

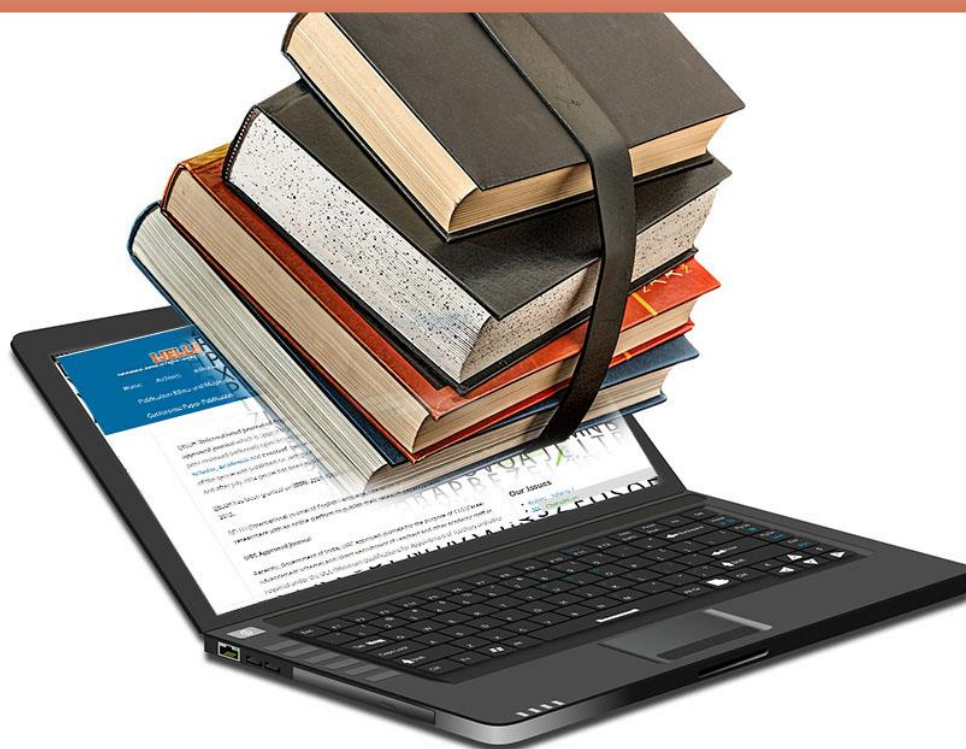
ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Dattani's Heroines: A Study of Selected Plays through Feminist Lens

Abstract

Drama has been an ancient tool to mirror society and Indian dramatic tradition is an old establishment, in fact, much before the times of 'Natyasastra'. The journey of its growth was never smooth thanks to different invasions and colonialism. Modern Indian Drama in English took off much later however. Mahesh Dattani is a household name in literary lanes of Indian English Drama. His plays cover a wide range of themes from gender issues, middle-class predicaments to LGBT rights etc. His female characters are not the ones caught in kitchen compartments only. They have a Feminist call in their own fashion. The Research Paper at hand is an attempt to look at his women characters from that angle. It explores how his female characters start a journey to self-discovery while walking through paths unexplored. It deals with the idea of representation of women in Modern English drama. While Western Feminist approach focuses on the battle of sexes in an attempt for

reclaiming the spaces, Postcolonial feminism has a different approach in this regard. In contrast, the Oriental heroine in her journey to self-discovery looks for reconciliation. Thus, the paper at hand tries to look through all these aspects.

Gender Identity and its representation are not very recent concerns of the critics globally. Ever since the civilized society came into being, and a normative framework worked into progression, for every established truth there was a rebellion in offing. Not going into length and breadth of details, literature has always played a vital role in ventilating those varied emotions through its vast variety of expressions as far as different genres are concerned. One such genre is theatre.

Globally, it is not easy to pen down the rich heritage of theatrical art that is much more than monolithic structural information. Take case of Indian aesthetics only and a medley of underlying traditions open up in front of one's eyes. However, Modern Indian theatre is comparatively of recent origin. It owes its inception to British theatre, although its current shape and form has more of local flavor thanks to playwrights par excellence like Mahesh Dattani. He is one of those playwrights who treat English more like their first language and breathe life into all emotions painted through said medium. The paper at hand highlights the portrayal of his female protagonists through a feminist lens.

Dattani has always been quite versatile in his choice of themes and treatment of characters. As far as his female characters are concerned, they are not stereotypical weak links of family. They are fighters with a difference who do not submit to the atrocities they meet at the hands of family and society just like that. They fight and flourish through their journey of self-discovery that is truly a feminist trait to start with. Though his heroine values family but not at the cost of her own dignity and happiness. She is a torchbearer to many who feel raising a voice against wrong is a gender specific accomplishment.

In his play ‘Where There is a Will’, Kiran Jhaveri, who is a mistress to Hasmukh Mehta, the male protagonist, truly embodies a very strong and clear minded woman who knows how to take hold of her life. While sharing her past life with Sonal, the wife of Hasmukh Mehta, she makes a wise observation,

My father, your husband-they were weak men with false strength. (CP 508)

She openly confesses after his death that she was the one, who had a way with Late Hasmukh Mehta playing smart enough,

KIRAN. He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He wanted me to run his life. Like his father had... (CP 510)

She does not portray a helpless keep, rather a kingpin, who affects all his decisions until he breaths his last. In fact, after his death, she helps his family overthrow his patriarchal regime. She is quite opposite to Sonal whom Hasmukh sarcastically calls as faithful as a ‘dog’.

In ‘Dance Like a Man’ Dattani brings another important issue i.e. dance as a profession in case of males and society’s reaction to the same. Here, Ratna, holds the centre stage though the play is about Jairaj, his husband, who is a classical dancer by profession.

Although in the beginning of the play, she is shown as a victim at the hands of, patriarchy but gradually she reverses the role from a victim to a victimizer.

AMRITLAL...Help me and I’ll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done.

RATNA. I will try.

AMRITLAL. You will do better than that. (CP 427)

Even her father-in-law appreciates her grit and guts. On the other hand, Jairaj does not come out boldly in defense of his career choice nor does he question his wife’s change of behavior at that time. In words of Zinia Mitra, “The play exposes the covert politics that are

sometimes played within family. Amritlal carries the baggage of his own era and demonstrates a frantic attempt to influence the next generation, Jairaj and Ratna, to carry it forward.” (P 216) Nevertheless, she follows her passion at the cost her conjugal relation.

She emerges more like a matriarch in matters of great importance related with the carrier of their daughter Lata. From her dress to her launch, she decides on everything. Still when Lata receives huge praise in media after her performance, she gets rather uncomfortable. In her heart of hearts, she looks at her more like her future competition and one can smell underlying jealousy when Jairaj quite excitingly discusses about the reviews. Her response is quite off beat.

JAIRAJ. You haven't even looked...

RATNA. (shouting). I heard. Rave reviews! The star of the festival! The dancer of the decade! And why shouldn't she get reviews like these? I deserved it. Spending sleepless nights arranging things. Sweet-talking the critics. My hard work has paid off, hasn't it? Hasn't it? (Takes the papers and makes for the bedroom.)

(CP 439)

Here, one is reminded of what Mithran Devanesen writes in 'A Note on the Play',

“Mahesh Dattani forces us to examine our own individual and collective consciousness. Are we the liberal-minded persons we would like to believe that we are or do we blindly kowtow to unwritten laws of family conduct that is easier path to take?” (CP 383) Like every conventional elder, she tries to undermine the talent of her daughter while snatching all the credit away, even though for that moment. Therefore, she is both heroic and opportunistic as well. Her heroism lies in keeping her passion for dance alive at whatever cost it takes. She does not yield to pressure and quits dancing; rather she looks for a way-out to keep her art alive.

Gender discrimination is an old menace that women are victim of. In Indian context, one commonly finds this problem in every other household. A girl child is discriminated against her male counterpart on every pretext starting from food, clothing, shelter and other facilities. Dattani has touched upon this issue through an extra-ordinary story of “Tara” where even medical pros and cons of the case could not dissuade a mother and her father from favoring a male child. Here the pivotal character of the play, Tara, is being projected not as a victim but a fighter who is ready to face life as it is. Her idea of future is also very positive. In the very beginning, when Roopa asks Tara about Chandan’s new writing venture, she happily shares that he is going to write about her.

TARA. About me. Strong. Healthy. Beautiful. (CP 329)

Gender identity does not take form in a day. It is years’ long social drilling that shapes one into a man or a woman. As Bhasin puts it, “Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing; girls are encouraged to be demure and home-bound.” (P 4) Even Tara faces similar resistance at the hands of her father. She is very sharp and witty and understands the nerve of time quite well. She understands the fact that her father favors education of her brother over her and time-to-time expresses his patriarchal stance here and there. When Patel openly dislikes the idea of Tara’s joining his office, she does not come down to argument immediately.

A while later, when Roopa joins them and asks if she was causing disturbance to them, she amusingly remarks,

TARA. Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave. (CP 328)

This line sums up her keen observation and deep understanding of her father’s bent of mind. Tara represents that lot of female intelligence that is deliberately suppressed to highlight the towering male superiority that sardonically finds meaning in absence of a fair

comparison. Tara is a girl with lots of potential and talent and ironically her brother Chandan always clings to her for support. She is instinctively more intelligent and confident than Chandan. (Lama, P 68) Moreover, this acceptance on part of Chandan is noticeable at the very outset when, after her suicide, he is still looking for an identity, recognition on his own, but miserable fails every time.

CHANDAN. ...My progress, so far, I must admit, has been zero. But I persist with the comforting thought that things can't get any worse. (CP 324)

Tara, the oriental heroine, interestingly, is thought to be a weak link or it can be said that she is made to feel like one through her parents' repeated reminders that her life is going to be terrible at mature age in spite of her frequent self-assertions.

BHARTI. It is all right while she is young. It is very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you-but not her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh God! (CP, 348-49)

Here the burden of her responsibility is willingly put on his brother giving him a gender priority though both are sailing in the same boat. It is another patriarchal notion that believes that a woman, specifically a physically challenged one, has no life of her own unless and until she has a male support system to safeguard her. However, paradoxically her death leaves their family apple cart disturbed forever. Butler makes a wise point in this regard, “Juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms-that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, and even “protection” of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice.(P 3)

Tara faces public with equal strength whether it is her doctor or her neighbors and classmates. Her sense of humor is very bright as well. Roopa's silly replies add to that even more. She is not afraid of her deformity mostly but the only thing that breaks her as a person is her mother's partiality. When she gets to know about the truth of her operation, that shakes her from tip to toes and she is not able to bear that. She is entirely shattered by the revelation so much so that Bharti's love and excessive care even is not able to 'make up' for the lifetime injustice that she has inflicted on her. On the other hand, Bharti plays both victim and victimizer knowingly and unknowingly.

Where at one place her father subjugates her largely in most of her decisions, she claims her freedom in front of her husband every now and then whenever he tries to enforce his ideas on her. Dattani here shows multiple levels of issues and conflicts that how economic dependence makes things even more complicated. As Bhasin rightly points, "In order to retain their privilege, women continually negotiate their bargaining power, so as to speak, sometimes at the cost of other women. But it is important that we look at the system and analyze reasons for this complicity." (P 22)

Gender prejudice is exercised not through a single tool. It echoes through a variety of channels and language is one such proverbial medium. In words of Rinki Bhattacharya, "Indian language proverbs caution us about the terrible outcome should daughters be born. Indian linguistic traditions echo with anti-daughter sentiments. Popular as these persuasive proverbs and idioms are, their impact on the construction of feminine identity is immense." (P 15) Dattani also highlights this point when Tara comes across one such telltale through Rupa that how Patels have always disliked the idea of having a girl child.

When one talks about Gender Abuse, the severest kind of abuse that immediately pricks one's conscience is child abuse. Because children are always an easy and soft target of sexual predators. Mahesh Dattani has dealt with this social hazard quite sensitively and

insightfully in his fabulous creation “Thirty Days In September”. Here, Mala, who is suffering from sexual dysfunction due to the abuse she has faced throughout her childhood, gives a tough fight to her situation. With the help of Deepak, she gets through the mess quite bravely.

She beyond doubt epitomizes her name. Her life is shattered like a broken string of flowers. The play poignantly highlights how her thoughts keep oscillating between her past and present like fragments with no roots to belong to. However, she picks up the threads of her entangled life one by one gradually but continuously with the help and support of Deepak and finally succeeds in reviving her garland. In addition, Deepak, as his name suggests, actually lights her path to self-recovery. Shanta equally characterizes her name by her unarguable silence that intensifies her catastrophe. This is simply not mother-daughter tragedy but a vivid expression of two extremely diverse outcomes of trauma in different cases. Where at one hand Mala wrongly accuses herself for her immoral advances, Shanta is merely reduced to a ‘frozen’ woman who knows not how to respond to the demands of a marital life.

Therefore, this quest for identity goes on. Dattani has created heroines who are human with above average human courage. They fight; they lose but do not give up on life. Their journey is a journey of growth from outside to inside.

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