



## Gender identity and gender discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's plays

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### Abstract

One of the most prominent modern Indian English playwrights, Mahesh Dattani, always deals with the complicated dynamics of the modern urban Indian family. Several of his plays deal with diverse issues like gender discrimination, homo sexuality, communalism and child sexual abuse. Dattani is one of the playwrights who challenged the construction of India and Indian society as they have been presented in the modern English theatre. The present paper is a humble endeavor to study the gender identity and gender discrimination, and how the male presence and power practice over the female in an Indian family perpetuate this discrimination. His plays deal with humiliation and deprivation, emotional instability and insecurity, threatened identity and discrimination and manipulation and abuse. Dattani in his plays tell the harsh truth about Indian social setup and he is never reluctant to acknowledge any hidden scandal of his characters.

**Keywords:** gender identity, gender discrimination, abuse, humiliation, manipulation

### Introduction

Gender identity is each person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person's sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person's gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex. Gender expression is how a person publicly expresses or presents their gender. This can include behaviour and outward appearance such as dress, hair, make-up, body language and voice. A person's chosen name and pronoun are also common ways of expressing gender. Others perceive a person's gender through these attributes. Mahesh Dattani is a contemporary Indian playwright and his plays revolve around the perception and presentation of gender. Gender discrimination is the reason for the trauma and the exercise of the social, familial or parental authority is also observed in the course of his plays.

Dattani makes the society a backdrop and displays the fiery issues of contemporary Indian society. In his plays Dattani becomes a juggler and juggles with the following relationship to display the gender identity and gender discrimination: husband and wife relationship, doctor and patient, son-in-law and father-in-law, parents and children, brother and sister. Among these various relationships the special focus in *Tara* is on father-daughter and mother-daughter relationship, and demonstrate discrimination based on gender.

### Gender Identity in Dattani's Plays

Mahesh Dattani is an eminent contemporary Indian playwright who uses his plays to represent the dark evils of the society. All his plays make the audience or the readers think about the social evils that are dominant in the society. *Tara* is a play by Mahesh Dattani which encompasses several themes related to social evils into one play. The parental authority enforces gender discrimination that victimized the children and gradually the family was also led to pain and suffering. Parents and their notion of gender led to the death of their own daughter and it is also

the reason why Chandan flees to London to escape the harsh and crude memories that burdened him in India.

"The concept of 'gender' is typically placed in opposition to the concept of 'sex'. While our sex (female/male) is a matter of culture. Gender may therefore be taken to refer to learned patterns of behavior and action, as opposed to that which is biologically determined. Crucially, biology need not be assumed to determine gender. This is to suggest that while what makes a person male or female is universal and grounded in laws of nature, precise ways in which women express their masculinity will vary from culture to culture..."

In another play of Mahesh Dattani *Dance Like a Man* the exercise of patriarchal authority has been brought out effectively. The Bharatanatyam dance couple, Jairaj and Ratna, come under the pressure of patriarchy and Jairaj is worst hit by it. Jairaj could not become successful dancer because his father, Amritlal Parekh, did not allow him to pursue dance as his career. Jairaj himself admits this fact while conversing with Vishwas. Jairaj sees himself as a failure partly because of Amritlal's autocracy and partly due to Ratna's ambition. Amritlal Parekh who is a representative of the society of 1930s and 1940s. He is freedom fighter and a reformist, but he curtails the freedom of his son who wanted to become a Bharatanatyam dancer. According to Jairaj, Amritlal Parekh was "as conservative and prudish" as the white rulers. In an "impulsive decision" Jairaj and Ratna leave the house and go out but they come back within forty eight hours. Their helplessness is exploited by Amritlal Parekh who imposes certain restrictions on them. He tells Jairaj "not to grow his hair any longer" and asks Ratna "not to learn (dance) from anyone else."

*Do the Needful* is a satire on arranged marriages in India. The theme and plot is based on Indian scenario where as its implication was on the entire universe. Homosexuality is ignored in India where as Dattani had the courage to present a play on this theme. The play deals with the gay relationship and mocks the concept of marriage. Alpesh is a gay and forced to marry. He had no other choice but get married to Lata. Alpesh and Lata get married but they have

mutual understanding. And they respect each other's decision. Through this play, Mahesh Dattani very beautifully show the thoughts and views of a gay who ignored his wife for his partner Trilok and Lata no doubt is the wife of Alpesh but still she loves Salim. Through this play Mahesh Dattani mocks at the Indian Marriage system.

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani explores the social rejection of the hijaras or transgender in the contemporary society. In India, we see women nature themselves according to the "feminine mystique" in order to please men to be alive in a patriarchal society and finally get trapped into the image of "Angel in the house". Betty Friedland in her book *The Feminine Mystique* aptly points that about the gender identity of women.

There is no way women can ever dream about herself, expect as her children's mother, her husband's wife. The famous Victorian woman portrayal is as an ideal women/wife and labeled as "The Angel in the House" where woman were expected to be submissive, loyal and devoted to her husband. The angel was meek, passive, powerless, charming, pious and most importantly self-sacrificing and pure. Virginia Woolf describes "The Angel in the House" as She was intensely sympathetic, she was charming. She was utterly unselfish, she excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. She never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always the minds and wishes of others.

Talking about Gender Politics in the play, Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* theorises the relation between sex difference and sexual politics and defines politics as an *unequal* system of power relations.

According to her patriarchy is both a universal and basic system of political oppression. The power structures in different societies produce different kinds of sexual oppression. Sexual politics is a system which is brought about by women's consent to their own oppression. 'Sex', according to her is a biological construction and 'gender' a social construction.

Whenever a choice has to be made between male and female, it is always the male who is chosen.

It is almost inevitably the women who are marginalised, and who are at the receiving end of the oppression, whether it is articulated by men or by women. The reason behind is the gender politics and systems of power that prevail in the society.

### **Gender Discrimination in Dattani's Plays**

Dattani's plays are set in the twenty-first century where gender conflicts still continue to pervade in the lives of the Indian families. The gender conflicts and differences begin at home. The society plays an important invisible role for gender conflicts to begin at home. The society had different evils in the past like female infanticide, through this play Mahesh Dattani makes the readers think that there may be no female infanticide in the society in the present but it has taken a new form where the son is preferred over the daughter in terms of education and providing opportunities. So a girl child's future takes a back seat and in this play the same happens and Tara is dead at the end. The male child preference had always been a dominant part of the society. highlights the notion of social issues like Gender inequalities, sufferings and depression faced by both men and women with reference to the Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani's plays "Dance Like a Man" (1989) and "Tara"

(1990). Dance Like a Man has generously expressed the social issues of contemporary Indian society. The theme of the play is dealt with tradition, relationship, career, and society. The plot revolves around Jairaj and Ratna and their daughter Lata and her fiancé Viswas. A fine metre traces the past of Jairaj, Ratna and Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's father through the technique of flashback concept. Jairaj and Ratna are exposed to the wrath of Amritlal Parekh who fails to understand their passion and their devotion towards dance and particularly of Jairaj. Mahesh Dattani indicates the typical Indian views about dance through Amritlal Parekh who believes that dance is made only for females. This paper is an attempt to study the gender discrimination in a society, the injustice done only on the term of gender and the preference given to a male child over a female in an Indian family. Here Dattani deals with the theme of gender discrimination in his another play Tara. The play also deals with the emotional and physical separation to conjoined twins. The play presents the deep rooted patriarchal system in the society. Women act as a key in the hands of patriarchy to perpetuate patriarchal values. This paper tries to discuss and analyse the issue of marginalisation of women in the play. Chandan being a boy child is preferred to Tara-a girl child in an Indian family. Bharati despite of being mother of Tara spoils her daughter's life and suffers in the longer run because of her inhuman act. Dr. Thakkar makes the misuse of his profession being the man of science and technology. He was bribed a piece of land by Bharati and her father for surgery that led to the death of Tara.

The Gender discrimination begins with parental preference of son over the daughter and belittling the importance of daughter. Home, in this play, is a reflection of the society and how parents blindly give in to the notion of gendered preference. The concept of a girl and a boy had led to the major destruction of Patel's family. Parents have complete authority over their children and they do not give them any reason for their actions and decisions. Patel did not want the children to know about the reason of the separation operation because it is a gendered preference and the children will not be unable to stand it because it will hurt them so much. Nevertheless they could not hide it from the children and when they came to know about it, Tara and Chandan were shocked and Tara dies and Chandan flees to London.

The death of the daughter Tara is the ultimate result of parental preference of the son over the daughter. The parents wanted the son to have a distinct future for himself, so the mother preferred to give the third leg to Chandan and the father, after operation, was so keen on the education of his son.

This paper highlights the notion of social issues like Gender inequalities, sufferings and depression faced by both men and women with reference to the Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani's plays "Dance Like a Man" (1989) and "Tara" (1990). Dance Like a Man has generously expressed the social issues of contemporary Indian society. The theme of the play is dealt with tradition, relationship, career, and society. The plot revolves around Jairaj and Ratna and their daughter Lata and her fiancé Viswas. A fine metre traces the past of Jairaj, Ratna and Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's father through the technique of flashback concept. Jairaj and Ratna are exposed to the wrath of Amritlal Parekh who fails to understand their passion and their devotion towards dance and particularly of Jairaj. Mahesh Dattani indicates the

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Keywords—Gender Discrimination, Inequality, Transgender, Patriarchy and Marginalisation.

Dattani, in *Dance Like a Man* has highlighted that patriarchy is an element of Indian society. Men hold primary power and predominate in the culture of the family. Men ignite to hold the reins of authority over women, children and other members of the family. Gender inequality has been present in society since the birth of civilization and up to date humanity is in its shackles. The Dramatist says “gender is constituted by some acts which when repeated come to form and give shape to a “coherent” gender identity”. Amritlal Parekh, *Head of the Family*: Dattani portrays an Indian family in which Amritlal Parekh possessed unquestionable power over Jairaj and Ratna. Parekh being the head of the family, he declared himself to be responsible head for taking important decision of all their life. He is a reformist and freedom fighter yet a prudish and conservative. He was supporting India to get free from the Britishers. Ironically he controlled and framed strict regulations over his own son's wishes. He rejects the freedom of his son who wanted to become a Bharatnatyam dancer- “Do you know where a man's happiness lies? In being a Man”. Father implements his wish on his son and wants him not to take up dance as his career because it is not a ‘male oriented’ profession. Man is declared to be the bread earner and he is expected to be in such a profession in which self-esteem is concerned with it, in Indian society. In the other term, man did not get freedom to undergo art form like Bharatnatyam. Jairaj's father equates the art of dance with prostitution. “The craft of a prostitution to show off her wares- what business does a man have to learn from such a craft? No use when compared with dance”. Dramatist has clearly indicated that Amritlal Parekh felt really bad and ashamed of Jairaj because he being a ‘real man’ is in the profession of lower quality. He considered Jairaj a cause for the shame for the family, because he judged Jairaj on the floor of masculinity in which he didn't allow himself to fit in. He says, “Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn't realize this interest of yours would turn into an obsession”.

### Conclusion

This play moves us deeply as Mahesh Dattani not only unravels how girls are subjected to discrimination in an educated society but also stresses upon the fact that how

discrimination is encouraged by people in Indian society. The play is a mega success in depicting the plight of marginalized women. This play depicts the discrimination against women which starts from the womb of mother. The incidents of female foeticide are common in our society. The patriarchal society considers a girl as a burden on her parents not only financially but also socially and emotionally. It can be concluded that Mahesh Dattani's thinking that the man with the passion and love to dance is considered to be lower and inferior in quality and status whereas woman has no rights and voice in the family. Gender inequality is the social evil which has overwhelmed the Indian society and it can be erased only when the people change their support to gender inequality. We should understand that gender inequality is a ‘mere social construct’. A person should be judged based on his or her quality and capability, but not on the basis of gender only. Then the society will improve in true sense. Every individual has got their own purpose and rights and hence they deserve equal respect on earth.

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