

## **Patriarchy and Gender in Mahesh Dattani's Plays**

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**Abstract:** *The term 'Post Colonialism' is not the same as 'After Colonialism', as if colonial values are no longer to be reckoned with. It does not define a radically new historical era, nor does it herald a brave new world where all the ills of the colonial past have been cured. Rather, 'Post Colonialism' recognizes both historical continuity and change. It acknowledges that the material realities and modes of operation common to colonialism are still very much a part of us even today.*

*Patriarchy is something inseparable from the structure of Indian society. Basically Indian society is male centered according to sociologies and the head of the family has immense power to exercise on the family members which is unquestionable. In the process of this power execution, often the head of the family overlooks the interests of the family members and decides according to the social norms. The freedom of choice is hardly given to the family members especially to the women of the family. Under the pretext of being the head of the family, being more powerful than others, the decisions are taken in the important aspects of an individual's life and career such as education, marriage, property, etc. Mahesh Dattani's plays *Final Solutions*, *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, etc, portray women suffering under the yoke of patriarchy and gender bias.*

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Patriarchy is something that cannot be separated from the structure of Indian society. According to sociologies, the family in the Indian society is dominated by male and it is he who is considered as the head of the family. The power that he enjoys over his family members is unquestionable. Since he is the head of the family, the freedom is hardly given to the other members of the family especially to the women. Being the head of the family and more powerful than others in the family, the important decisions are taken in the aspects of an individual's life and career such as education, marriage, property, etc. Mahesh Dattani portrays women suffering under the oppression of patriarchy and gender bias in his writings *Final Solutions*, *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, etc.

In his play *Final Solutions*, Daksha (Hardika after her marriage) is married to Hari at the tender age of 14. She comes to her husband's house on her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her name is also changed from Daksha to Hardika "to match with Hari"<sup>1</sup> along with her life. She becomes a typical house wife at the age of 15 and not allowed to continue the education. With her marriage "All my dreams have been shattered... I can never be a singer like Noor Jahan. Hari's family is against my singing film songs. His parents heard me humming a love song to Hari last night. And this morning they told him to tell me...I'm just a young girl who doesn't matter to anyone outside her home..."<sup>2</sup>

Dattani creates an ironic atmosphere by setting the play between the time periods 1947 and present. Though India gained its independence at the time Daksha wrote these lines she lost the freedom of humming the tune to her husband and lost the freedom of dreaming too. She is stopped from going to Zarine's house by a fake accusation that she ate with Zarine's family. Hari hits her for having gone to Zarine's house without his permission and eating them –"... I did not touch their food! Ah ! Don't hit me (Angrily). Don't do that! I swear I didn't eat anything!...Alright. I won't go there again. Please leave me alone."<sup>3</sup>

Daksha, after all this, could not match with Hari though her name was changed to match with his name. She becomes a victim of patriarchy and represents a chained woman in an independent India.

Another play *Where There's a Will* is the “exorcism of the patriarchal code”<sup>4</sup> according to Dattani himself. This is a play about Hasmukh Mehta, one of the business tycoons in the city who is gritty, gutsy and stubborn man. Having been an obedient son to his father all through his life, he expects the same from his son Ajit. In his view, Ajit is an “outright loss and his schemes are crack pot schemes.”<sup>5</sup> Hasmukh is suspicious of his daughter-in-law Preeti who he thinks “pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake.”<sup>6</sup> He is unhappy with his wife Sonal too. According to him “...whemn I was 21, the greatest tragedy of my life took place. I got married...I soon found what a good for nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life...”<sup>7</sup>

His disbelief in his family members and his unhappy sex life makes him to find the “right person” outside the family. Kiran Jhaveri, a marketing executive in his company who has “a shrewd hard-head” gets closer to him than his family members. He entrusts all his property to Hasmukh Mehta charitable trust and makes Kiran the trustee before he dies. This shocking news is unfolded when Kiran enters Mehta house with Hasmukh’s will. The family members are taken aback by the bitter decision of Hasmukh Mehta. Hasmukh’s decision of managing the trust for 25 years by Kiran Jhaveri until Ajit turns 48, leaves the family to show the true colours about one another. But this plan of Hasmukh’s tries to bring the family members together.

As regards male dominance, the play reflects on the intricacies of patriarchal code where women are destined to be in peripheral position. Neither education nor economic independence would help them gain their dues unless the male ego undergoes a complete change and transformation.

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 didn’t 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 Rtna’s ambition. Amritlal Parekh who is a representative of the society of nineteen thirties and forties. 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.” The following conversation between Ratna and Amritlal parek makes clear what is ‘progress’ in his opinion and his terms and conditions to Ratna.

Amritlal : Do you know where a man’s happiness lies?

Ratna : No

Amritlal : In being a man... I have no intension of Stopping you. I will let you dance.

Ratna : And Jairaj?

Amritlal : A woman in a man’s world may be considered As being progressive.But a man in a woman’s Pathetic.

Ratna : May be we aren’t ‘progressive enough.’

Amritlal : That isn’t being progressive, that is...sick...help Me make him an adult. Help Me to help him grow up...(I will) make him worthy of you.”<sup>8</sup>

“The play focuses on this conflict in the character like Amritlal Parekh who represents the attitudes of the older generation of the society during thirties and forties. The younger generation, represented by Jairaj and Ratna oppose such an attitude.”<sup>9</sup> But in this conflict of patriarchal stereotypes and “progressive thoughts” Jairaj suffers both as a dancer and as a human being.

Mahesh Dattani is asensitive playwright who writes about issues like gender bias, social discrimination of the girl child, etc. This theme can be seen in his plays *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the*

*Queen, Where There's a Will*, etc. the theorists demarcate between 'sex' and 'gender'. This difference is more lucid in the following words:

"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..."<sup>10</sup>

In Indian culture, importance is given to the male. This discrimination begins from childhood and sometimes even before that. There are instances of female foeticide which is an example in itself to the attitude of Indian society towards gender. *Tara* is a play that talks about how Indian society deals with girl children, women in general including those who are differently abled.

Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins born with 'three legs'. In the process of separation of their bodies through surgery, the fateful leg becomes the bone of contention. The leg to which the main blood supply was from Tara's body is forcibly given to Chandan, on the decision of mother Bharati and her wealthy father without getting the consent of Mr. Patel, Bharati's husband. The leg becomes useless after few days of joining it to Chandan's body. It would have been a success with Tara's body. It would not only have saved her life but also made her a more complete person which she very much desired to be more compare to Chandan. The surgeon Dr. Thakkar, who was influenced by Bharati's wealthy father, knows very well that joining leg to Chandan wouldn't be fruitful but still he succumbs to the wrong decision.

Bharati tries to shed her burden of guilt by showing maternal love and concern for her daughter and to assert her moral superiority over her husband. She also tries to expiate by donating a kidney to her daughter which turns out to be futile. Patel, on the other hand, has plans of education and career for Chandan and not for Tara. He puts the blame back on Bharati that she has not allowed him to take decision on behalf of Tara.

Though this is a play about the injustice done to women, it is also a play about injustice to men such as Chandan. For no fault of his own, he is forced to lead a life of guilt. He considers himself responsible for his sister's death which results in his refuge in London. When his father informs him about his mother's death he refuses to come back to India. Sangeeta Das opines that

"*Tara* is neither Chandan's tragedy nor is it really Tara's. Tara is sacrificed because she was a girl and had no right to have a better life than her brother. The idea of a complete girl child and an incomplete male child is so shocking that sacrifice of the girl child is acceptable than a handicapped male child. The tragic events depicted in the play are tragic actions belonging to everyday life."<sup>11</sup>

Thus Dattani brings out the power play in the gender structure in the Indian society. The characters Kiran Jhavery, Ratna seem to be liberated and successful, who are a name to reckon with in their respective careers. When examined closely, they face the problems of identity and patriarchy. Kiran is a mistress of Hasmukh Mehta, the kind of relationship that society doesn't respect. She, in her childhood, has been a victim of alcoholic father who could not keep his family happy. Ratna who was allowed to dance by her father-in-law, Amritlal Parekh, just because she is a woman. One can see the different shades of gender bias and patriarchy affecting women characters in Dattani's plays.

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