect foil to the character of Bharati. She is more contained, rational and sensitive. What Tara generalizes about women, is the justification of Dattani himself about womanhood, “We are more sensitive, more intelligent, more compassionate human being than creeps like you....” (CP 237). Bharati, in her reflection identifies herself with the smiles of Tara. She is an image of both a sensitive wife as well as a subtle mother caught in a whirlwind of social conventions. She bears the irrational authority of Mr. Patel but towards the end of the play, she gathers her strength to compromise with reality.

Ratna, the female protagonist of the play *Dance Like a Man* is also an unconventional image of woman. It has been argued that Ratna in her passion to get her identity overpowers the manhood of Jairaj. Dattani in this conspiracy of Ratna, explores the invisible horrors of gender discrimination. He discovers those aspects of feminine psyche where woman is not a silent sufferer but a conscious individual endowed with a passion for self identity. Ratna is a dancer and she wants to develop her art in union with Jairaj who is also a dancer. In order to secure her future as a dancer she makes a secret agreement with her father-in-law to divert the passion of Jairaj. Sacrificing the image of a dedicated wife, she becomes an instrument of affliction. It is attributed: This is the twist that the playwright gives to the stereotypes associated with 'gender'-issues that solely view women at the receiving end in the oppressive power structures of a patriarchal society (3).

It is only the passion for dance that brings Jairaj and Ratna closer. However, Jairaj seems to be too weak to resist the authority of his father. All his choices and actions are guided by Amritlal's desires. He forbids Ratna from visiting the old *devdasi* who teaches her the art of *Bharatnatyam*. Ratna is expected to yield before his proposal that he would support her career in dance only if she helps him to pull Jairaj out of his obsession and help him to make a 'manly man'. Ratna has no option but to choose either Jairaj or her career. She appears as an oppressor. For her, if the company of Jairaj is a question of her womanhood, the art of dance is positively a question of her identity. In dealing with the issue of identity crisis in such an unconventional way, he has reflected on the negative perspectives of feminine ideals.

Ratna has to struggle at two levels- for her realization of femininity and for her assertion towards individuality. Ratna has an insight of Jairaj's that he did not have the will that gives strength to an individual. When her inner self aspires for male companionship, she finds herself frustrated. The shadows of discontent in Ratna & Jairaj's relationship, affirms that woman has also every right to express her sexual desires. What she expects in the company of a male was a positively wanting desire in the life of Jairaj. The contemptuous remark of Ratna about Jairaj, reflects her own frustration, "you are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours"

(CP 402). She has a yearning for the real manhood of Jairaj, “You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house” (CP 402). Unconsciously, Ratna sublimates her sexual desires, and starts seeking its outlet in her dance performances. She keeps her talent alive and tries her best to enhance her daughter’s talent. In case of Lata, she has feels a sense of satisfaction, “She is talented and can become famous” (CP 412). Dattani’s women are the sufferers of patriarchal authority but they are also sensitive human beings who identify their suffering and retaliate in due course of time. She obeys the directives of Amritlal, but simultaneously asserts, “You can’t stop me from learning an art.” Her passionate dedication to dance enlightens the impression, that she adopts it as a defence mechanism for the safer outlet of her more intense passion. Amritlal tempts her, “ Make him worthy of you” (CP 428) but in paying heed towards Amritlal’s efforts, she lost both Jairaj, the ‘man’ and Jairaj the ‘artist’. In extreme frustration she accuses, “Oh! For God’s sake Jairaj, do something useful before it is too late” (CP 442). Ratan’s efforts have three determinants—(a) her anxiety for self preservation, (b) her yearning for perfect male companionship, (c) the torture of gender stereotype. In spite of certain blemishes, Ratna is positively further more sure of herself to control and resist the forces of society. Her character reflects a vital energy that generates the conflict within a woman to make a choice between her femininity and individuality, violence and rebellion. These indeed, are the natural outcomes of forced suppression. It has been accepted:

It is socially acceptable that within the family man is the master and the woman is inferior and the subordinate partner. Social pressures force woman to maintain this *staus quo*. A woman who does not accept the traditional role of submissiveness into accepting this position, and any means including violence, is justified.⁵

Mala and Shanta in *Thirty Days in September* present an entirely different spectrum of feminine psyche. The play is designed to expose the evil of childhood sexual abuse. Mala as a young and innocent child on the encouragement of her uncle, Vinaya, engages in innocent sexual pleasures. Shanta, mother of Mala, in spite of having a realization of the horrors of such instances, remains silent against the whole issue. Along with this shield of silence, she does not allow Mala to confess her crime. The submissiveness of Shanta leads

to 'shame' and 'guilt'. She becomes hostile towards her mother, indifferent to her own life and rebellious towards the social conventions. Mala's conflict is the result of self guilt and also the resentment against the lack of consolation from her mother. However, Shanta's silence is not a sign of her weakness but her desperate effort to escape the horrors of reality. She maintains a wilful indifference because the horrors of the reality might have made her insane. She tries to pacify Mala's anger with stuffed 'Parathas' and by depicting similar external care. Mala's anger is more directed towards her mother rather than the oppressor. It suggests that a daughter identifies herself with her mother and any kind of breach in this relationship, is a mode of betrayal & totally unacceptable. Mala expresses her anger, "I won't let you get off so easily. There is only one way I can make you listen to me" (CP 26). After the persistent accusations of Mala, Shanta like Ratna of *Dance Like a Man*, confesses that their economic needs made her to maintain silence against the injustice done to her daughter. Her helpless confession is heart wrenching, "He bought your silence so that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter" (CP 52). Dattani through Mala's anger and the helplessness of Shanta, vindicates that rape is the worst horror in a woman's life and it destroys her essentiality as a human being, her positive thrust of life in totality. Mala admits, "This is my hell. This hell is where I belong! It's your creation. Ma! You created it for me with your silence! You didn't forget anything, you only remained silent" (CP 54). Shanta admits that silence is not imposed from outside but it is conditioned due to her own ignorance. She said, "I remained silent not because I wanted to but I didn't know how to speak. I—I cannot speak. I cannot say anything my tongue was cut off..." Dattani like a post colonial critic admits that a woman's inability to fight for their own rights lies within their own will.

The characters of Sonal, Kiran and Preeti in *Where There's a Will*, are also projected as the sufferers of patriarchal authority. These three women related with the life of Hasmukh Mehta, expose the different dimensions of feminine psyche in male-dominant society. Sonal, Hasmukh's wife is a typical traditional Indian wife whose identity is confined to the pleasure of her husband and the management of household. She has neither any kind of economic independence nor intellectual awareness. She is ignorant of the intricacies of the business world. She keeps herself busy in managing the menu for lunch and dinner.

Offering blood pressure tablets to her husband on time is the most significant ritual of her life. She has no power to speak against the authority of Hasmukh because all economic resources are controlled by him. Preeti, the daughter-in-law is comparatively cunning enough to have an insight into the intentions of Hasmukh. She tolerates the authority of her father-in-law but she is also able to frame policies to challenge his authority. Kiran, Hasmukh's executive secretary, manages the whole affairs of Mehta Group of Industries. She belongs to the group of intellectuals. She is appointed the future trustee of Mr. Mehta's will and is given the responsibility to manage his property and business after his death. Sonal, in the first part of the play appears only as a silent and submissive woman. Most of the time, she is busy in kitchen, making 'salaad', and setting the 'halwa'. Hasmukh calls her, the greatest tragedy of his life. Even family matters are indirectly controlled by Hasmukh. He ridicules Sonal's concern for her confinement to kitchen, "She keeps cooking food like it's her new invention. Rich food, wasting so much ghee and oil" (CP 465). The hegemony of Hasmukh in contrast to the subjugation of Sonal affirms that woman in Indian society can rarely define their own 'self' because her image is framed only in a male's dream. It is remarkable, that Sonal exhibits no discontentment within the conditions in which she was left to survive. Patiently, she bears his pride and arrogance and even compromises with disgust and pain for her husband's 'happiness'. In fact it is the greatest pleasure of her life. In the company of Hasmukh, she finds no space for her emotional satisfaction and he calls her merely a dog, "Then I should be very happy man. I've got a loving wife who has been faithful to me like any dog would be" (CP 475). However, Sonal's comments after the death of Hasmukh present an entirely different shade of womanhood.

Dattani's idea of womanhood is neither the search for an idealized goddess like image, which has been the core factor of an Indian thought. Similarly, he also denies the possibility of radical feminism and the whole stress is on the sexual drives of woman. The female images conceived in his dramatic world are neither conventional nor archetypal. His perception is not only socio-cultural but also socio-psychological. Woman is also essentially a human being endowed with basic urges and impulse. If she possesses the tributes of 'love' and 'compassion' she can also fight back to defend her 'identity' and her 'basic self'. His women characters in spite of being marginalized, possess a will of their own to resist the

forces hazardous to their survival. Bharati is a victim but is nowhere a silent sufferer. She has a will to provide the best care to her daughter. She learns to live with her handicap and is not perturbed with those who make a fun of handicapped. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Alka challenges the authority of her husband and asks for his disloyalty. She also exposes the betrayal of her brother for not revealing the existence of his homosexual relationship with her husband. The dance of Alka in rain signifies the sense of freedom from the shackles of society. She seems to be getting ready to fight back with an imaginary sword, swinging in her hand; for all that she has suffered. Alka is well equipped to fight back and to question the norms set by men for men. Shanta and Mala in *Thirty Days* present the ideal of a courageous woman who can survive in their private spaces beyond all the conventions of society.

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