

GENDER ISSUES IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI AND GIRISH KARNAD

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad are the famous playwrights who have provided their readers with lively discussions of various social problems and fundamental issues of gender. The proposed research topic is a serious attempt at evaluation of major plays of Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani dealing with the gender discrimination or gender bias in post-Independence Indian society with patriarchal social structure and norms. 'Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are "Male" and "Female", the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these later may be quite independent of (biological) sex.' (Stoller 09) The plays written by Mahesh Dattani which base themselves on gender issues are *Tara (1990), Where there is a Will(1993), Bravely Fought the Queen(1994), A Muggy Night in Mumbai(1998), etc. Similarly, the plays like Yayti (1961), Naga-Mandala(1990), The fire and the Rain (1998) etc are written by Girish Karnad which deals with gender issues.*

Key Words: - Indian English Drama, Gender, Discrimination, Masculine, Feminine, Patriarchal.

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Girish Karnad shares a lot of similarities with Mahesh Dattani. They are considered to be India's brightest shining stars who have earned international praise as playwrights. Girish Karnad is a playwright, actor, critic, translator and a poet. Mahesh Dattani is similarly a multifaceted personality who has written radio plays, dramas, screen plays and acted in and directed many plays over the years. To understand, what drove these playwrights to write on gender issues, it is important to understand the meaning of the term *Gender*.

Gender is a socially constructed definition of women and men. It is not the same as sex (biological characteristics of women and men) and it is not the same as women. Gender is determined by the conception of task, functions and roles attributed to women and men in society and in public and private life. (Gender)

This definition makes it quite clear that determination of gender is based on a concept that tends to create inequality. Further, we need to understand what gender equity means. Gender equity requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. Gender equity does not mean that women and men become the same, but that their opportunities and life chances are equal. It has been rightly said in following lines.

While playing their roles men and women are acting according to their, psychology and according to the conditions around them. The world of culture and civilization influences the man in his personality development. Our personality is a complex product of the interaction of various roles that one has to play. People are trained on playing this culturally programmed role from their birth. They grow deformed and dehumanized as they learned playing their roles. (Babu 37)

Thus inequality in opportunities and life chances etc, results in gender inequality. We also come across the term non-binary gender. The gender binary is the idea that only two possible genders- male and female.

Anyone who identifies as non-binary.....therefore views their gender as being beyond these confinements. Non-binary people may also identify as transgender which mean their internal experience of gender differs from the one they were assigned at birth." (Binary Breakdown)

There are plenty of cases highlighting discrimination against non-binary gender people. The issues of transgender are usually invisible. Further, we find that his plays deal with subjugation against women, girls and transgender. Similarly he also took the problems of homosexuals. Mahesh Dattani in his play "Muggy Night in Mumbai" portrayed the domination against homosexuals. Both Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani's play are considered as fresh arrival in domain of Indian English Drama because they probed deeply into the problems associated with the life of modern man and the gender issues. M.K. Naik has rightly pointed out the similarities and dissimilarities between Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani's play, 'In a sense Dattani's Drama compliments Karnad's in the mythology and history is Karnad's favourite subjects while Dattani is involved with social and political issues in India today.' (Naik)

Gender issues seem to be spread throughout in most of the *plays* of Girish Karnad. Girish Karnad's three plays *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* focus on the gender narratives. *Yayati* (1961) is Girish Karnad's first play. It is an existentialist play whose theme has been taken from Mahabharata's first chapter 'Adiparva'. This play deals with the sufferings and struggles of women named Sharmishtha (a Demon princess), Devayani (a Brahmin and the Queen of King Yayati) and Chitrlekha (wife of Puru). Sharmishtha fights against the artificial constructs of gender establish her natural desires and rights. Sharmishtha makes Devyani a victim of patriarchal constructs of gender and culture that she herself wants to subvert and hence the conflict lies with their own class. Sharmishtha in order to become the part of upper class and bring herself from margin to centre betrays her friend Devyani who becomes marginalized within centre. The conflict starts when Yayati indulges himself into a physical relationship with devil princess Sharmishtha and is cursed with Senility by his queen's father because of moral transgression and the only way of deliverance is if someone takes the curse on himself and become old. Puru decides to give up his youth and vitality to serve his father's idiosyncrasies. Chitrlekha, Puru's wife becomes the sufferer. Puru suppresses her desires, and does not think of his wife even once before acceding to the supreme sacrifice. The character of Chitrlekha is Karnad's creation. 'Through her Karnad explores the futility of being born a princess who finds reality too much to bear and kills herself'. (Raju 84) She rebels against the unjust and gender-biased norms and structures of the Indian patriarchal society. She says to Yayati,

You are the one who has taken my husband near the funeral pyre; not I. And on the top of it you have come to preach to me! Without understanding my grief you are giving me lectures! What have you done? You have got an idea as your son on whose shoulders you have transferred the burden of your sins and then you come to give me lectures on duties of a female as a woman and wife! (81)

Chitrlekha finally commits suicide. Her anguish is expressed in the following speech:

Neither will you return Puru's youth nor will you accept me! . . . Of what use am I to your garland of victories? All of you have achieved your objectives. Who needs me now? You have your youth; Pururaj has his self-sacrifice, but what am I to do? (87)

The writer's sympathy goes to the women such as Sarmistha, Devyani and Chitrlekha who are trapped into old concepts of gender and class bias.

Hayavadana (1972) is Karnad's next play, where he tried to display the gender bias prevailing in the society. The original story is derived from Kathasaritsagar but Karnad also looked up to Thomas Mann's 'The transposed Heads'. The story revolves around the two characters named Kapila (with well built body) and Dedutta (with mind) who are close friends. Kapila falls in love with his friend's wife Padmini. Padmini is married to Devdatta but Kapila is her lover. Padmini's desire of transposing the heads of Kapila and Devdatta throws light on her physical desire for a perfect male partner.

Padmini: {Watching him, to herself}. How he clients-like an ape. Before I could even say 'yes', he had taken off his shirt pulled his dhoti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a board back- like an ocean with muscles rippling across it-and then that small feminine, waist which looks so helpless. He is like a Celestial Being reborn as hunter... How his body sways his limbs curve- its dance almost... no woman could resist him (Karnad I.25, 26).

The gender constructs of the patriarchal society stops her from fulfilling her wish. Kapila belongs to sudra class and Padmini to higher class. While talking on this matter P. D. Nimsarkar writes,

Padmini does not publicly admit her love for Kapila because she is aware of the socio-cultural restrictions which prohibit a married woman from developing extramarital relationship which would otherwise have been taken as a breach of social condition and violation of marriage institution. Moreover, Kapila is a Sudra, a lower caste person and inter-caste marriage would not have been approved and accepted...Her idea of a perfect man is already at the centre of her game plan and by shutting the eyes she transposes the heads, Devdatta's on Kapila and vice versa deliberately, with the advantage of the goddess' blessing." (104)

In his next play named Nagamandala, Karnad, unlike Hayavadana's character Padmini, shows the female protagonist Rani going against the patriarchal constructs of gender and cultural discourses. Girish Karnad constructs a composite plot of two stories taken from oral tales. In Hayavadana, Padmini's desire to receive sexual pleasure from Kapila remains

dormant but here in Nagamandala, Rani fulfil her sexual desires. Karnad shows the subjugation of a woman by the patriarchy through the instruments of gender and culture constructs. Rani's husband Appanna is found of another woman and is not willing to spend time with her crushing the desires of Rani. But Karnad also displays the attempt to subvert those constructs. An old woman prepares a potent love drug for her husband but rani out of fear commits a mistake, She throws the drug on the ant-hill .instead of giving it to her husband. The ant-hill is the abode of cobra, on tasting it, cobra falls in love with Rani. Rani fulfil her sexual desires, going against society's norms which unlike male restricts a women to have any sort of physical relation with a man other than the husband. M. Sarat Babu writes,

Naga-Mandala is a feminist play. It questions the patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. This is accepted not only by men but also by women. Appanna openly and unashamedly commits adultery but nobody objects to it; the Village Elders who sit in judgment do not find fault with him. Nobody believes the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing it. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using his magical power. (Babu, 76).

Rani successfully goes against the construct which is evident in the words of Fatima Sugarwala, At the end Appanna worships his wife and accepts the child. Now he is at peace, he has resolved his differences, but faces the dichotomy of her real and ideal self. She pats her hair, and tells Naga,

This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss, live happily forever." She wants the love and the status of her wedded husband and she also yearns for the warm sensuous love of the Naga. (Sugarwala, 22)

Coming to Mahesh Dattani, we all are well aware of his talent. In his plays Dattani deals with hidden problems, issues of Indian society. On an interview, Dattani says,

you can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted, but you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian [that] doesn't happen here. You can't talk about middle - class house wife fantasizing about having sex with the cook or actually having a sex life-that isn't Indian culture-that's confrontational even if it is Indian.'By pulling taboo subjects out from under the mg and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani, challenges the constructions of India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modem theatre.(Mee 321)

In his first play named, Where There's a Will (1988), Mahesh Dattani described it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. Until the patriarch dies, Kiran, Hasmukh's mistress is on

the margins, it appears that Hasmukh Mehta is a very successful patriarch who has full control over his family but his death throws her right into the centre of the action. She is to manage the entire state for twenty-one years -until Ajit's child turns twenty-one and live with the family. Kiran is a marginalized woman who is suddenly forced into the action and accepts the challenges. Here Dattani's perception of gender strength is quite clear. In the play, Dattani has depicted an important aspect of patriarchal dominance. Let it be, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mistress, all are dependent on man for financial and physical security.

In his next play named, *Tara* (1990), he dealt with the issue of discrimination between a girl and a boy child and hence the gender bias. Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins born with three legs. The third leg was attached with Tara's body therefore the leg was supplied with blood through Tara. But due to the patriarchal constructs of gender and cultural discourses the leg has been forcibly given to Chandan which resulted into gradual decline in Tara's health, is not given the opportunities given to her brother, though she is very intelligent, eventually dies in the play. The leg becomes useless after few days of joining it to Chandan's body. Dattani brings out an impressive play in the gender structure in the Indian society which gives an enormous importance to male child. "Destiny decides strange things." (330). Our society decides strangest things.

'Mahesh Dattani claims that he is not overtly conscious about the gender of his characters, except when they themselves become conscious about it.' (Subramanyam 130) In *Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), Mahesh Dattani highlights the dark side of society that forces people to choose between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Professor John McRae, who (in his introductory note on *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*) applauds Karnad for using theatre to unmask injustice,

"For the fault is not just the characters" – it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity" (46).

In the play *On a muggy night in Mumbai*, Kamlesh and Prakash were ardent lover. But Prakash was suddenly changed into Ed by feeling ashamed of being homosexual. Then he fell in love with Kiran, who unfortunately happens to be Kamlesh's sister. In due course of time Kamlesh's sexual needs are being fulfilled by Sharad, still he loves Prakash. Incidentally Prakash once again comes in the life of Kamlesh as a lover of his sister, Kiran. When she comes to know this relationship, she showed all compassion for the gay people and homosexual relations. At one stage Kiran innocently remarks: "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry"(58).

To conclude, this quite evident from the discussion in this paper that Karnad succeeds in portraying the bold woman in Sharmishtha, Rani and Padmini and Mahesh Dattani also succeeds in doing the same thus, challenging the traditional patriarchal concepts of gender and culture that consequently puts a question mark on the validity of gender discrimination in general.

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