

THE GENDER ROLES ARE CONSTRUCTED IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI.

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani the Indian writer in English draws his inspiration from the socio-ontology where in an Indian society, role of a gender is constructed by pattern which is affected by society, culture and time. The playwright writes about the fact how, gender in a society is never able to find a suitable place for self. The choices for individuals are done by families in which they live in, which work according to social norms. Mahesh Dattani explores the complicated issue of gender construction. In the plays, Tara and Dance like a man, Dattani highlights the fact that when a male gender decides to choose for himself he finds himself stuck in between his choices and choices of the society. A female is always considered to work in accordance with the socio cultural norms. In a stark contrast to a female, a male also finds himself stuck in between society norms where he struggles to identity with society and himself. The word Gender is deeply embedded in our actions, ideas, beliefs and gives a natural expression completely. Our world is simply clouded with ideas regarding gender, which appear so natural that we assume them to be true as facts. As individuals it becomes our job to look above or beyond facts that are true in common-sense but rather we should look how these ideas and beliefs came into existence, as common sense.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Politics, Social orientation, Stereotypes, Social Construction.

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A gender is always a constructed constituent in a society. It is not a natural way a gender forms in a society but it is created by the social order according to sex of an individual. There are patterns in a society which constructs the identity of an individual. A gender which is divided into a male and female is formed by the culture, politics, time, geography of a region and society. These factors affect construction of a gender. In a society a woman is defined by a man, she is constituted and constructed by a male gender. When Simone de Beauvoir says, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. She underlines a principle that the sex of a woman is always constructed by the society by the subject male. There is always a social orientation associated with the construction of a gender whether it's a male or a female. According to a website Planned Parenthood;

'Gender is much more complex: It's a social and legal status, and set of expectations from society, about behaviours, characteristics, and thoughts. Each culture has standards about the way that people should behave based on their gender. This is also generally male or female. But instead of being about body parts, it's more about how you're expected to act, because of your sex'.

There are particular ways to learn or behave in relationships, societies, institutions, communities. A male sex, like a female is also a construct of society. A society determines the behavioural patterns of a male where he is expected to act in masculine ways, from a very early age. A male child learns about his own sex mainly by imitating like his father who appears to be an ideal figure for him to follow. He learns to be strong, tough, not to show emotions or cry publically. The current work is on the play of Mahesh Dattani who writes about society in general where individuals strive to find their own identities in the society. The current research is on the plays of Dattani, *Tara* and *Dance like a man*.

Mahesh Dattani the Indian writer in English draws his inspiration from the sociology where in an Indian society, the role of a gender is constructed by the pattern which is affected by the society, culture and time. The playwright writes about the fact how, gender in a society is never able to find a suitable place for self where he or she can decide or choose. The choices for individuals are done by the families in which they live in, which work according to the social norms. Judith Butler, in *Gender and Trouble*, believes:

...that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who

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is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today.

In his plays, Mahesh Dattani explores the complicated issue of gender construction. In the plays, *Tara* and *Dance like a man*, Dattani highlights the fact that when a male gender decides to choose for himself he finds himself stuck in between his choices and the choices of the society. A female is always considered to work in accordance with the socio cultural norms. In a stark contrast to a female, a male also finds himself stuck in between the society norms where he struggles to identity with society and himself.

Dance like a man, (1989) is one of the most famous and favourite play of Mahesh Dattani. The play is written during time when dancing was considered a harlot's profession. Erin Mee notes, Dattani actually challenges the construction of "Indian" that conveniently ignores whatever deviates from our age-old conceptions of "right" and "normal" (319). Dattani says 'I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid-twenties... he says, it is 'a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women' ...!The writer highlights that our society is constructed in such a way that it does not let an artist to precede his dreams and talent but rather it looks dance to be a woman's area. He raises certain questions about the construct of a sex. The playwright with the help of the character Jairaj is all set to break the ideology, the stereotypes of the society where a role of a gender is decided by the sex and by the society. '...it explores the general inhibitions suffered by an Indian man (Jairaj) taking dance as a career, especially a dance (Bharatanatyam) traditionally performed by woman.'

It is often seen that a woman is always oppressed and suppressed by patriarchy but in his play it is a male, who suffers from the patriarch figure. Jairaj is a Bharatanatyam dancer who is obsessed with his art. It looks odd to call a man a dancer, but there he is to break all the norms and do justice to his talent. He is a brilliant and a prolific dancer who loves to dance. The father of Jairaj, Amritlal is the embodiment of social and cultural prejudices who is the head of the autocratic joint family. The family comprise of Jairaj and his wife Ratna who is too a dancer like her husband. The father is all against for the Bharatanatyam dance which he considers a prostitute's 'craft', the father and the son often have strong and harsh debates about dancing. Bharatanatyam is one of the most ancient forms of dance and a best way to offer prayer service in temple. The arguments between father and son bring the most ancient form of dance into question. The dance was considered in the history an art meant only for devadasis, who were prostitutes to only the upper class men.

Amritlal is a social reformer who considers dance and prostitution as evil, in the society and wants to eradicate it. Therefore he is all against the dance; he does not even allow his daughter in law to dance. He accuses Ratna when she goes to a Chennai amma, who is a prolific dancer of her time to learn dance. Amritlal cannot tolerate dance in his house, he is aghast by the fact that is son dances. It is unimaginable for him to believe or understand. He cannot tolerate the daily practices of dance in his house. He gets angry when the Guru, with effeminate gestures of Jairaj and Ratna come to their house with long

hair. The sound of the music and dancing bells cannot be endured by him. It is seen in the play that Amritlal has more exception from his son; he wants him to be a man, and not dance like a woman. He fears that one day his son would be a professional dancer; he tries tooth and nail to stop him. The most important reason for Amritlal to stop his son from dancing is his objection towards his son's career. As Jairaj chooses be a dance which is against the norm of fixed gender roles. Dancing will never help him in his future this is what the father believes also dancing is a women's area.

Amritlal's gender bias is portrayed in his following words to his son: 'I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket [. . .]. Why must you dance?' (414-415). When Amritlal learns that his son want to learn, Kuchipudi a form of dance where men dress as women, he feels his son is sick. The father is in rage as his son is not able to defy the role of his gender in the society. Mary Hawkesworth argues after Butler, but as doing, 'a performance that constitutes the identity that it purports to be" (155). Here gender is to be considered not a part of cultural). A gender in cultural discourse is formed discursively according to his sex where he supposed to work and act accordingly. In the play Amritlal is totally against his son, he wants his son to be happy and according to him, a man's happiness lies in 'being a man.'(426) Amritlal talks about the construction of gender, which is formed according to the norms of society rather than one's own choice and he is also a part of society. Choices of individuals do not matter, when sex is constructed than formed naturally. The father here then then join hands with the daughter in law and ask for help, in order to stop his son from dancing, '...help me and I will never prevent you from dancing!'(427) On this account Ratna agrees to him Amritlal as she knows without Amritlal's financial support they will not be able to survive also she will be free to pursue her dream in dancing. Initially she does not agree on his concept of maleness but later collaborates with Amritlal and keeps Jairaj out of his practice.

Cultural practices are built, where there are patterns of how an individual should act, dress, speak, the postures and movements are directly associated with the cultural associations and construction. Jairaj cannot pursue his career in dance, as he is born in a society where there is gender construction according to sex. The fixing of gender roles in society depends on cultural/sexual ideology where masculinity and femininity are constructed rather than arbitrary; it is deeply rooted in a sex of a gender. Amritlal wants to keep Jairaj out of pursuing his dream, he wants to shape him as a man but far from being so, Jairaj loses all his self-esteem and wastes his life.

Tara, a play by Mahesh Dattani explores the issues that sensationalise society. The play is about Siamese twins Tara and Chandan who were con joined from chest till down. Later a surgery is required to separate them, according to Dr Thakkar it was the only, 'the only chance for their survival' (331) .The play portrays, how the leg which belonged to the girl child is given to her twin. As in a society a male is always a preferential sex. He is given all the privileges and advantages only because of his sex.The male sex is the epitome of humanity, the rational being through whom the female sex is defined. The play also highlights the same point where female child is looked beyond the male one. The society

works in a way, which sees all the privileges and advantages for the male as to Chandan, the twin of Tara.

On the other hand if one looks at the play, it is observed that a male gender is also a victim of society. He is too determined by this sex. In the play Chandan is the one who is expected to behave in certain ways. He is the one who likes, to help his mother at her work. He does not want to go to office with his father, instead he want he wants his father to take Tara. ... 'You can take Tara. She'll make a great business woman'. (328) Chandan does not want to go to the office like all men but he wants to be a writer. The father of Chandan, Mr Patel plans a future for his son, where wishes to him abroad. The wishes are without the consent of Chandan. In an Indian family, the present and future of people especially the children is decided by the elders of the house. In most of the cases it is the male of the house who decides everything. It is interesting to note how gaze of others can do the same damage to men and women both at social and domestic levels. Later in the play when Patel finds Chandan helping out Bharati with knitting, he loses his temper, and accuses Bharati that she is turning Chandan "into a sissy --- teaching him to knit!" (CP: 351). Patel's anger and outburst is indicative of his commitment toward male hegemony. Chandan is creative, sensitive, sensible and caring. He possesses all those qualities which are usually associated with the feminine. He refuses to join college without Tara; he refuses to get separated from his other half. But society cannot tolerate such 'freaks' and ultimately Chandan is forced to live a meaningless life.

Dattani's plays explore the tangled issues of contemporary society. He also explores the tangled attitudes of the people living in society towards gender. Ashis Sengupta in his work, Mahesh Dattani and the Indian (Hindu) Family Experience, writes, 'His plays dramatize the predicaments of those who either are compelled to live the roles assigned to them by the family/society or break away from them, no matter at what price' The characters of Dattani feel sometimes to be accepted in the way they are, and sometimes they want to rebel and fight for their own position in the societies. The individuals who struggle for acceptance in society, want to be accepted the same way they are, with all the differences and similarities. They do not want to establish something but break the boundaries that were constraining them to be free.

A society expects certain behaviour from different genders that are male and female. Gender roles are set as compulsory performances by a social order where the genders are supposed to act and behave according to the norms of the society. 'The patterns of posture, movement, dress, adornment, intonation, speech, and the like, associated with cultural constructions of masculinity/femininity, build up a pattern of constraint on practice in the social structure of gender thereby affecting individual potential' (154, Sengupta). These gender roles have powerful effect on our society, as according to our roles, one's position is placed in society. They influence our ways of behaviour in society and we work according our gender. A child, from his or her birth is exposed to these roles set by society, which places individuality of a child. We rather letting children choose his or her roles; set roles for him which effect grow, as well as the future of him or her. In a family, if a girl is born, parents opt to dress the girl in pink, purple or red, which classify her as 'girly'. If a baby boy

is born, blue or green are standard colours set for him, to establish his gender by social standards. In society, even children head towards their standards colours when they have to choose between colours, due to their pre exposed view. Being a part of a community, we according, to what is expected of us and as individuals we try to adjust to norms. As individuals, we are constantly told, how to act or behave in surroundings, which put us into category of, “theatrical performance” (Conley 2013:139)

In an article ‘Men will be men.....stuck in patriarchal role’, Nandita Das, writes. ‘She may have got rid of her meow, but he is stuck with his alpha roar. For men there seems to be no other way to be. Sure he may wax his chest and do the washing up today, but he is still trapped by patriarchal stereotypes and continues to play protector, procreator and provider’.

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