

**A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECTED
PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI**

ABSTRACT

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2008**

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List of abbreviations used against the following plays:

Will for Where There's a Will

Man for Dance Like a Man

Queen for Bravely Fought the Queen

Solutions for Final Solutions

Mumbai for On a Muggy Night in Mumbai

Needful for Do the Needful

September for Thirty Days in September

“A Study of Women Characters in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani”

Drama is a rich treasure house of various cultures and traditions. In India since the ancient Vedic times, dramatic performances mainly presented events of daily life accompanied by music, through which one could understand social representations of characters. In the recent times we have learnt that from these representations, one could study not only dominant cultures but also marginalised subcultures in society. The thrust of drama today is to bring out oppressed people's lives and attitudes that so far remained unexpressed.

Women, oppressed socially, politically and culturally were ignored or feebly represented in drama. From Greek times women were not fit subjects of Greek tragedy. Till mid 16th century women never acted on stage around the world. Even when they appeared in dramatic literature, they were only presented as male imagined stereotypes, and therefore they were presented as 'feminine' or 'femme fatale,' i.e., either as divine mothers or as witches and never as what they were.

The ironical treatment of women in Indian society could be understood from many Indian plays' depiction of women. Woman as a protagonist has been presented in Indian plays since the classical Sanskrit drama. On the one hand woman was worshipped as Durga or Kali figures in these works, and on the other hand woman oppressed and treated as liability also comes to the surface in them. It is therefore not of a futile exercise to discuss here several Indian plays presenting woman as a central subject.

In several classical plays, woman is portrayed as the traditional woman who accepts unconditionally the treatment meted to her by the male. Shakuntala in Kalidas' Abhigyanam Sakuntala accepts silently the curse of sage Durvasa as well as the passive indifference of her husband Dushyanta. Similarly portrayal of women by modern Indian playwrights like Rabindranath Tagore, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mahasweta Devi, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan and Poile Sengupta provide interesting dimensions of Indian women like the oppressed woman, woman fighting social and racial discrimination, dalit woman, woman asserting her individuality, woman as a victim of sexual abuse, and so on. Women dramatists in particular have helped in bringing in a woman's point of view in Indian drama.

Only in recent times, we find male playwrights, inspired by western and Indian feminism, tend to write plays with the consciousness of feminism. Mahesh Dattani, the Bangalore, based Indian English playwright-director, belongs to the above category. His plays discover the feminist experience of patriarchy that manipulates both men and women in society. Consequently Dattani's portrayal of women in his plays is different from other Indian male playwrights like Girish Karnad or Vijay Tendulkar, in the sense that Dattani writes from the woman's point of view.

Mahesh Dattani, born on August 7, 1958 was originally from a Gujarati business family settled in Bangalore. Dattani spent his school days at Baldwins, Bangalore, where the medium of communication was strictly English. He pursued higher education at St. Joseph's College. Neither in school nor in college did Dattani show any sort of inclination towards literature. In fact, he graduated in History, Economics and Political Science, and acquired a Masters degree in Marketing and

Advertising Management. He spent a 'normal' life with his parents and two sisters with whom he shared a close and loving relationship. He joined the family business, an agency for machinery to make corrugated boxes, and worked with his father for ten years.

Dattani was introduced to the world of theatre at the age of ten, when his parents took him and his sisters to Gujarati plays. Theatre was the only means by which his parents could stay in touch with their community. Even as a boy Dattani knew that he wanted to be part of the exciting and enthralling world of theatre.

Dattani's talent is not restricted to writing plays. He is also an actor, director, dancer, and teacher. As an actor, Dattani has won accolades for his sterling performances in several well-known plays. As a director, Dattani is internationally known, with many of his plays staged abroad. Dattani is also an accomplished dancer. His landmark production 'Dance Like a Man' featuring a traditional Carnatic musical score and Bharatnatyam won rave reviews in the New York Times. Dattani, amidst a busy schedule, conducts drama seminars and workshops with the aim of nurturing new talent.

The M.Phil dissertation on Mahesh Dattani's plays begins with the hypothesis that the study of Dattani's women characters in the background of patriarchy is found indispensable to a basic understanding of his plays. Dattani's women characters are not stereotypes but larger than life characters that grow from immaturity to wisdom, from weakness to strength and from loneliness to female companionship and bondage, and they sometimes even deteriorate from self-empowerment to self-centredness. The women characters in Dattani's plays show the relevance of woman as a subject matter to his drama.

The M.Phil dissertation entitled “A Study of Women Characters in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani” aims to explore the playwright’s projection of women in his plays. For this purpose three aspects are chosen for the study: image of woman in Dattani’s plays, the dramatist’s depiction of women’s relationships and woman’s consciousness in his plays. For this purpose, the researcher has made use of primary and secondary sources on Dattani’s plays and also relevant critical theories wherever necessary.

The dissertation has been organised in five sections as given below.

Chapter I, “Introduction” attempts to introduce the dramatist, his life, career, plays and their thematic concerns, and his projection of women in the backdrop of Indian drama.

Chapter II, “Image of Woman in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays” discusses the image of woman in his plays in the backdrop of images seen in ancient texts and also attempts to categorise them.

Chapter III, “Female Bonding in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays” highlights and analyses the relationships shared between women i.e., mothers and daughters, sisters and friends in his plays.

Chapter IV, “Woman Consciousness in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays” examines the woman’s consciousness in Mahesh Dattani’s plays which mostly centre women and also evince an intense concern for women’s problems and struggles.

Chapter V, “Conclusion” discusses the following. First of all it sums up the contents of the previous chapters, recounts the arguments offered in the preceding chapters and presents the findings of the research on Mahesh Dattani. Secondly it examines how Dattani, in his depiction of women characters, is different from his

female counterparts. The chapter reaches a finale with the scholar's identification of future areas for research on Mahesh Dattani's plays.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The present chapter introduces Mahesh Dattani's life, works and relevant characteristics of his drama. Dattani's published volumes include Final Solutions and Other Plays (1994) Collected Plays (2000) and Collected Plays, Vol.2: Screen, Stage and Radio Plays (2005). His full-length stage plays are Where There's a Will (1988), Dance Like a Man (1989), Tara (1990), Bravely Fought the Queen (1991), Final Solutions (1992-1993), On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998), Thirty Days in September (2001) His radio plays for BBC include Do the Needful (1997), Seven Steps Round the Fire (1999), The Swami and Winston (2000), Tale of the Mother Feeding Her Child (2000). His short play Night Queen (1996) was published in *The Telegraph's* Autumn Collection. Bravely Fought the Queen was made into a film.

Where There's a Will confronts the problem of patriarchal control, and also exposes the hollowness of patriarchal authority. Dattani considers the play as an 'exorcism of the patriarchal code' (Mahesh Dattani. 'My Favourite Book'. 449). The play delves into the classic feminist situation of the female heading a family so far under patriarchal hold, while the grudging patriarch's ghost looks over.

Dance Like a Man dispels the notion that it is only the female who is oppressed by a patriarchal society which oppresses the male too.

Tara, whose dramatic technique, echoes Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, retells the story of female child discrimination, from a man's point of view. Bravely Fought the Queen, questions established values, norms, social roles and gender perceptions guided and disciplined by patriarchy.

In Final Solutions, Dattani uses family as a laboratory experiment to trace and examine the Hindu – Muslim conflict and deep-rooted communal prejudices through three generations of the Gandhi family. On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, dramatises the life of a group of homosexuals and the different problems confronted by them. Do the Needful explores the theme of the Indian system of arranged marriages.

The relevant characteristics of Mahesh Dattani's drama would be discussed here. Dattani's inspiration for all his plays then is rooted firmly in society, which, with all its rumblings and conflicts, becomes the dominant subject of Dattani's plays. The playwright himself boldly proclaims: "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background" (Mahesh Dattani. Preface. Collected Plays. XV). His plays tackle with sincerity and openness contemporary issues that others would shy of.

The most charismatic quality of Dattani's plays lies in his depiction of middle – class Indian life and modern issues like homosexuality, gender – identity, human relationships, inequality of the female sex and communalism. In this regard Alyque Padamsee's comment on Dattani is relevant: "Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Dattani is not writing plays that revive old myths and legends. He is one of the few, really the only playwright in English today who writes about modern India" (Alexander Viets. A Stark Look at Modern India.)

Dattani's plays reflect to a larger extent lives of socially marginalised sections of society. The dramatist brings to the forefront the issues that are prevalent in the society but are not tackled or discussed. Plays like Mumbai, Needful and Queen lift the veil of secrecy that shrouds the marginalised cultures, sexualities and lifestyles. Talking about his choice of themes and subject matter, Dattani says, "Thematically, I talk about areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand 'this' space. They live on the fringes of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe – space for themselves as they can". (Angelie Multani. "A Conversation with Mahesh Dattani". 130-132)

Dattani's representation of oppression as a theme is stronger and louder when it comes to his depiction of women. His plays dramatise largely the issue of gender discrimination and female oppression by patriarchy. In handling woman as the marginalised subject, he explores a wider area of oppression – sexual, social and cultural. Mala in September is sexually oppressed by her own uncle; Sonal in Will is oppressed by her demanding husband who verbally abuses her; Baa in Queen is a widowed old woman who is still haunted by the violence inflicted on her by her late husband; Alka in Queen is a woman trapped in a marriage where her husband is a homosexual; Tara in Tara is discriminated by her own family, due to which she is doomed to be lame. Dolly in Queen is physically abused by her husband almost on a daily basis.

The first chapter thus emphasises the need to study Mahesh Dattani's women characters. Mahesh Dattani portrays Indian women in different hues and shades of individuality that make them resist, react or succumb to a society that is patriarchal in

content. Dattani's women are neither openly rebellious nor completely submissive. They try to face their daily struggles in their own unique ways as the playwright himself explains his women: "They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it." (Lakshmi Subramanyam. A Dialogue with Mahesh Dattani. 131) Dattani projects their fortunes and misfortunes; they have flaws yet he does not ignore their strengths. Each woman is different from another woman, each endowed with her own qualities. He has drawn his women with great sympathy, but they are by no means saintly victims. They are also endowed with negative qualities. These women can be strong (Kiran in Will), egoistic (Ratna in Man), greedy (Preeti in Will), spunky (Tara in Tara), stupid (Roopa in Tara), emotional (Sonal in Will), sly (Baa in Queen) or cruel (Bharati in Tara) (C.K Meena. "Unmasking the Middle Class", 10).

Dattani's plays are strongly influenced by the oppressive limitations he saw being imposed upon his two sisters and his mother. Dattani's attachment to his sisters and his mother, his intimate and firsthand knowledge of their experiences in society, their struggles, their tribulations – all these have gone into the making of his strong feminist consciousness.

CHAPTER II

IMAGE OF WOMAN IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

The second chapter, 'Image of Woman in Mahesh Dattani's Plays' begins with an overview of the images of women in the ancient texts of male writers. These women are basically modelled after Savitri and Anasuya who are the epitomes of the

Indian woman. The women characters are weak, dependent, pure, meek, and sacrificial. These texts have influenced male writers creating stereotyped female characters. Dattani's women however are not stereotyped characters, but individuals with unique personalities. This chapter attempts to make three categories – the traditional woman, the quietly rebellious woman and the new woman - based on the women's situations and what they stand for.

As a playwright Dattani is intrigued by the varied appeal and complexities of women as dramatic characters. In one of his interviews, Dattani admits that he finds women characters very interesting: "There are more layers to peel, artistically speaking." (Viets). This may be the reason why Dattani's women cannot be reduced to stereotyped categories. If at all one attempts to categorise his women, they can be viewed, only with reluctance, as the traditional, the quietly rebellious and the new woman, as these categories tend to be fluid and merge with one another.

The traditional woman like Sonal in Will is a submissive, dependent woman whose role in the family is restricted only to the kitchen. Her life resonates with Tennyson's verse:

"Man for the field and women for the hearth;
Man for the sword and for the needle she."

("The Princess" V, 427)

As the above verse relates, Sonal's 'hearth' is her kitchen, where she spends most of the time, making 'parathas' or 'orange-flavoured halwa'. The kitchen becomes her refuge due to lack of any other outlet to vent out her frustration and unhappiness.

The women of the second category – the quietly rebellious externally do not appear to be very different from the women of the first category. In appearance they seem to embody all the attributes of traditional Indian women, but in reality, they are different. They are seemingly submissive but adopt rebellious ways to attain their goals. All that the daughter-in-law, Preeti in Will does to destroy the patriarchal father-in-law is a moderate mutiny, as she proudly states to her husband Ajit: “How did I manage? Simple, I gave in, I simply listened to him and didn’t ‘protest’ like you! I knew he didn’t have long to live. I thought, why not humour him for a few days? After he’s gone, we can have all the freedom to do what we want, and also all the money. I almost succeeded”. (Will, 501 – 502)

The last category of woman in Dattani’s plays is the new woman, who is rebellious but constructive in her rebellion. She faces her problems in a more positive manner. Kiran in Will; Smita in Solutions; Ratna in Man; Kiran in Mumbai are ‘new’ women, bold and self – confident, representing the sensibilities of the new Indian woman. Kiran in Will represents such an independent woman: “I managed. I managed my work, I managed my house, I managed my husband.” (Will, 505). She breaks free from the traditional shackles and seeks her own identity and place in the world. She is modern and career oriented and this helps in achieving her sense of worth.

The interesting dimension of Dattani’s women is that they are dynamic characters, revealing constant growth and mental maturity. For instance the tradition bound woman does not always remain so. The transformation in Sonal in Will comes with Hasmukh’s death and its aftermath that make her realise that her passivity lies in

her childhood. Sonal grasps the truth that she has been oppressed and controlled not only by her husband, but also by her sister Minal.

Consequently one arrives at the truth that the categories mentioned earlier are fluid more than fixed. Having faced the truth of the root of her oppression, woman's rejection of dominating powers and her self-transformation are not far off. In Sonal's final rejection of Minal's authority as decision maker, Dattani reveals the icon of the transformed female, who is led from passive adherence to tradition to its active rejection in order to become a woman thinking.

CHAPTER III

FEMALE BONDING IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

The third chapter identifies how Dattani underlines female tradition and bonding in his plays and thus explores the relationship shared between/among women. Dattani says, "Women form the largest minority in the world and I find it interesting to illustrate their personal expressions, their dilemmas, their interpretations," (Viets.) In the diversity of woman – to – woman relations, Dattani brings out the positive aspect of female bonding where women cling to each other initially for support. Then in the process of their comradeship, they discover the strength and magnitude of this relationship. Dattani's plays demonstrate how in this male dominated society, where women's oppression keeps unfolding, the only hope for a woman is sharing and shouldering life's burdens with another woman. His dramatic pieces are classic depiction of how when women, sharing the same

experiences in life, arrive at the crossroads of understanding - that no one can understand a woman better than another woman.

The chapter has viewed how Dattani portrays female relationships in varied settings i.e., those in a domestic set up or outside domesticity. His plays become the arena for exploration of women's relationships within familial milieu. The chapter particularly discusses Dattani's portrayal of relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, those shared between siblings and also friendships between women, including even those between wife and mistress under the same roof. The chapter finally examines his portrayal of female relations viewed by the playwright in both its positive as well as its negative dimension, where the former leads to female bonding and the latter leads to power relations.

A situation that is unique to Dattani's drama is that, not only mother-daughter or mother-in-law to daughter-in-law or sister to sister relations, but even the wife and mistress relations can lead to female bonding. The most surprising dimension of the wife and mistress relations in Will is that, it begins with distrust but ends in happy trust and harmony. Initially when Sonal learns the presence of a mistress [Kiran] in her husband's life through his will that makes Kiran the sole trustee of his trust fund, she reacts with shock and disbelief. However their animosity does not last long. Kiran and Sonal come together, gradually realising that they enjoy each other's company and it marks the beginning of positive sharing and trust that blossoms into a beautiful friendship.

The friendship between them leads most importantly to sharing their personal lives - that they have not been treated fairly by the men in their lives. Sonal was under the control of Hasmukh, who never respected her feelings and sentiments. The strong

female friendship leading to sharing of woes and finding comfort in each other creates the female bonding among Dattani's women. The female bonding coupled with these women's realisation of their powerlessness in a patriarchal society brings them together into a powerful union.

Female bonding reaches its summit in Will, when all women in the Mehta household unite against the injustices by the male in the household. Thus female bonding has a positive aspect in the Mehta household with the three women's experiences of doubt, anger and jealousy for each other now transformed into a relationship of trust, respect and love.

The negative dimension of female relations is viewed in the unequal relations or power relations between women, Sonal and Minal in Will share an unequal relationship where Sonal feels that her sense of worth has been crushed by her controlling and dominating older sister Minal.

CHAPTER IV

WOMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

The fourth chapter "Woman Consciousness in Dattani's Plays" explores the idea of Dattani as a male writer with female sensibility that is reflected in his plays. He sensitively portrays women focusing on both their positive and negative facets. The reason he gives for his preoccupation with this particular subject is, "Gender is a major part of it ... it has to do with my own comfort with both the feminine and the masculine self in me ... the masculine self is very content, it doesn't need to express

itself. But the feminine self seems to seek expression” (Anjum Katyal. ‘Of Page and Stage: An Interview with Mahesh Dattani.’). The idea of the feminine self in a male writer also indicates the awakened female sensibility in him. Such an awakened sensibility helps the writer to portray sympathetically women and their experiences in a male dominated society. It also leads the male writer to present male characters as sensitive to the female plight in society. It also enables him to provide an alternative perspective on patriarchy for example, its control and suppression over not only the female but also the male.

In Dattani’s plays, woman no more becomes the object of the male ‘gaze,’ as it happens in Girish Karnad’s plays, but an active subject, free to take decisions on her life. The male too, seen as victim of patriarchy, is female sensitised. The chapter has thus looked into the issue of examining the playwright as a male writer with an awakened female sensibility, which renders a gynocentric vision to his plays and which the researcher chose to name as ‘gender or woman consciousness’. Such a vision or gender awareness, it was seen, has helped the dramatist to view patriarchy as affecting the male too but mostly having an adverse effect on the female.

One can understand such a woman consciousness from the following facts: Dattani’s act of viewing women in a multidimensional rather than uni-dimensional perspective, his empathy with women around him and their lives; his depiction of female united against patriarchy; his gynocentric dramatisation of the story, where dramatic action is based on female narratives; his portrayal of the awakened sensibility of women characters in his plays; the playwright’s act of sensitising the reader to the woman’s cause; his delineation of the repressive situation of women trapped within failed marriages; his unique perspective that shows how even

conventional marriage set-up that is supposed to provide security to women only affects them in a negative way; his dramatic exploration of how man's homosexuality affects woman's marriage and her personal life; his tracing the roots of women's oppression in marriage to patriarchy; his contentions on patriarchy and its emptiness; and his portrayal of women in the act of a journey to self-discovery.

Since the scope of this abstract limits discussion of all the above-mentioned points, the researcher would highlight the playwright's 'woman consciousness' through the example of his use female narratives. In Final Solutions, making use of the grandmother's diary, Dattani pays tribute to women's writing. Writing is a therapy for women, it is a process of self – discovery and Helene Cixous encourages this art ... “And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you. You are for you ... women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing, their stream of phantasms is incredible” (Helene Cixous. The Laugh of the Medusa).

Though Daksha the grandmother is not writing a literary classic, the diary that she writes gives the only space to voice out her feelings without the prying judgement and ridicule of her in – laws. Behind Daksha's stereotyped existence as daughter, wife, mother and grandmother, Dattani discovers a new woman who is witty, clever and quite secure with her own identity from her shrewd and humorous observations: “He [her husband] wants to stop his studies and join his father in his cloth mill ... I must talk to him and tell him to enjoy himself while he is in college. Not that the world is going to miss a great scholar, but at least I can get some news from him about the country's future.” (Solutions, 197)



CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The research has arrived at the following findings in the due process of this study. An examination of the image of woman in Dattani's plays revealed that his women are neither extraordinary nor stereotyped. These women are constantly trying to prove themselves in a man's world: "... but they are by no means saintly victims. They are strong, egoistic, greedy, spunky, stupid, diffident, sly, cruel..." (C.K Meena. "Unmasking the Middle Class, 10). Most significantly they are not flat or stereotyped characters but growing ones and their growth to self – realisation, maturity and understanding is triggered also by the manner in which they relate themselves to other women. The representation of female bonding and oppressive female relations by a male writer reveals that he has feminist leanings. Therefore the depiction of female bonding in Dattani's plays highlights the feminist streak expressed in his plays.

The woman consciousness in his plays has enhanced the feminist goal that explore woman and centre her life, anxiety or dilemma. Most importantly, we find that the sufferings of the Indian woman, the marital disharmony, overbearing tradition all find a place in Dattani's plays. He traces the roots of woman's problem in patriarchy, he reveals that what has kept women bound to their chains were the multifarious roles women were expected to perform in the patriarchal society. However, his plays depict that in the long run there is a process of self-discovery in the women, when they become aware of their emotional needs and accept challenges in order to live a more meaningful life. In sketching women in the act of a journey to self-discovery Dattani has proved that he is a male artist with a profound

understanding of the female sensibility. It is not surprising then that he has succeeded in delving deep into the subconscious needs, desires and aspirations of his women characters and has presented an unbiased perspective of the Indian woman and her true self.

The second finding reveals that Mahesh Dattani is different in his depiction of women characters from not only his male counterparts but also his female counterparts. It is not surprising that the woman writer is interested in portraying women characters, the reason being either projection of her own 'self' or the responsibility she feels a woman in order to bring into focus the daily struggles of a woman in a man's world. However these very reasons limit the female writers as there is a possibility of bias in subjective treatment of their own kind. For example Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta deal with the issue of rape in their plays Lights Out and Getting Away with Murder respectively. They use drama as a medium to bring attention to the stigma of rape which is commendable, but it restricts their creativity as they are emotionally involved with the raped victims. Mahashweta Devi again restricts her subject to the marginalised communities. She is more of an activist. Dattani is different from male writers in his viewing of women in the sense that his perception is neither stereotyped nor voyeuristic typical of patriarchal male writings. His perception of women is also different from female writing as he views women objectively from a male's perspective and also with a female consciousness that makes his observations sympathetic towards women.

The third finding which the study arrives at is a logical conclusion from an idea of his sympathetic and objective viewing of women. A study of Dattani's dramatic technique further reveals this presence of feminism in male writings. Dattani's use of

images reveals a man's empathy for the woman's cause. Alexander Viets captures Dattani's images, "The images used to express the condition of women by one of India's playwrights are startling and vivid: The dwarfed and stunted boughs of a bonsai tree, a young bride locked in her room for 30 years, a Siamese twin forced to sacrifice a limb for her brother, a spastic child from an unhappy and destructive marriage... Perhaps most startling of all is that this strong feminist voice belongs to a man."(Viets). Another technique unique to his drama is the flashback and switchback techniques, through which he is able to present a female centred story (Tara) but through a male narrative or a male point of view. This technique helps the dramatist to distance himself from the story and renders great objectivity.

The research on Mahesh Dattani would also proceed to discuss the possible areas of further research on his drama. These areas are merely identified as topics as they are not in the purview of this present research and they are as follows: representation of the middle class family in Dattani's drama; treatment of the theme of homosexuality in Mahesh Dattani's selected plays; the idea of conflict and its repercussions in Dattani's plays, viz, political / familial / social /gender conflicts and finally Dattani's use of dramatic and theatrical techniques that render a unique quality to his plays.

To conclude woman as a subject has found a worthy and deserving representation in Mahesh Dattani's plays. Dattani's portrayal of women's characters certainly adds a new dimension to how women are viewed in Indian Drama.

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**A STUDY
OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECTED
PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI**

EVANGELINE L. MARBANIANG

**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH**

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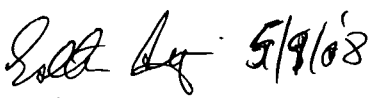
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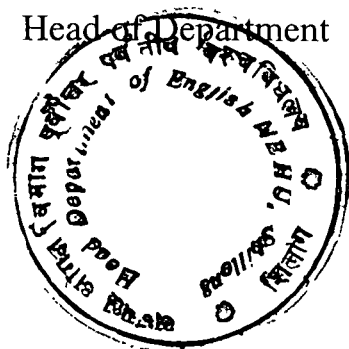


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ABSTRACT

The M.Phil dissertation entitled “A Study of Women Characters in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani” aims to explore the playwright’s projection of women in his plays. For this purpose three aspects are chosen for the study: image of woman in Dattani’s plays, the dramatist’s depiction of women’s relationships and woman’s consciousness in his plays. The research work on Mahesh Dattani has made use of primary and secondary sources on the dramatist’s selected plays and also relevant critical theories wherever necessary.

The dissertation has been organised in five sections as given below.

Chapter I, “Introduction”, attempts to introduce the dramatist, his life, career, plays and their thematic concerns, and his projection of women in the backdrop of Indian drama.

Chapter II, “Image of Woman in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays” discusses the image of woman in his plays in the backdrop of images seen in ancient texts and also attempts to categorise them.

Chapter III, “Female Bonding in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays” highlights and analyses the relationships shared between women i.e., mothers and daughters, sisters and friends in his plays.

Chapter IV, “Woman Consciousness in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays” examines the woman’s consciousness in Mahesh Dattani’s plays which mostly centre women and also evince an intense concern for women’s problems and struggles.

Chapter V, “Conclusion” sums up the contents of the previous chapters, recounts the arguments offered in the preceding chapters and presents the findings of the research on Mahesh Dattani. It also examines how Dattani is different from his female counterparts in his depiction of women characters, and then concludes with the identification of topics for further research on Mahesh Dattani’s plays.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

List of abbreviations used against the following plays:

Will for Where There's a Will

Man for Dance Like a Man

Queen for Bravely Fought the Queen

Solutions for Final Solutions

Mumbai for On a Muggy Night in Mumbai

Needful for Do the Needful

September for Thirty Days in September

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Drama is a rich treasure house of various cultures and traditions. In India since the ancient Vedic times, dramatic performances mainly presented events of daily life accompanied by music, through which one could understand social representations of characters. Only in the recent times we have learnt that from these representations, one could study not only dominant cultures but also marginalised subcultures in society. The thrust of drama studies today is to bring out representations of subaltern traditions, and many oppressed groups' lives and their attitudes, which have so far remained hidden and unexpressed.

Indian women belong to one such socially / politically oppressed group. Women, oppressed socially, politically and culturally were ignored or feebly represented in drama. From Greek times women were not fit subjects of Greek tragedy. Women never acted on stage around the world till mid 16th century. Even when they appeared in dramatic literature, they were only presented as male – imagined stereotypes, and therefore they were presented as 'feminine' or 'femme fatale' or 'mother figure' and never as what they were.

The ironical treatment of women in the Indian society could be understood from many Indian plays' depiction of women. Woman as a protagonist has been presented in Indian plays since the classical Sanskrit drama. On the one hand woman worshipped as Durga or Kali figured in

these works, and on the other hand, woman treated as liability and oppressed by discriminatory practices like dowry and female infanticide also came to the surface. It is therefore not a futile exercise to discuss here several Indian plays presenting woman as a subject.

In several classical plays, woman is portrayed as the traditional woman who accepts unconditionally the treatment meted to her by the male. Shakuntala in Kalidas' Abhigyanam Sakuntala accepts silently the curse of sage Durvasa, as well as the passive indifference of her husband Dushyanta. Swapnavasavadutta and Charudatta are also portrayed as the traditional heroines in Bhasa's Vasavadatta and Vasantasena respectively. At the same time plays like Mritchakatika present women as bold and independent. In the modern period women are not limited to traditional, weak beings, but also presented as brave and strong individuals, who refuse to be reduced to marginal roles in the already secondary positions they occupy as wives. Sumitra in Tagore's The King and the Queen is not content with her role as wife; but rather prefers the role of a queen with all its challenges and responsibilities. Similarly, Tagore's Chitra in his play Chitra neither wishes to be worshipped as a goddess nor pitied and sympathised as a victim. She fairly and simply desires to be considered as an equal. But even in the treatment of these women as strong characters, the woman's point of view of her choice is blurred by the male point of

view of the whole situation. Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi plays portray oppressed women as well as struggling women. In Kanyadaan, Jyoti an upper – class woman marries a Dalit writer with the approval of her liberal father, and faces untold miseries and humiliations from the wife-beating, upper class baiting husband. In another Tendulkar play A Friend's Story, the lesbian Mitra is compelled to commit suicide. Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session depicts a different facet of a woman fighting her own social discrimination.

Another Marathi playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar's Sonata tells the story of brave single women who were a part of the women's movement of the 1970s, with their moments of despair and elation thirty years later. Girish Karnad's Padmini in Hayavadana and Rani in Naga-Mandala are reluctant to be mere puppets in the hands of their husbands and they assert their individuality. Nevertheless, even Karnad's postmodern representation of Indian culture does not make women unfettered from their dilemma. They are still marginalised characters in comparison to his male characters.

In modern times women dramatists, inspired by women dramatists in the west, have been creating plays with a woman's point of view. Mahashweta Devi's Sujata Chatterji in Mother of 1084 turns the tragedy of the death of her son into a journey of female self-discovery. Manjula

Padmanabhan's Harvest once again presents a woman fighting a lone battle against racial and cultural forces in the midst of the racket of illegal organ sale that destroys her family life. In Poile Sengupta's Mangalam, Sonali is helplessly and continuously raped by her own uncle and thus unfolds a taboo tale of female sexual abuse.

Once again only in recent times, we find male playwrights, inspired by western feminism, tend to write plays with the consciousness of feminism and western thoughts like socialism and Marxism. Mahesh Dattani, the Bangalore – based Indian English playwright-director, belongs to the above category. His plays discover the feminist experience of patriarchy that manipulates both men and women in society. Consequently Dattani's portrayal of women in his plays is different from other Indian male playwrights like Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar as stated earlier in the chapter.

The M.Phil dissertation on Mahesh Dattani's drama begins with the hypothesis that a study of Dattani's women characters in the background of patriarchy is indispensable to a basic understanding of his plays.

Dattani's women characters are not stereotypes but larger than life characters that grow from immaturity to wisdom, from weakness to strength and from loneliness to female companionship and bondage, and

they sometimes even deteriorate from self-empowerment to self-centredness. The women characters in Dattani's plays show the relevance of woman as a subject matter.

The dissertation entitled "A Study of Women Characters in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani" aims to explore the playwright's projection of women in his plays. For this purpose three aspects are chosen for the study: image of woman in Dattani's plays, the dramatist's depiction of women's relationships and woman's consciousness in his plays. For this purpose, the researcher has made use of primary and secondary sources on Dattani's plays and also relevant critical theories wherever necessary.

Mahesh Dattani, born on August 7, 1958 was originally from a Gujarati business family settled in Bangalore. Dattani spent his school days at Baldwins, Bangalore, a school where the medium of communication was strictly English. He pursued higher education at St. Joseph's College. Neither in school nor in college did Dattani show any sort of inclination towards literature. In fact, he graduated in History, Economics and Political Science, and acquired a Masters degree in Marketing and Advertising Management. He spent a 'normal' life with his parents and two sisters with whom he shared a close and loving

relationship. He joined the family business, an agency for machinery to make corrugated boxes, and worked with his father for ten years.

Dattani was introduced to the world of theatre at the age of ten, when his parents took him and his sisters to Gujarati plays. Theatre was the only means by which his parents could stay in touch with their community. Even as a boy Dattani knew that he wanted to be part of the exciting and enthralling world of theatre. Recounting his experience of seeing Madhu Rye's stage play Koi Pun Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo Tho (Tell Me the Name of the Flower), Dattani says, "I was mesmerised. I fell in love with the surreal world of theatre in an instant." (Utpal K Banerjee. "Conversing with Mahesh Dattani". 161).

However Dattani never realised that he would one day choose theatre as a career option. Theatre initially was a world Dattani did not think he belonged to. For in his college days, his only connection with theatre was his work in the backstage. It was only in the early eighties, when he directed Woody Allen's God in college that his interest in theatre really sparked off, culminating in the launch of his own theatre company 'Playpen' in 1987. For his 'Playpen' productions, he began to look around for Indian plays in English, and his search proved more difficult than he had expected. Eventually, he solved this problem by deciding to write his own plays, starting with Where There's a Will in

1986. His plays have been successful, and he was given the seal of approval by the Sahitya Akademi when he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for his contribution to Indian Drama.

Dattani's talent is not restricted to writing plays. He is also an actor, director, dancer, and teacher. He seems to achieve the shifts in his position effortlessly, like a competent actor switching roles. As an actor, Dattani has won accolades for his sterling performances in several well-known plays. As a director, Dattani is internationally known, with many of his plays staged abroad. Dattani is also an accomplished dancer. His landmark production 'Dance Like a Man' featuring a traditional Carnatic musical score and Bharatnatyam won rave reviews in the *New York Times*. Dattani, amidst a busy schedule, conducts drama seminars and workshops with the aim of nurturing new talent.

Dattani's writing credits include two volumes– Final Solutions and Other Plays (1994), Collected Plays (2000) and Collected Plays, Vol.2: Screen, Stage and Radio Plays (2005). His plays constitute full-length stage plays and radio plays. Where There's a Will (1988), Dance Like a Man (1989), Tara (1990), Bravely Fought the Queen (1991), Final Solutions (1992-1993), On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998), Thirty Days in September (2001) are his full-length stage plays. His radio plays for BBC include Do the Needful (1997), Seven Steps Round the Fire

(1999), The Swami and Winston (2000), Tale of the Mother Feeding Her Child (2000). He has also written a short play Night Queen (1996) which was published in *The Telegraph*, Autumn Collection. His plays like Bravely Fought the Queen have also been produced in the film medium.

Mahesh Dattani's full length play, Where There's a Will was first performed by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23 September 1998 as part of the Deccan Herald Festival. The play confronts the problem of patriarchal control, and also exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal authority. Dattani considers the play as an 'exorcism of the patriarchal code' (Mahesh Dattani. 'My Favourite Book'. 449). In this play Dattani focuses on the roles played by the male and the female in a typical patriarchal family and how these roles are reversed when the female takes over as the head of the family. Dattani manages to work his narrative around the intrigues of a dysfunctional Indian family. Hasmukh Mehta, the head of the family does not get along with his family and the rest of the family is not particularly fond of him. Yet they have to function together, with no choice, under the patriarchal order. Things take a positive turn with the death of Hasmukh and the entrance of his mistress Kiran in the Mehta household as the sole trustee of his will.

Dance Like a Man was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 22 September 1989, and was directed by Dattani as

part of the Deccan Herald Festival. It is a play that deals with one of Dattani's main concern – gender- and that too through one of his passions, dance, 'I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatnatyam in my mid twenties ... a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women..' (Raj Ayyar. 'Mahesh Dattani: India's Gay Cinema Comes of Age'.). Dattani subtly deals with serious issues such as the clash between tradition and modernity, the politicisation of culture and the politics of marriage. This play dramatises a family conflict that revolves around a Bharatnatyam dancer couple Jairaj and Ratna, and Jairaj's father Amritlal Parekh. Ratna wants her daughter to achieve excellence as a danseuse, since her own dreams to make a mark in the dance world has been thwarted by her repressive father-in-law, who is prejudiced about choosing dance as a profession. The worst victim in this play is Jairaj since Amritlal is even more averse to his son's choice of dance, which he considers as a woman's profession. Dattani dispels the notion that it is only the female who is oppressed by a patriarchal society which oppresses the male too.

Tara was first performed as Twinkle Tara by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23 October 1990. "Dattani's Tara gives us a picture of the helplessness of woman in our (Indian) society". (Sangeeta Das. "Identity Crisis of Women in Tara". 51). The play is all about

gender discrimination, about Indian parents' preference for a male child over a girl child, unfortunately even amongst educated, urban families. This play in two acts, rounds up the story of the Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, conjoined at birth. The operation to separate the children, leads the family to the act of discrimination between the brother and sister, when the parents Bharati and Patel decide to give the boy the leg which clinically belongs to the girl, thereby disrupting her better- to-be chances of survival. The leg that would otherwise have been an active component in Tara's body is wasted on Chandan as a piece of dead and decaying flesh. The revelation of this truth much later, of the betrayal of her own mother, causes Tara to die in shock. Though Chandan survives the trauma physically, he could never lead a peaceful life and hence migrates to the suburbs of London to create a new identity.

Bravely Fought the Queen, first performed on 2 August 1991 at Sophia Bhava Hall, Mumbai and directed by Dattani, is a play in three acts titled 'Men', 'Women', and 'Free For All'. This play questions the established values, norms, social roles and gender perceptions that are guided and disciplined by patriarchy. Dattani explains that this play "was triggered off by the poem we learnt in school 'Khoob Ladi Mardani Woh To Jhansi Wali Rani Thi' [Bravely Fought the Manly Queen Jhansi Rani, *translation mine*] and then I immediately got this setting of a woman

fighting a losing battle; and the title just came to me and is reflective of Laxmi Bai's fight against the British and it was a losing battle but she never gave up". (Dattani, Int. with Mohanty. 183). Queen, set in present day Bangalore, opens in the house of an executive estate where sisters Dolly and Alka await the return of their husbands Jiten and Nitin from the ad agency they are struggling to run: the matriarch Baa is upstairs in the house, making her presence felt by the ringing of a bell. Praful, the brother of the two sisters and Daksha, the disabled daughter of Dolly and Jiten are conspicuous by their absence: the mounting tension– filled atmosphere and tragic revelations are witnessed by the brothers' only employee Sridhar and his wife Lalitha.

Final Solutions was first performed by Dattani and Preetam Kolipillai at the Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore on 10 July 1993. The play revolves around a Hindu family that gives refuge to two Muslim boys during a communal riot. Using the family as a representation of India, Dattani traces the Hindu – Muslim conflict through three generations of the Gandhi family, examining the deeply– rooted attitudes behind years of prejudice. In other words, Solutions examines the “so – called liberal attitude to communalism”(Rozario Ignatius. Contemporary Social Issues in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani. 104) and also Dattani “highlights the deep sense of futility of such bloody acts of violence”

(Alyque Padamsee quoted by Rozario Ignatius. Contemporary Social Issues in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani.104)

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, first performed by Lilette Dubey and her group at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai on 23 November 1998, dramatises the life of a group of homosexuals and the different problems confronted by them. Kamlesh, a fashion designer entertains guests in a hotel room, but the get-together is just a façade, as he actually needs help. He is still in love with Prakash, a homosexual turned bisexual. He seeks his friends' help to get over the reality that his relationship with Prakash is over. The visit of Kiran, Kamlesh's sister brings about a shocking revelation – that she is marrying Ed [another name for Prakash], unknown to her that he is gay and her brother's ex-lover. In the end, Kiran learns the truth about her fiancé and brother, but it does not break her.

Thirty Days in September was commissioned by RAHI (Recovery and Healing from Incest), and premiered at Mumbai in 2001; and it is by far the most serious and sullen of all his plays. In this play Dattani wished to show the impact of child sexual abuse. He spent a few days with about eight survivors of child sexual abuse who spoke to him about their childhood experiences of their own family members sexually abusing them. This experience had a deep influence on Dattani: "I was completely exhausted at the end of it all. Felt very drained. In fact I did not go back

to the material for a long time”. (Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri. Mahesh Dattani. 73). This play centres on a victim of child sexual abuse slowly recovering from her painful and abused past about her own uncle abusing her and her mother choosing to keep quiet about it.

Do the Needful, first broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 14 August 1997, was directed by Sally Avens. This play explores the theme of the Indian system of arranged marriages in the coming together of families of different linguistic backgrounds, the Patels, Gujaratis from Mumbai and the Gowdas, Kannadigas from Bangalore, with the expectation of negotiating a match between their children Alpesh and Lata respectively. However the prospective bride is involved with another man and the respective groom is apparently gay. However, Lata and Alpesh mutually agree to ‘do the needful’ and enter this marriage of convenience, in order to pursue their separate lives. Thus the play sardonically reveals how marriage and its conventions provide a garb for unconventional relations or socially – unrespectable relations like homosexuality.

Seven Steps Round the Fire, first broadcast as Seven Circles Around the Fire by BBC Radio on 9 January 1999, was directed by Jeremy Mortimer. MTC Production and the Madras Players first performed it on stage on 6 August 1999 at the Museum Theatre Chennai. This play revolves on the theme of eunuchs and their identity as members

in the fringes of the Indian society. It centres once again on a woman. Uma Rao, (a PhD scholar in Sociology, wife of the superintendent of police Suresh Rao and daughter of a vice – chancellor) emerges as an individual engaged in a struggle for identity and dignity of a eunuch Kamala, who was burnt alive by hired goons.

The relevant characteristics of Mahesh Dattani's drama would be discussed here. Dattani's plays are rooted firmly in society, which with all its rumblings and conflicts, becomes the dominant subject of Dattani's plays. The playwright himself boldly proclaims: "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background" (Mahesh Dattani. Preface. Collected Plays. XV). His plays tackle with sincerity and openness, contemporary issues that others would shy away from.

The most charismatic quality of Dattani's plays is his depiction of middle – class Indian life and modern issues like homosexuality, gender – identity, human relationships, inequality of the female sex and communalism. In this regard Alyque Padamsee's comment on Dattani is relevant: "Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Dattani is not writing plays that revive old myths and legends He is one of the few, really the only playwright in English today who writes about modern India" (Alexander Viets. A Stark Look at Modern India.)

Communal disharmony is not a subject usually tackled by writers as they often invite unwanted controversies. But keeping with the spirit of Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen, Dattani chooses controversial subjects. He also manages a balancing act when it comes to tracing the origin of communal disharmony within the Hindu– Muslim communities in Solutions. He refuses to write a play based on his feelings and personal views as that would bring about a biased interpretation. Rather he approaches the issue objectively with the enthusiasm of a good journalist. His literary focus is on “a failure of understanding” between men. (B. Rajan. The Dark Dancer. 262)

Dattani’s plays reflect to a larger extent the lives of socially marginalised sections of society. Dattani brings to the forefront the issues that are prevalent in the society but are not tackled or discussed. Plays like Mumbai, Needful and Queen lift the veil of secrecy that shrouds the marginalised cultures, sexualities and lifestyles. Talking about his choice of themes and subject matter, Dattani says, “Thematically, I talk about areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand ‘this’ space. They live on the fringes of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe – space for themselves as they can”. (Alexander Viets. A Stark Look at Modern India)



One such taboo subject is homosexuality, which Dattani admits that he is quite comfortable to tackle in his plays. In Mumbai, Dattani shocks his audience with one of the many faces of homosexuality where Kamlesh is paying a middle – aged security guard for sex. What is admirable about Dattani is that he write facts without being apologetic even though he may inadvertently hurts anybody in the process. However, the playwright does not accept the tag of a social reformer or an activist; he does not aim at changing society but only make his audience think about the argument he has presented on stage. Can homosexuality change to heterosexuality? Is homosexuality an unnatural aberration of human society at all? Dattani attempts to pose these questions knowing too well that it is hardly possible to arrive at total solutions to these issues.

Other than the issue of homosexuality and the life of homosexuals, Dattani has dealt with the turbulent lives of sexually abused children and the socially / communally oppressed people. Above all, Dattani's representation of oppression as a theme is stronger and louder when it comes to depiction of women. Dattani's plays dramatise largely the issue of gender discrimination and female oppression by patriarchy. In handling woman as the marginalised subject, Dattani explores a wider area of oppression – sexual, social and cultural. Mala in September is

sexually oppressed by her own uncle; Sonal in Will is oppressed by her demanding husband who verbally abuses her; Baa in Queen is a widowed old woman who is still haunted by the violence inflicted on her by her late husband; Alka in Queen is a woman trapped in a marriage where her husband is a homosexual; Tara in Tara is discriminated by her own family for the simple fact that she is a girl. Dolly in Queen is physically abused by her husband almost on a daily basis.

The present chapter introduces thus Mahesh Dattani's life, works and relevant characteristics of his drama. It also emphasises the need to study his woman characters. Mahesh Dattani portrays Indian women in different hues and shades of individuality that make them resist, react or succumb to a society that is patriarchal in content. Dattani's women are neither openly rebellious nor completely submissive. They try to face their daily struggles in their own unique ways as the playwright himself explains his women: "They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it." (Lakshmi Subramanyam. "A Dialogue with Mahesh Dattani". 131) Dattani projects their fortunes and misfortunes; they have flaws yet he does not ignore their strengths. Each woman is different from another woman, each endowed with her own qualities. He has drawn his women with great sympathy, but they are by no means saintly victims.

Dattani's plays are strongly influenced by the oppressive limitations he saw being imposed upon his two sisters and his mother. When describing his sisters' interactions with their peers, Dattani recalls the event as expressing 'a sympathetic view of the devious ways in which oppressed women come to nurture their intelligence' (Viets). Dattani's attachment to his sisters and his mother, his intimate and firsthand knowledge of their experiences in society, their struggles, their tribulations – all these have gone into the making of his strong feminist consciousness.

The dissertation has been organised in five sections as given below.

The present chapter (Introduction) has thus attempted to introduce the dramatist, his life, career, plays and thematic concerns, and his projection of women in the backdrop of Indian drama.

Chapter II, "Image of Woman in Mahesh Dattani's Plays" discusses the image of woman in his plays and attempts to categorise them.

Chapter III, "Female Bonding in Mahesh Dattani's Plays" highlights and analyses the relationships shared between women i.e., mothers and daughters, sisters and friends in his plays.

Chapter IV, "Woman Consciousness in Mahesh Dattani's Plays" examines the woman's consciousness in Mahesh Dattani's plays which

mostly centre on women and also evince an intense concern for women's problems and struggles.

The concluding chapter discusses the following. First of all it sums up the contents of the previous chapters, recounts the arguments offered in the preceding chapters and presents the findings of the research on Mahesh Dattani. Secondly it examines how Dattani in his depiction of women characters is different from his female counterparts. The chapter reaches a finale with the scholar's identification of future areas for research on Mahesh Dattani's plays.

CHAPTER II
IMAGE OF WOMAN IN MAHESH DATTANI'S
PLAYS

The images of women in ancient texts reveal how tradition in patriarchal societies relegated woman to the periphery and reduced her to a marginalised position. These images of woman show how society and its customs confined woman to the spaces in her home as a wife and a mother. This has been emphasised in a passage from the Manu Smrithi, where the freedom of a woman has been pushed away to far oblivion:

Pitaa Rakshati Kaumaree,

Bhartaa Rakshati Yauvane;

Putroo Rakshati Vardhakyee;

Na Stri Swaatantryam Arhati:

(Shastri 1983, IX, 3)

(The father protects the woman during childhood, the husband during her youth, and the son during her old age; a woman does not deserve freedom).

Similarly images of mythical characters like Savitri and Anasuya projected as epitomes of Indian womanhood, influenced many male-written texts. These male-written texts, whether ancient or modern, projected woman as

shy, gentle and dignified as a person, pure and giving as a wife, sacrificing and understanding as a mother. Such projection of woman realistically is impossible as long as she is human and not a goddess. A

woman is a person, a human being with as many flaws and weaknesses as any human being. Mahesh Dattani's plays reflect an understanding of the above truth.

As a playwright Dattani is intrigued by the varied appeal and complexities of women as dramatic characters. In one of his interviews, Dattani admits that he finds women characters very interesting: "There are more layers to peel, artistically speaking." (Viets). This may be the reason why Dattani's women cannot be reduced to stereotyped categories. If at all one attempts to categorise his women, they can be viewed, only with reluctance, as the traditional, the quietly rebellious and the new woman, as these categories tend to be fluid and merge with one another.

The traditional woman like Sonal in Will is a submissive, dependent woman whose role in the family is restricted only to the kitchen. Her life resonates with Tennyson's verse:

"Man for the field and women for the hearth;

Man for the sword and for the needle she."

("The Princess" V, 427)

As the above verse relates, Sonal's 'hearth' is her kitchen, where she spends most of the time, making 'parathas' or 'orange-flavoured halwa'. The kitchen becomes her refuge due to lack of any other outlet to

vent out her frustration and unhappiness. Her over-indulgence in the kitchen therefore is not the least surprising when she insists that “navrathan pulao, malai kofta, baingan barta, patties, not to forget the halwa and salad are not enough for a proper meal”. (Will, 465)

She is expected, like any other woman to cook food for her man, smile cordially at his friends, run around attending to his needs and sexually satisfy him whenever he has the urge. Yet, the woman's willing self-sacrifice does not always lead to marital bliss, since “many a time, the ordeal comes to the ideal woman in the form of the ‘other woman’.” (Meera K. Bai. 125). Sonal continually serves her husband, despite her unfulfilled marital life. She is, according to her husband a ‘faithful dog’ (Will, 475).

Nothing that Sonal does is good enough for her family. The kitchen where Sonal feels most at ease is not free from the judgement of her family. Her husband comments: “She keeps cooking food like it's a new invention. Rich food, wasting so much ghee and oil.”(Will, 465) Even her good intentions

of making healthy food does not stand in good stead. For instance, when she makes salad for her husband and ‘orange-flavoured halwa’ for the son Ajit, Hasmukh questions her ignorance about his health: “How can I

eat halwa when I have sugar in my urine? She knows that! Oneday she's going to kill me with her halwa" His indifference towards her is expressed in his reference to her as a 'faithful dog' and 'as good as mud' (Will, 473)

The situation that a tradition-bound woman like Sonal confronts in her married life can be linked to Kamala Das' fierce and feisty writing, on how such a woman feels:

You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea, and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins,
Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego, I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.
I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions, I mumbled incoherent replies".

("An Introduction," Raghukul Tilak, New Indian English Poets and Poetry, 53)

The interesting dimension of the image of the tradition-bound woman in Dattani is that, she does not remain the passive woman bound by tradition. The transformation in Sonal comes with Hasmukh's death and its aftermath that makes her realise that her passivity lies in her

childhood. Sonal grasps the truth that she has been oppressed and controlled not only by her husband, but also by her sister Minal. She realises that her life is still being restricted by her sister and that she still does not possess the courage to break free from her. It was always Minal who decided everything and Sonal has followed her blindly: “I have always lived in my sister’s shadow. It was Minal who decided what we should wear, what games we should play. She even decides which maharaj is suitable for our family. Even at my husband’s funeral, she sat beside and told me when to cry”. (Will, 511)

Having faced the truth of the root of her oppression, rejection of dominating powers and transformation are not far off. In Sonal’s final rejection of Minal’s authority as decision – maker, Dattani reveals the icon of the transformed female, who is led from the passive adherence to tradition to its active rejection in order to become a thinking individual.

There is another variety of the tradition – bound woman in Dattani’s plays. Occasionally the traditional woman is not only oppressed by the patriarchy, she is even reduced to a tool of patriarchy being fostered within its customs and mores. Dattani portrays one such woman, Bharati in Tara, where she discriminates her own daughter. She risks her daughter’s better chance of survival for the sake of her son’s bleak prospect of having two good legs. In Bharati, Dattani creates a sardonic

image of womanhood. If motherhood and wifehood are the “dual crowns of womanhood” (Gauri Shankar Jha, “Mahesh Dattani’s Plays”. 32), Bharati’s “womanhood” has been suppressed and overpowered by a cultural impulse that expected people to do only what seemed acceptable to society. By favoring her son in a crucial decision, Bharati succumbs to an age-old practice of female discrimination prevalent in Indian society. She has compromised motherhood with an all-powerful tradition of patriarchal male supremacy. Adrienne Rich in her book emphasises the absurdity of the situation of patriarchy controlling even motherhood: “Though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control and the physical situation of becoming a mother is disciplined by males. This glorious motherhood imposed on women conditions her entire life”. (Adrienne Rich. Of Woman Born. 45)

A patriarchal society has an inclination towards a male child, and it is this dark element of society which has compelled Bharati to take the drastic decision. Yet Bharati’s action cannot be simply condoned, and it is in Bharati that Dattani subtly shows us the negative image of the traditional woman. A traditional woman, who is supposedly sacrificing and unconditional in her love for her family, shocks us with her patriarchy – influenced action and heartlessness. If Bharati had not shown partiality and indulgence for the male child, and if only she could have

given the girl child the leg which is rightfully hers, then both the children would have flourished and established themselves in the world. However, Bharati only reflects in her indulgence for the male child, the attitude of her husband who plans for Chandan's education and future prosperity but prefers to overlook Tara's prospects, given that Tara is much brighter than her brother.

Barbara Christian explains patriarchy suppressed motherhood thus: "Ironically, the experience unique to women is interpreted for them through male authorities and structures, through religion, myths, science, politics, economics." (Barbara Christian. Black Feminist Criticism, 21.)

Tradition and culture pressurises Bharati to do the unthinkable, which is why she tries to make up for her guilty conscience by showering more love and affection on Tara. She even tries to redeem herself by readily offering herself as the kidney donor for Tara. It is tragic to watch Tara being deceived by her mother's actions to hide the horrible truth.

"Tara: Do you really want to do that, Mummy?"

Bharati: Very much

Tara: Because you love me so much (Tara, 355)

Dattani sketches the ironical facet of the Indian society where girls seen in the likeness of 'Lakshmi', the goddess of wealth, are still

discriminated and oppressed due to gender prejudices. One such society is reflected in the Patel family's attitude to the female child:

“Roopa: It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies– you know dowry and things like that –so they used to drown them in milk.

Tara: In milk?

Roopa: So when people asked about how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk”.

Tara (laughs suddenly): How absurd! (Tara, 349)

Tara is the image of the discriminated woman, ironically without the slightest inkling of her plight almost like that of the girl baby drowned in milk.

Tara can therefore be viewed tragically as one of the many gender victims of Indian society, where the social system controlling the minds and actions of the people, kills women. If tradition and socio-cultural elements have not played such a crucial part in the minds of these people, the Patel household could have spared Tara, who is spirited and intelligent despite her handicap (unlike her brother) and thus would have been a happy household. Unfortunately the above could not happen because, “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. (Sangeetha Das, "Identity Crisis of Women in Tara." 55). And if it had been the other way round, a handicapped male would be more tolerated and accepted than a handicapped female, as Bharati herself explains this revelation to her children: "Its all right while she is young. It's all 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!" (Tara, 348 – 349)

Similar to Tara, there are also women characters in Queen portrayed as victims of male oppression and patriarchal control. The plight of the mother-in-law Old Baa and the two daughters-in-law, Dolly and Alka as passive, helpless victims of male tyranny parallels the stunted growth of the bonsai plants mentioned in this play: "You stunt their [bonsai plants'] growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and ... stunt them again ... you've got to make sure the roots don't have enough space to spread. You still have to keep trimming them as they grow." (Queen, 244; 246). Dattani further draws on the bonsai plants as a symbol of the claustrophobic and restricted world of women. Lalitha tips Alka and Dolly on how to trim the bonsai plants and the best part of making bonsai trees she says is that, "you can shape their branches into whatever shape you want – by pinching or wiring the shoots." (Queen, 246) and it sounds ironical when related to

women's limited growth in the social or professional spheres. These women suffer at the hands of their husbands. As Dattani says in an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam: "I am not sure I have portrayed the women as victims in Bravely Fought the Queen. I see men as victims of their own rage and repression. This has serious consequences on the lives of women." (Subramanyam. 130)

The stunted growth of the bonsai plants is simulated in Baa, the matriarch of the household. She makes her presence felt only by the ringing of a bell; she has not recovered from the fear psychosis that her late husband has successfully imbibed in her mind with his physical abuse of her, she is a living embodiment of the past. She reveals that her life with her late husband was a pathetic one.

Dattani explores the mind and thoughts of a woman and presents her as a traditional wife, who despite feeling enraged at being beaten by her husband tries to protect him and herself from the embarrassment of exposure: "You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are No! No! Not on the face: what will the neighbours say? Not on the face. Hit me but not on aaah!" (Queen, 278)

Dolly is exploited in almost the same manner as Baa. She is trapped in an abusive marriage with Jiten, who maintains a simultaneous

life with prostitutes. Dolly not only experiences infidelity in her marriage but was also abused physically by her husband; in fact it was Jiten's beatings which caused the premature birth of Daksha which results in the child being born mentally challenged: "And you hit me?! Jitu you beat me up! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up!" (Queen, 311)

However it is the third woman in the lot, Alka, who suffers the most. She has been deceived by her own brother who did not reveal the reality of Nitin as a homosexual. Even Nitin admits that what Praful has done is wrong and completely unfair to Alka: "He tricked you too didn't he? How can you still love your brother after what he did to you ...?" (Queen, 314) Alka escapes the sham of her marriage by spending most of her time drinking. In Alka, Dattani brings into focus the image of a woman resorting to drinking in a trapped marriage situation. Dattani poignantly shows Alka's attempt to fight her situation when she dances in the rain. Alka's dance signifies her sense of freedom from the shackles of the society. She seems to be getting ready to fight back with an imaginary sword swinging in her hand; for all that she had suffered. All the above mentioned women – Sonal, Bharati, Baa, Dolly and Alka reflect images of woman suppressed by patriarchal control or tyranny or social stigmas and they have been sensitively rendered.

The women of the second category – the quietly rebellious externally does not appear to be very different from the woman of the first category. They seem to embody all the attributes required for the traditional Indian women, but that is where they are different from the traditional woman because they seem to be what they are not. These women actually adopt seemingly submissive roles but adopt rebellious ways to attain their goals.

A daughter-in-law is traditionally supposed to be a source of joy in a household, especially in the Indian household. She is considered to be a “Lakshmi”. Typically, she is looked upon as someone who would shower unlimited love and affection on her husband, be an ideal surrogate daughter to her in-laws or a loving sister-in-law to her husband’s siblings. Preeti in Will seems to be an exemplary daughter-in-law in the Mehta household. She helps her mother-in-law in the kitchen, looks after the health of her father-in-law; actually she is the one who reminds her father-in-law to take his tablets for his blood pressure on time and regularly. However, soon after the death of her father-in-law, she completely changes overnight. This is evident when Preeti, Ajit and Sonal are back at home from the funeral and Sonal feeling weak and dizzy asks for some water to which Preeti rudely replies: “Get it yourself! And while you’re at it, get me some too.” (Will 480).

As Hasmukh's hovering ghost comments, observing everything that is happening:

“My daughter – in – law certainly has changed overnight, hasn't she?”
(Will, 480)

Dattani's women like Preeti is imaged as a kind of a femme fatale, “charming, graceful and sly as a snake” (Will, 456) as Hasmukh accurately describes her. For Preeti's change in behaviour and attitude, as Kiran reveals, proves even fatal to her father-in-law. This reveals a more sinister side to her that she has no patience to allow Hasmukh to die naturally. She had therefore switched his blood pressure tablets for her vitamins, in order to get her hands on the inheritance money as soon as possible. All that she had to do to destroy the patriarch was a moderate mutiny, in a very traditional apparel of a daughter-in-law, as she proudly states to her husband Ajit: “How did I manage? Simple, I gave in, I simply listened to him and didn't ‘protest’ like you! I knew he didn't have long to live. I thought, why not humour him for a few days? After he's gone, we can have all the freedom to do what we want, and also all the money. I almost succeeded”. (Will, 501 –502)

In Needful Dattani portrays another helpless but quietly rebellious woman, Lata, caught in the throes of society's expectations of her. She is twenty – four, a suitable age for marriage according to her parents. They

are impatient with her as she shows no interest in settling down. Though Lata is interested in marrying Salim, her parents object to this relationship as he is a Muslim. Constantly pressurised by her family to settle down, Lata plays along with them and meets with 'suitable matches', and in private, rebuffs these meetings: "The last buffalo complained about my narrow hips. Honestly, I would have screamed if this one had done that. You don't need wide hips to bear children, for God's sake!" (Needful, 132). Her words tinged with irony and humors reveal the predicament of women trapped without freedom of choice in marriage. Her rebellious words also bring the picture of frustrated women under the power of patriarchal men like Hasmukh whose main motive for marrying is only to have a son. Dattani reveals that most men have the same mentality as Hasmukh - the first requirement that men look for in a woman is whether she will be able to conceive or not. The representation of a woman trapped in a society that expects her to be only a son-bearer, not even a child - bearer, reveals the patriarchal nature of control on her.

Finally in Lata's choice to marry a homosexual can be seen the figure of a woman faced with a lack of positive alternatives and her consequent willingness to enter into a marriage of convenience with Alpesh and 'do the needful' viz what Alpesh utters: "Tere bhi chup, mere

bhi chup.” [Let us be silent on each other’s secret] (Needful, 142). She like Preeti in Will gets back at the system by remaining within the system.

Female representation in Dattani’s plays therefore is tinged with the following message- that a patriarchal society – set – up, firmly asserts men’s superiority over women; that women, despite playing a vital role in the creation of this society, were never given a fair chance, and have always been shoved to the periphery; that with the rise of feminism, women have become aware of their own identity, and hence the new woman refuses to be a toy in the hands of men. The last category of woman in Dattani’s plays is the new woman, who is rebellious but constructive in her rebellion. She faces her problems in a more positive manner.

Kiran in Will; Smita in Solutions; Ratna in Man; Kiran in Mumbai are ‘new’ women, bold and self– confident, representing the sensibilities of the new Indian woman. They are the ‘new’ confident and strong women. Kiran in Will emphasises this when she says, “I managed. I managed my work, I managed my house, I managed my husband.” (Will, 505). She breaks free from the traditional shackles and seeks her own identity and place in the world. She is modern and career– oriented and this helps in achieving her sense of worth. For “a woman supported by a

man remains bound in her conditions of vassalage. Only through gainful employment women have traversed most of the distance that separated them from the male, and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice.” (Neelam Singhania Rai, “The Rights of Women in the Nineteenth Century”. 47)

The power that Kiran, Hasmukh Mehta’s mistress, wields on him becomes clear from the fact that Hasmukh appoints her the sole trustee of his trust fund and also makes her the caretaker of his family. Being his mistress did not make her any less worthy; instead she is more in-charge of her life than Hasmukh who has lived his whole life in his father’s shadow. Kiran stresses this when she says: “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. Hasmukh didn’t really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him!” (Will, 510)

The tables are turned in the relationship of Hasmukh and Kiran. In this relationship, the woman is more powerful than the man; she is the decision maker. Or in contrary words, here is the situation of a weak patriarch and a woman with a strong will and liberated spirit. Dattani’s image of the new woman in Kiran reminds one of the modern Indian woman – a woman with a combination of beauty and brains, a ‘shrewd

hard – headed marketing executive’ who, Hasmukh had ‘brains to match his’ (Will, 473). In Kiran Dattani has represented the perfect woman who with her wisdom and maturity manages not only her own life, but also the lives in the Mehta household, which culminates in the settlement of unresolved issues - which Hasmukh has failed to do so while he was still alive.

Unlike the male, who replicates his father’s abusive behavior onto his wife, the new woman like Kiran is positive despite adverse circumstances at home, overcoming all obstacles to be the strong, smart, intelligent and confident woman that she is. Unlike her brothers, who turned out to be like their father– drunkards and wife – beaters, – she did not let her miserable life be an excuse to fail in life. Her married life was no more different than her mother’s – her husband is a drunkard. Her experience with life has made her an indestructible woman. Her experience with the men in her life has made her realise that “they were weak men with false strength.” (Will, 508)

Smita, the only secular character in Solutions, is another representation of the new woman, a woman who breaks free from the shackles of tradition, unlike her mother who is still bound by age– old traditions. She sees a lot wrong with the living styles of her mother, who,

a staunch Hindu, has been conditioned to believe that her religion is superior to any other religion.

Ratna in Man is another independent woman character with interesting dimensions of compromise typical of a traditional character, of quite revolt and also femme fatale element. The merging of categories can be seen in her. She is a woman who knows her mind and is determined to achieve her goals. She decides to marry Jairaj not because she loves him or because Jairaj shares a similar passion for dance, but because she realises that there would be no interference from him concerning her dance. Ratna is a strong character and she is not someone who can be easily influenced by anyone, not even Amritlal Parekh, her father – in – law, when he tries to restrict her way of life. She defies him outrightly: “You can’t stop me from learning an art” (Man, 421) Amritlal realises that Ratna is clever and cannot be controlled easily. Even Ratna understands this and confides this to her husband: “... he realised he couldn’t stop me.” (Man, 444) The femme fatale in her surfaces when she compromises with Amritlal to stop Jairaj’s dancing, with the understanding that he would never interfere with her profession. She becomes a reputed dancer at the expense of losing one child for her career and also helps to make her daughter a successful performer too, while her husband has a failed dancing career to his credit.

In one of his more provocative and sensational plays, Mumbai Dattani introduces another new woman of quiet strength and dignity in Kiran who is deceived by her own fiancé and brother who are homosexuals. Yet she refuses to be a pawn to Ed's deception, she does not wait for anyone to save her but rescues herself from any untoward heartbreak by asking Ed to walk out of the door, symbolically out of her life. The rejection of the homosexual husband by the woman in Mumbai, unlike the compromising woman in Needful, is certainly a tall tale on the strong and self-respecting new woman, who seems to haunt many plays of Dattani.

Whichever category or variations of category Dattani's women belong to, what is common to all is their reaction to the patriarchal society in which these women find themselves. These women, despite their differences, express their rebellion in different ways and even unite themselves against the patriarchal system.

Kiran in Will replaces the patriarch and does a better job than Hasmukh at managing the household. She demonstrates her power not merely to control but to love and empathise; and her positive efforts finally bring order in the Mehta household.

Ratna in Man is an ambitious woman who liberates herself from the patriarchal authority of Amritlal Parekh with her ambition and

cleverness. Smita in Solutions proved to be a young woman who is wise beyond her years. She refuses to be burdened with racial prejudice; she makes her mother question her faith and beliefs. Lata in Needful defies the system in her own way. She fulfills her parents' wish and at the same time fulfills her own desires. She marries Alpesh and they both continue their relationship with their other respective partners, even as their parents, the Gowdas and the Patels believe the match to be a success, which would lay the social and cultural threat to rest. Dolly in Queen emerges as a strong and beautiful woman who is a rebel not only in fantasies but also in reality. She bravely holds her ground against her husband Jiten even in front of a stranger. She defends her sister and her brother and makes it clear that she can never forgive her husband for causing the abnormality in their daughter.

Dattani's women are not extraordinary women. He does not portray them as good or evil, they have their strengths and weaknesses, and they have their good days and bad days. They are constantly trying to prove themselves in a man's world. Dattani's image of women can be described in the words of C.K. Meena: "... he has drawn his women with great sympathy, but they are by no means saintly victims. They are strong, egoistic, greedy, spunky, stupid, diffident, sly, cruel..." (C.K. Meena,, "Unmasking the Middle Class, 10.)

Most significantly Dattani's women are not flat or stereotyped characters but growing ones and their growth to self – realisation, maturity and understanding is triggered also by the manner in which they relate themselves to other women. It is the female to female ties that strengthen these women's will to fight and survive under the authority of patriarchy. This issue will become the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

FEMALE BONDING IN MAHESH DATTANI'S

PLAYS

The strength of female to female ties or women's union with their own sex has been discussed by many feminists. Luce Irigaray stresses on the importance of female bonding and its deterioration due to patriarchal culture: "The relationship of women to their mothers and to other women – thus towards themselves – are subject to total narcissistic 'black-out', these relationships are totally devalued. I have never come across a woman who does not suffer from the problem of not being able to resolve in harmony, in the present system, her relationship with her mother and with other women. Psychoanalysis has totally mythologised and 'censored' the positive value of these relationships." (Luce Irigaray, "Women's Exile", 75).

Male and female writers with an inclination for feminism constantly revive the female tradition and bonding in their works. Exploration of female friendships and harmonious bonding becomes an important area of interest in such literary works, including that of Mahesh Dattani. Mahesh Dattani never misses the opportunity of displaying female relationships. His plays not only characterise a variety of female relationships but also inhere the value and importance of female relationships. Dattani says, "Women form the largest minority in the world and I find it interesting to illustrate their personal expressions, their dilemmas, their interpretations." (Viets). In the diversity of woman– to –

woman relations, Dattani brings out the positive aspect of female bonding where women cling to each other initially for support. Then in the process of their comradeship, they discover the strength and magnitude of this relationship. Dattani's plays demonstrate how in this male dominated society, where women's oppression keeps unfolding, the only hope for a woman is sharing and shouldering life's burdens with another woman. His dramatic pieces are classic depiction of how when women, sharing the same experiences in life, arrive at a crossroads of understanding that no one can understand a woman better than another woman.

In contrast to his portrayal of relationships among/between the female as successful, his portrayal of women's relationship with men remains unsuccessful. Alka in Queen is a bitter woman in terms of her relationship with her husband; Sonal in Will has never gained respect or approval from her husband, Kiran in Will has suffered doubly at the hands of her alcoholic father and husband. Therefore it is the woman-to-woman friendship that is seen as a sign of strength while man-to-man friendship most often culminating in homosexual partnership does not lead to positive harmony and vigour.

Dattani portrays female relationships in varied settings i.e., those in a domestic set up or the female relationships outside domesticity. Dattani's plays mostly become the arena for exploration of women's

relationships within the familial milieu. He examines relationship between mothers – in – law and daughters – in – law, the relationship shared between siblings particularly between sisters, and also friendships between women including even those between wife and mistress under the same roof.

The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Dattani's plays either get along with each other or they become lifelong enemies, as in the case of Baa, Dolly and Alka in Queen. These three women are caught in a situation where they have to live together regardless of their animosity towards one another. Baa, the mother – in – law constantly misuses her power as the head of the family; it is the daughters– in – law who are at the receiving end. Dattani highlights the flux in the 'saas-bahu' relationship, where they first share a cordial relationship that later gradually worsens. In Will, Preeti carries out duties as the daughter-in-law, helping Sonal in the kitchen: "I'll help Mummy finish whatever she is finishing". (Will, 463). She is concerned about Sonal when she faints in the kitchen; she helps her to sit at the table ... "Come. Eat something. It will make you feel better". (Will, 467)

Sonal does not have any complaints about her. However, their relationship takes a new turn when Hasmukh dies and it goes from good to bad. Preeti no longer embodies the role of a good daughter-in-law. The

change starts in the kitchen ... when Preeti places some carrots and a knife on the kitchen table with a clatter. "Here, cut these carrots. Call me when you're finished". Her changed attitude does not escape the eye of Sonal. She muses: "Preeti was never like this before". (Will, 506). However at the end of the play, they come to an understanding and finally make peace.

Queen examines relationship between two sisters married into the same household and marked with conflict due to problems in married life leading to hatred for each other. Dolly and Alka are married into the same household; they encounter different problems in their married life – Dolly, who considers herself to be the mature one, is regularly abused physically and mentally by her husband Jiten while Alka's marriage to her homosexual husband forces her to turn to alcoholism. Dattani reveals both sisters gradually overcoming differences in the presence of their female friend Lalitha. Alka no longer fights her battles alone but with Dolly, who emerges as guardian. Alka, finding herself neglected and exploited by her husband, turns to Dolly for strength. These sisters' reclaimed relationship proves to be the discerning factor for them to confront their husbands, as when Dolly blames her violent husband for maiming their daughter in her womb and challenges him: "No! Oh no! I will not let you get away so easily!" (Will, 312).

Solutions is a play that reveals a mother and a daughter with different beliefs and attitudes to life. Aruna is a devout Hindu who lives her life religiously according to her religion. She performs her daily rituals to perfection. However, it is in the course of devoting herself to her religion that she acquires an air of superiority that makes her believe that any other religion is inferior. Although Smita is constantly under Aruna's care, Smita's individualistic spirit and secular beliefs make her rebel against her mother's teachings and ideologies. She confronts her mother:

“Ever since I was small, you have been at me to go to the temple, make garlands, listen to you reading from the Gita. I love you mummy, that's why I did that. I listened to you and I obeyed you. I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother. Maybe I should have told you earlier, but I'm telling you now, I can't bear it! Please don't burden me any more! I can't take it!” (Solutions, 213).

What is fascinating in this mother-daughter relationship is that, even their opposing attitudes and beliefs do not disrupt the trust between them nor do they allow even the father to do so. For an instance, Smita feels stifled by Aruna, but she does not let down her mother in front of her father. She does not like her mother's self-righteous behaviour but she can still tolerate it. But what she cannot tolerate is her father taking

advantage of her mother's nature as a way of dominating her. She does not appreciate her father undermining Aruna's beliefs and so remains with the mother, pretending to support her: "How easy it would have been for us [Smita and her father] to join forces and make her [Smita's mother] feel she was wrong". (Solutions, 386).

A situation that is unique to Dattani's drama is that, not only mother-daughter or mother-in-law to daughter-in-law or sister to sister relations, but even the wife and mistress relations can lead to female bonding. The most surprising dimension of the wife and mistress relations in Will is that, it begins with distrust but ends in happy trust and harmony. Initially when Sonal learns the presence of a mistress [Kiran] in her husband's life through his will that makes Kiran the sole trustee of his trust fund, she reacts with shock and disbelief.

However, surprisingly, the expected animosity between the wife and the mistress last only for a few minutes. Kiran and Sonal, the mistress and the wife come together to form a team – they realise that they enjoy each other's company; Sonal's attitude towards Kiran was a sign of the beginning of a beautiful friendship ... "She can share my room! Mrs. Jhaveri and I have a lot to discuss. Come. Help Mrs. Jhaveri settle into our lives". (Will, 495). As Kiran and Sonal get to know each other, they realise that they have not been treated fairly by the men in their lives.

Sonal was under the control of Hasmukh, who never respected her feelings and sentiments. Kiran has suffered at the hands of her abusive drunken father, later on her brothers let her down ... “They have turned out to be like their father, going home with bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers.” (Will, 508). She confides to Sonal, “I-I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard and listened to his swearing”. (Will, 508).

The suffering brings them together into a strong friendship that began with rivalry leading to sharing of woes and finding comfort in each other. As the playwright himself says of women, “They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I am focusing on is the powerlessness of these people.” (Lakshmi Subramanyam. 129) It is their realisation of their powerlessness and sharing of their condition that brings them together into a powerful union and wisdom.

For example, Sonal is able to see her husband for the first time as a man living in his father’s shadow, deprived of identity and self worth, “Where were his own dreams? His own thoughts? Whatever he did was planned for him by his father”. (Will, 509). Sonal realises that her husband the egoistic, pompous, controlling man was actually a weak man with false strength”. (Will, 508). Hasmukh observing the conversation between his wife and mistress could not believe his ears. They were

supposed to be enemies, competitors. It was his worst nightmare. The final crushing blow for Hasmukh was when his wife offers her gratefulness to his mistress, “You have made many things clear to me. I am glad you are living with us. I hope you’ll stay with us forever”. (Will, 511). To which Kiran replies: “Thank you. You have made me happy”. (Will, 511). Symbolically Sonal’s finger, hurt earlier while cutting the vegetables is now healed, and life looks beautiful again.

Once the petty differences among these women are overlooked by them, they come together to fight against a common enemy – the patriarchal system, and their friendship brings about defeat to Hasmukh as he is beaten at his own game. He admits he is defeated: “They are not my family anymore. I wish I had not interfered with their lives. They look quite happy together.” (Will, 515)

Female bonding reaches its summit in the same play, when all women in the household unite against the injustices by the male in the household. Kiran gains respect from Preeti when she chooses not to tell Ajit that his wife had been switching his father’s tablets which brought his demise sooner than expected. Thus female bonding has a positive aspect in the Mehta household with the three women’s experiences of doubt, anger and jealousy for each other now transformed into a relationship of trust, respect and love. Dattani brilliantly captures the new

found female unity in a scene when Preeti suddenly holds her abdomen and Kiran and Sonal responding to her:

Kiran: Did the baby move?

Preeti: It kicked! Almost as if it had ... sprung to life.

Sonal: Oh. I think that's a good sign that all is well". (Will, 515).

However not all female relationships lead to female bonding in Dattani's plays and not all mothers – in – law are friendly with their daughters – in – law.

Dattani focuses on the negative dimension of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship also. In Queen, the discrimination between women has a negative impact on the lives of the women. Baa the matriarch of the Trivedi household is not particularly in good terms with her daughters-in-law. Baa is an old embittered woman who has suffered much cruelty at the hands of her late husband, she still fears him after so many years of his death. "I have married such a villager! Aah! You slapped me?" (Queen, 288). The plight that she experienced has left her repressed and angry; she turns all her anger on her daughters-in-law. She takes on the role of the patriarch, and makes up for all the lost time. She controls her household, her sons and her daughters-in-law. She provokes her sons to beat their wives, and it is in one of these beating episodes that

things go beyond the control of Baa. Dolly was carrying Daksha, when Jiten started beating her, acting on the advice of his mother ... “No! Jitu! Hit her on the face but not on the ... stop it Jitu! In the face, only on the face!” (Queen, 311). When he realises his mistake, it is too late to change things or turn back time. He cries in front of Dolly: “I didn’t mean to ... you know I didn’t. It was Baa! Blame her but not me!” (Queen, 312).

If Baa had taken on the role of a second mother to Dolly and Alka, and treated them like her own daughters, they would have shared a strong bond in which the men of the household would not dare to treat them unfairly. Yet she poisons her sons against their wives.

Baa: “I don’t want her in this house!”

Nitin: “Will you be happy if she Wasn’t in this house?”

Baa: “Yes. Send her away to the neighbour’s house”. (Queen, 302).

Tara deals with the destructive dimension of female bonding, where the mother discriminates the daughter. In the beginning Tara and her mother Bharati appear to share a loving and friendly relationship. Bharati absolutely adores Tara, “Tara! My beautiful baby! You are my most beautiful baby! I love you very much” (Tara, 355) and Tara reciprocates to her mother with the following words: “I have plenty. I have you”. (Tara, 355) Gradually the play exposes this female bonding only to be a façade behind which there is a terrible, tragic, and cruel story

of female discrimination by the female herself. Bharati the adoring mother, who Tara considers her world, has denied Tara of a good leg for the sake of her son. In a conversation with her son, she tells him: “I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. It’s what she... deserves. Love can make up for a lot”. (Tara, 349).

Bharati also imposes her sense of guilt on Roopa, a neighbour who is of the same age as Tara when she bribes Roopa to be her daughter’s companion. Tara on the other hand, unaware of the fact that her loving mother is responsible for her handicap, adores and admires every move of her mother especially when her mother decides to donate her kidney to her. Tara thinks that it was such an unselfish and loving act on her mother’s part. She innocently asks her mother: “Do you really want to do that, mummy? To which Bharati replies “very much” to which Tara concludes: “Because you love me so much” (Tara, 355). Tara’s hopes on her mother are shattered when she learns the truth and she is crushed with disbelief that her own loving mother would have deceived and destroyed her... “And she called me her star!” (Tara, 379). Their relationship, so complex and deep from the beginning has a tragic end, unlike Smita and Aruna in Solutions who overcome their differences to cling to each other and in consolidation, to fight out the patriarch.

Dattani occasionally presents sisters also in unequal or power relations as seen in Sonal and Minal of Will, where Sonal feels that her sense of worth has been crushed by her controlling and dominating older sister Minal. Sonal having lived all her life in her “sister’s shadow” as she herself points out, falls into the same pattern of submission with her husband.

Tara is another play that explores a negative dimension of unequal female relationships in Roopa and Tara. Their friendship is not one nurtured on mutual interest and affection for each other but an artificially created one, with Roopa being promised lipsticks and magazines by Bharati in order to keep company to the invalid Tara. Bharati, Tara’s mother, entices Roopa to be Tara’s friend:

Bharati: So – there must be a lot of films you are dying to see ... You can see them here, anytime you want to, no restrictions.

Roopa: Can I watch Fatal Attraction?

Bharati: You can watch whatever you want! Just be my Tara’s friend. (Tara, 341).

Such an artificially simulated friendship turns out to be futile since Roopa and Tara are two very different girls with opposite personalities. Tara’s wit, intelligence and spark compensate her physical abnormality. She cracks jokes at the expense of her leg ... “Hurt? Embarrassed? Not at

all. You can say it sort of ‘runs’ in the family – this leg”. (Tara, 336).
Roopa on the other hand, though normal, is quite dull, slow and lacks sharpness of wit, constantly mistaking one word for another, the way she calls ‘ogres’ as ‘oglers’. An instance of Tara’s wit and Roopa’s stupidity is revealed when Roopa compliments Bharati’s coffee but somehow cannot get the right word, which Tara provides:

Tara: “She means decoction”

Roopa: “Decoction – yes, of course! How silly of us. A concoction is something you have when you get hit on the head”. (Tara, 346)

Bitterness and jealousy is the foundation of the relation between Roopa and Tara. Roopa is jealous of Tara’s wit and sense of humour; she belittles Tara’s intelligence by calling her a ‘freak’. (Tara, 379). Tara, who is unable to conform and fit in due to her abnormality, despises Roopa’s fullness, and calls her ‘ugly’. (Tara, 369). It remains without saying that it is a friendship that did not last for long and did not have a good ending as well, with both girls hurling insult at each other:

Tara: “So how does it feel having one tit smaller than the other?”

Roopa: “How dare you one-legged thing!”

Tara: “I’d sooner be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged than be an imbecile like you. An imbecile with uneven tits.”

Roopa: “And to think I pitied you! Oh I think you are disgusting! I only came here because your mother asked me to. No, she didn’t ask me, she bribed me to be your best friend”. (Tara, 369).

A similar kind of forced friendship is created between sisters Dolly and Alka with their friend Lalitha in Queen. This friendship starts with Lalitha defending her presence ... “Your husband asked me to come and meet you” (Queen, 233), to which Dolly, in confusion, replies: “There must be some mix up. Er – sit down.” (Queen, 233). Lalitha seems to be an intruder in the Trivedi household. However, at the end of the day these women seem to have accomplished a sort of a mutual understanding between them.

Other than portraying female relations within domestic sphere, Dattani also explores female relationships that transcend religion, class, status, social background.

Dattani reveals that female bonding is more than meets the eye. Women as a whole are a repressed category and their coming together is a kind of revolt against or subversion of patriarchy. Sonal and Kiran in Will unitedly underplay the dictatorial authority of Hasmukh Mehta. Kiran and Sonal surprisingly develop a deep and loving friendship, overlooking the tag of wife and mistress. It is this bond of friendship that finally liberates Sonal from the overpowering presence of her husband

and sister, “How little I knew him. If I had understood him when he was alive, I would have died laughing.”(Will, 510). Sonal also emancipated herself from her sister’s grasp when she finally takes control of her own life, “Well, as far as I’m concerned you can go jump into a bottomless pit!” (Will, 516) as she slams down the phone and turn towards Kiran.

Kiran: “We all have to remain friends for another twenty-one years.

Sonal: Not for twenty-one years. Forever!” (Will, 515)

Dattani enlightens us that the woman, living in a man’s world, with the reins in the man’s hands, struggles to find her way out of the maze created by man. Therefore in Dattani’s plays women come together and in their unity find strength and courage to survive and fight out patriarchy. This issue, part of Dattani’s woman consciousness remains to be explored and examined in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER IV

WOMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN

MAHESH DATTANI'S

PLAYS

If one assumes that a male writer writes with an awareness of feminism and feminist spirit, that he centres not merely women's lives and dilemmas but also man's dilemma on women's discrimination, and if one further witnesses in such a writer a leaning towards feminist principles and gynocentric approach to literature, then he can be called as a writer with an 'awakened gendered consciousness.' It is Mahesh Dattani, more than any other Indian dramatist, who writes with a sense of an awakened female sensibility. Such an awakened sensibility helps the writer to portray women and their experiences in a male dominated society. It also leads the writer to present male characters as sensitive to the female plight in society. It also enables him to examine patriarchy in a different manner viz its control and suppression over not only the female but also the male. In Dattani's plays, woman no more becomes the object of the male 'gaze,' as it happens in Girish Karnad's plays, but an active subject, free to take decisions on her life. The male too, seen as victim of patriarchy, is female – sensitised.

In Dattani's plays woman is viewed in a multidimensional rather than uni-dimensional perspective. Lakshmi Subramanyam accurately refers to how Dattani avoids an 'essentialist perspective' (Lakshmi Subramanyam. 131) of his women characters. He has more appreciation for women rather than men, particularly Indian men whom he describes

as “very shallow subjects who all too easily give in to the roles prescribed to them” (Alexander Viets. A Stark Look at Modern India. International Herald Tribune), whereas he readily admits that he finds women more interesting.

Dattani’s gendered consciousness is strongly nurtured by the oppressive limitations he had earlier witnessed being imposed upon his mother and two sisters. His empathy with the struggles, tribulations and dreams of the female members of his family account for his strong female sensibility. His articulate way of projecting women, in all their glory and flaws, reveals his strongly inherent gender consciousness. His plays are spaces that manifest his intense concern for women’s problems and struggles. Dattani therefore belongs to the category of male writers who centre women in their fictive world, and that is why Gauri Shankar Jha calls him as the “*avante garde* feminist.” (Jha, 31)

Mahesh Dattani’s plays not only represent courageous women trying to assert as individuals, but also timid women gradually accepting their weaknesses and also shortcomings of the people around them. Sonal in Will, after years of living in the shadow of her sister and then her husband, finally becomes her own person. It was only after her husband’s death that she really understands him and she realises that the man who controlled and dominated every sphere of her life, was himself under the

control of his father all his life. His situation therefore, she realises, is no different from hers, and his mistress Kiran stresses this when she says... “Where were his own dreams? His own thoughts? Whatever he did was planned for him by his father.” (Will, 509). Sonal then becomes aware of the fact that she was not the only victim of patriarchy, and this thought liberates her and at the end even makes her sympathise with her husband, “How little I knew him. If I had understood him when he was alive, I would have died laughing.” (Will, 510)

The act of Dattani’s female characters bonding together naturally and overcoming or challenging patriarchy is another example of Dattani’s representation of gender awareness and also feminist consciousness. In the company of other women in the household, Sonal in Will regains control over her life once again after a long time, and she understands that things were about to change, “But everything is going to be different now. I can feel it.” (Will, 511), the telephonic conversation with her sister leading to her rejection of her sister’s decisions for her proves her act of reclaiming her life, her identity, her confidence and most importantly, her freedom: “Well as far as I’m concerned you can go jump into a bottomless pit.” (Will, 516). Dattani’s gender consciousness in this play is obvious from his presentation of not only the female pitted against the male, but also the female dominance of the female.

Sometimes Dattani's female consciousness lends itself a gynocentric dramatisation of the story, where dramatic action is based on female narratives. In Solutions, the presence of two Muslim boys taking shelter in the Gandhi household triggers off memories for the matriarch, the grandmother of the household. Making use of the grandmother's diary, the dramatist goes back in time to reflect and narrate the past, thus connecting the past with the present. Thus Dattani pays tribute to women's writing, through the diary of Daksha. Dattani understands that writing is a strong weapon, a source of freedom of expression especially for women during the colonial period. Women were supposed to conceal their thoughts and feelings, and it took Daksha a lot of courage to pen down her innermost thoughts as she reveals, "Dear Diary today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages." (Solutions, 167). Writing is a therapy for women, it is a process of self-discovery and Helene Cixous encourages this art, "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you. You are for you ...women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing, their stream of phantasms is incredible". (Helene Cixous. *The Laugh of the Medusa*.)

Though Daksha is not writing a literary classic, the diary that she writes gives the only space to voice out her feelings without the prying judgement and ridicule of her in-laws. Where else could she make fun

of in – laws without a care in the world? It is only in her diary that she reveals the nickname that she has christened her mother – in – law, ‘Gaju’, and the reason she gives this particular name is because of her mother – in – law’s usage of water... “You should see her bathe! Sorry, hear her bathe. It sounds like there’s a herd of elephants splashing about in our bathroom. And the amount of water she needs! Baap re!” (Solutions, 175).

Dattani reflects the awakened female sensibility of women in his plays. She no longer desires to be the epitome of the Indian woman– the sacrificing, loving woman, the Sita – Savitri image that worships her husband as lord and master of her life. Only from her diary we come to know that she neither worships her husband, nor considers him superior to her, but actually regards him stupid: “You must be wondering why I haven’t mentioned Hari [her husband] very much. After all, he is my lord and master. Well that’s because I think my lord and master has the brains of a silly goat.” (Solutions, 175). Behind Daksha’s stereotyped existence as daughter, wife, mother and grandmother, Dattani discovers a new woman who is witty, clever and quite secure with her own identity from her shrewd and humorous observations: “He [her husband] wants to stop his studies and join his father in his cloth mill ... I must talk to him and tell him to enjoy himself while he is in college. Not that the world is

going to miss a great scholar, but at least I can get some news from him about the country's future. They can't be all lazy and brainless like Hari... the only time he will speak intelligently will be when our community people come to collect donations for building temples and celebrating festivals. They will sit on the steps while he asks them questions about sadhus and sants whom he is sponsoring on tours. That will make him feel important. Then he will feel he is somebody." (Solutions, 197)

Daksha in her act of writing a diary becomes a symbol of the feminist vision of the subversion of patriarchy. As Dattani says, "Daksha becomes a symbol of our historical vision, our sense of history, how prejudice is formed and how we deal with the situation today". (Uniyal, Ranu. "Conversing with Mahesh Dattani", 182)

The playwright's act of sensitising the reader to the woman's cause can be viewed in his representation of inequality in marital relations and oppression of woman through the institution of marriage. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes that, "in the relationship between man and woman two chief archetypes are seen; the Radha – Krishna motif and the Rama – Sita relationship, where the woman is the submissive sufferer, who through her suffering enhances the nobility of her husband."(Meenakshi Mukherjee. The Twice Born Fiction. 133). This defines most Indian marriages where women are properties of their

husbands, in which the male is the rightful owner. Dattani explores the repressive situation of the women trapped within failed marriages. Men also suffer, but not as much as the women do. Hence he portrays marriage as a dying institution that causes mental decay in women, particularly in plays like Queen, Needful, Mumbai, and Will.

Queen portrays three different marriages under one roof, and all the three marriages have proved to be unsuccessful. Baa, the matriarch of the house is the living embodiment of the past; she constantly wanders to the past, as she is still embittered by the way, her husband treated her. He had constantly abused her physically and mentally, and after he left her, she becomes more or less senile. The abuse that she suffered at his hands leaves a permanent scar in her mind that would not heal with time. The fear that she has for him is still strongly etched in her mind: "There he is. He is coming! Go away! Leave us alone! (Queen, 302) On account of Baa's bitter experiences, one would expect her sons to be sensitive and understanding towards their wives, considering that they and their mother suffered at the hands of their father. But ironically her son Jiten turns out to be exactly like his father. He is unfaithful to his marriage; he beats Dolly, and does not spare her even when she is in the advanced stage of pregnancy. This results in her child being deformed. However it is Baa's

second daughter – in – law Alka, who suffers the most, since her husband's homosexuality turns her into an alcoholic.

Tara presents another dimension of a complex married life in which, Bharati and her husband Patel are constantly competing with each other for their children's attention.

Will projects a marriage where there is no give and take or relation – building based on trust and understanding. It is a marriage where the patriarch is the head of the household, and he expects everyone including his wife, his children and their spouses to follow his every word. He must have the final word in every matter and decision. Sonal is the Indian homemaker who passes her days looking after her husband's needs, cooking him food, taking care of his health yet Hasmukh trusts her not even with his money and considers his wedding day to Sonal to be the 'the greatest tragedy of his life.' (Will, 464).

Dattani with his unique perspective has shown how even conventional marriage set-up that is supposed to provide security to women only affects them. Wives like Aruna in Solutions and Sonal in Will are trapped in marriages where their husbands are never openly cruel. The husbands observe their duties and obligations as husbands but are ignorant and indifferent to their wives' emotional needs and they disregard their wives' individuality. Though Ramnik is a liberal Hindu,

who protects two Muslim youth during Bombay riots, he is small-minded when it comes to dealing with his own wife – he does not respect her religious beliefs. He fails to understand that Aruna is an individual with her own set of ideals and religious traditions; he undervalues Aruna's devotion to her religion, "Nobody is asking you to pray all day." (Solutions, 173) which subconsciously restricts Aruna's belief in herself. Ramnik plays the patriarchal card when he tries to impose his liberal ideas on her and his daughter Smita, yet he objects when Aruna does the same thing, "I don't like the way you impose things on Smita." (Solutions, 173).

Dattani reveals another complexity in marital relationships, affecting women – homosexuality. Homosexuality complicates marriage which is an institution that promotes heterosexuality. Homosexuality which has been an unconventional and a taboo subject has been placed on the spotlight and is revealed to the Indian audience in the two plays of Dattani – Queen and Mumbai. Dattani counts homosexuality as one of the many reasons that cause the breakdown of a heterosexual marriage. The issue of homosexuality is particularly interesting in Dattani's drama, for its exploration of how it affects women.

Queen reveals the traumatic experience that a woman like Alka goes through in her disappointing married life that forces her to confront the reality her husband as a homosexual, which ultimately makes her succumb to alcoholism.

In Mumbai, Ed manipulates Kiran, the only straight person, to think that he is the ideal man for her. "I feel like a complete woman with him", (Mumbai, 104) Kiran ironically reveals this to her brother's friends. She is however saved from the doomed marriage with the discovery of a picture openly that suggests that Prakash and Kamlesh were lovers. The idea of a happy married life with Prakash is completely shattered as the truth about his homosexual relationship is revealed. However, she is different from Alka in Queen in the sense that she is initially presented as a simple, weak, victimised woman, but she emerges perhaps to be one of the strongest characters who base all her ideas on openness and truthfulness. The intensity of the moment does not weaken her, as seen in her rejection of Ed who offers his love to her, with a promise that he will love her in whatever way she wants: "You tried. But no thank you. Get out of here, Ed." (Mumbai, 108).

The two plays dealing with the issue of homosexuality reveal the male point of view of the complex situations that homosexuals face on day-to-day basis. At the same time, they also deal with female point of view of women trapped in futile relationships with homosexual

husbands and also their predicament of having to sustain their marriage which is only a sham to cloak the hidden truth. Two issues on the issue of homosexuality relevant to female oppression arise in these plays. First of all, the patriarchal notions of homosexuality oppress homosexuals on the one hand, and more adversely oppress women, who are trapped in marriage with these homosexuals. Secondly, under patriarchy, even homosexual males have an upper hand over women. Both these viewpoints are relevant to study Dattani's woman consciousness.

Most of Dattani's plays express the dramatist's gender awareness that makes him trace the roots of women's oppression in marriage to patriarchy. The meaning of patriarchy clearly states, "a form of social organisation in which the father or eldest male is the head of the family; a society in which men hold most or all of the power". (Catherine Soanes.ed. The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary. 614) His plays are a tour de force on how patriarchy affects women more than it affects men. For the women are more affected by men's rage and repression. This rings true with the Indian society, which has strong patriarchal values, and Dattani displays the patriarchal stronghold in his plays Will, Man, Tara, Queen.

Tara gives us a glimpse of the Indian society that claims to be modern and liberal in thought and action but in reality degenerated with corroded values of male superiority and male chauvinism. The maternal grandfather in the play is the embodiment of all things that is patriarchal. He plays god with the lives of his grandchildren, he decides that the good leg should be given to Chandan, when medically it was found to be more suitable for Tara. His indulgence for the male child further escalates when he leaves all his property to Chandan and nothing at all for Tara. Patel, his son – in – law is a mere onlooker who does not protest against the decision taken by Bharati’s father and regrets only when it is too late, “Maybe if I had protested more strongly!” (Tara, 378). Incidentally, Patel displays social prejudice when he objects to Chandan helping his mother with knitting, “But you can think of turning him into a sissy– teaching him to knit!” (Tara, 351) Thus Patels’ situation echoes Dattani’s observation on men as “victims of their own rage and repression.” (Subramanyam. 130). In the above sense, patriarchy is also self-destructive since even the male succumbs to its control. Nitin and Jiten in Queen were beaten by their father. The frustration and fear psychosis only make them worse husbands like their father. Jiten especially treats women only as sex objects and balances a marriage simultaneously with

life with prostitutes in his office. Baa while describing Jiten says, “Jitu is just like his father. Just like him.” (Queen, 284).

The self-destructive dimension of patriarchy is viewed in another protagonist in Man. Jairaj is belittled by his father for choosing the profession of a Bharat natyam dancer, taboo to many middle class patriarchal families. Bharatnatyam is one of the oldest traditional dance forms of India and like any art form, if practiced by dedicated dancers, is deeply spiritual. However, the middle class Indian society has not grasped the idea of a man being a practitioner of this dance form. A man is supposed to act like a man, provide for his family, and take up hobbies that befit his sex. Dattani uses his own experience as a student of Bharatnatyam, in order to truly understand the situation of Jairaj, “wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women”. (Raj Ayyah. ‘Mahesh Dattani: India’s Gay Cinema Comes of Age).

Jairaj and his wife Ratna are dancers, under the shelter of Jairaj’s father, Amritlal Parekh. He clearly asserts his status in the household as the head of the household and that there should be no misunderstanding that the house belongs to him, and that everything and everyone living under his roof is under his control as he stresses: “Your husband happens to be my son. And you are both under my care. It is my permission that

you should ask for.” (Man, 420). Amritlal is a man of fixed notions and limited perspective, “You can’t have a decent rehearsal in this house? I can’t have some peace and quiet in my house?” (Man, 420) He does not understand his son’s passion for dance. As long as dancing was just a passing hobby it was fine, but to take it up as a profession is something unacceptable. Like a typical patriarch he cannot tolerate his son sporting dance costumes, growing his hair long and practising all the time. His shallowness and prejudice is evident when he says, “A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic.” (Man, 427).

In this play, Dattani reveals that Jairaj suffers more than Ratna under the patriarchal system. Jairaj’s tragedy is simply that he has chosen to pursue a profession that is considered suitable and right for women, and he suffers that choice; as his father puts an end to his professional life with the help of Ratna. Together they destroy Jairaj for their own selfish interests and at the receiving end – is Jairaj. Amritlal expects to stop this obsession for dance and be a real man, while Ratna understands that by agreeing to Amritlal’s offer, she guarantees herself a life of dancing with no interference. Ratna completes her part of the deal; she destroys his career and ultimately his self – esteem slowly, bit by bit. Jairaj himself realises this ... “I want you to give me back my self – esteem! ... You

took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow.” (Man, 443). He also holds his father responsible for his failure and becomes an alcoholic, frustrated at his failure as a dancer, frustrated at being eclipsed by his wife’s success, frustrated as he cannot fight the patriarch and he loses his identity and self– esteem, which he pleadingly asks Ratna to give back to him.

Therefore Jairaj is a protagonist who succumbs to patriarchy’s iron hands. Of all men who are subjugated by patriarchy, only Ajit of Will rebels against the patriarchal father and is also successful in overthrowing his authority. All his life he has rebelled against his father and his ideology. Though Ajit is an intelligent young man with new ideas to improve the company, he is always dismissed by his father Hasmukh. The infuriated son consequently fights with his father; this is evident at the dinner table in an argument between his mother and father. Hasmukh confidently tells Sonal that Ajit does not want anymore ‘parathas’ while Sonal is sure that he still wants them. Ajit, after a while, takes his own decision and agrees with his mother which makes Hasmukh furious:

Hasmukh: Liar! You lied! You do not want them!

Ajit: No! I don’t want them! Yes, I lied! Because I would rather lie than agree with you! (Will, 469) As Kiran says “He [Ajit] may not be the

greatest rebel on earth, but at least he is free of his father's belief. He resists. In a small way but, it's a start. That is enough to prove that Ajit has won and Hasmukh has lost. (Will, 510)

Ajit underlines the roots of his rebellion in his own words: "Ever since I was a little boy, you have been running my life. Then, when I grew up, I learnt to answer you back. I think it was worth disagreeing with you, Atleast I have the satisfaction of knowing that you were worried about me. (Will, 487)

Through the father – son conflict in the above play Dattani exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal code. In Will, Hasmukh Mehta – the successful entrepreneur and the head of the Mehta household expects his family members to obey every command that he utters. He expects to be in – charge of his son's life the way his own father was to him: "A son should make me happy. Like I made my father ... happy. I listened to him. I did what he told me to do." (Will, 475) Such expectations and demands in the name of the head of the family are only bound to meet a dead end and emptiness, as it happens with Mehta, who bitterly regrets that his son does not possess a single quality that he looks for in a son and hence openly argues over this fact in front of his wife and Ajit's wife. More control and authority over his people only leads the patriarch to resort to pettiness. He even embarrasses him when he is talking with his

friends on the telephone. When Ajit protests, he answers in a way that only a petty patriarch would: “Wrong! I, Hasmukh Mehta, have every right. Its *my* phone you are using in *my* house” (Will, 458). The word ‘my’ is emphasised very strongly as a reminder of his authority. Hasmukh views Ajit as incapable and irresponsible. Hasmukh should have been proud of his son as he refuses to live in anyone’s shadow, but apparently he discourages Ajit’s individualistic nature: “If you are you, then you are nowhere. You are nothing but a big zero.”(Will, 461). Such a remark only echoes a patriarchal code that sounds jarring in an era of individualism and global recognition of individuality as unique to personality development and learning. Hence the researcher’s contention that Dattani represents the social emptiness of his patriarchal figures that reduces society to authority, obedience and victim – victimiser life pattern. Particularly when Dattani observes men to be victims of their own rage, he is also providing the picture of their devastating effects on women.

The playwright’s observation of the male and the female plight under the control of patriarchy helps one to draw interesting parallels between the male and the female consciousness within the playwright. One interesting example of the presence of the male and the female psyche is Tara, where the female discrimination of the sister by the family members leads her brother to self- exile and self-inflition.

Chandan and his sister Tara share a loving and close relationship, he completely adores his sister, and when he learns of the injustice meted out to Tara, he is heartbroken and forced to lead a life of guilt for no fault of his own. He could not forgive himself for the crime committed against his sister; he blames himself for her death. He escapes to London to live an anonymous life under a new identity Dan. He lives without a personal history, unable to make any progress with his writing career, alive but barely living due to the painful reality that his only friend Tara is dead: “Moving in a forced harmony. I move, just move. Without meaning. I forget Tara. I forget that I had a sister – with whom I had shared a body. In one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out ... and separated.” (Tara, 379 – 380). Chandan therefore is the finest example of Dattani’s gender – sensitised male psyche and Tara is thus the epitome of a male playwright’s woman consciousness.

Dattani’s woman consciousness has enhanced the feminist goal in his plays that explore woman and centre her life, anxiety or dilemma. Most importantly, we find that the sufferings of the Indian woman, the marital disharmony, overbearing tradition all find a place in Dattani’s plays. He traces the roots of woman’s problem in patriarchy, he reveals that what kept women bound to their chains was the multifarious roles women were expected to perform in the patriarchal society. However, his

plays depict that in the long run there is a process of self-discovery in the women, when they become aware of their emotional needs and accept challenges in order to live a more meaningful life. In sketching women in the act of a journey to self-discovery Dattani has proved that he is a male artist with a profound understanding of the feminine sensibility. It is not surprising then that he has succeeded in delving deep into the subconscious needs, desires and aspirations of his women characters and has presented an unbiased perspective of the Indian woman and her true self. The concluding chapter would elaborate further on this aspect.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

An attempt was made to briefly study the selected women characters portrayed by different Indian playwrights with their different perspectives. The researcher considers Mahesh Dattani as one of the most adept and brilliant playwrights, whose plays bring to the fore many burning issues that plague society. This is clearly evident in the Sahitya Akademi award citation that considers Dattani's work as one that "probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender ... a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English." (Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri. Mahesh Dattani.15) Dattani particularly excels in his portrayal of women characters as he himself justifies this, "Women form the largest minority in the world and I find it interesting to illustrate their personal expressions, their dilemmas, their interpretations." (Alexander Viets. A Stark Look at Modern India.) Woman as a subject occupies a pivotal role in all of Dattani's plays. Dattani's women characters are not portrayed as extraordinary women, but they are ordinary women with strength and weakness, trying to overcome the challenging situations in their everyday lives. The researcher here sums up all that has so far been attempted to study.

In Chapter I, "Introduction", the researcher first of all attempted to view Dattani's portrayal of women in the context of Indian drama, and then introduced the playwright's life, works and achievements. It showed

how women in Indian Drama were presented from a male stereotyped perspective. Women characters were portrayed at two extremes – either as a woman with noble virtues or a woman endowed with negative qualities. Mahesh Dattani, however, was seen to present women characters as individuals possessing both positive and negative traits and thereby making them human. The salient features or characteristics of his plays – such as patriarchy, communal unrest, gender discrimination, homosexuality, unequal treatment of women - were also discussed. Woman and her adverse circumstances in a patriarchal society was a subject close to Dattani's heart, with his sympathetic approach to women rooted in his own family.

Chapter II, "Image of Woman in Mahesh Dattani's Plays", presented an overview of the images of women, mostly stereotyped, in the ancient texts. Dattani's women, however, are not stereotyped but presented as individuals with unique personalities. This chapter categorised women into three types – the traditional woman, the quietly rebellious woman and the new woman. These categories were viewed as fluid and not fixed categories.

Chapter III, "Female Bonding in Mahesh Dattani's Plays", identified the presence of female tradition and bonding in his plays and explored the relationship shared between/among women. The chapter has

viewed how Dattani portrays female relationships in varied settings i.e., those in a domestic set – up or the female relationships outside domesticity. Dattani's plays mostly become the arena for exploration of women's relationships within the familial milieu. The chapter particularly discussed Dattani's portrayal of the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the relationship shared between siblings particularly between sisters and also friendships between women, including even those between wife and mistress under the same roof. It was also seen how Dattani portrays not only the positive nature of female bonding but also the negative dimension of female relationships where female turn against their own kind - a mother destroying her daughter's life or sisters in unequal power relations.

Chapter IV, "Woman Consciousness in Mahesh Dattani's Plays", has shown Dattani as a male writer with female sensibility that is reflected in his plays. The chapter looked into the issue of examining the playwright as a male writer with an awakened female sensibility, which renders a gynocentric vision to his plays and which the researcher chose to name as 'Dattani's gender or woman consciousness'. Such a vision or gender awareness, it was seen, has helped the dramatist to view patriarchy as affecting the male too but mostly having an adverse effect on the female. Therefore one could understand Dattani's woman

consciousness from the following: his viewing women in a multidimensional rather than uni-dimensional perspective, his empathy with the women around him and their lives; female in union against patriarchy; his gynocentric dramatisation of the story, where dramatic action is based on female narratives; his portrayal of the awakened sensibility of the woman characters in his plays; the playwright's act of sensitising the reader to the woman's cause; his depiction of the repressive situation of women trapped within failed marriages; his unique perspective has shown how even conventional marriage setup that is supposed to provide security to women only affects them; his dramatic exploration of how man's homosexuality affects woman's marriage and her personal life; his tracing the roots of women's oppression in marriage to patriarchy; his contentions on patriarchy and its emptiness; his sketching of women in the act of a journey to self-discovery.

The research arrived at the following findings in the process of this study. An examination of the image of woman in Dattani's plays revealed that his women are neither extraordinary nor stereotyped. These women are constantly trying to prove themselves in a man's world: "... but they are by no means saintly victims. They are strong, egoistic, greedy, spunky, stupid, diffident, sly, cruel". (C.K Meena. "Unmasking the Middle Class, 10). Most significantly, they are not flat or stereotyped

characters but growing ones and their growth to self – realisation, maturity and understanding is triggered also by the manner in which they relate themselves to other women. The representation of female bonding and oppressive female relations by a male writer reveals that he has feminist leanings. Therefore the depiction of female bonding in Dattani's plays highlights the feminist streak expressed in his plays.

The woman consciousness in his plays has enhanced the feminist goal that explores woman and centres her life, anxiety or dilemma. Most importantly, we find that the sufferings of the Indian woman, the marital disharmony, overbearing tradition all find a place in Dattani's plays. He traces the roots of woman's problem in patriarchy, he reveals that what has kept women bound to their chains were the multifarious roles women were expected to perform in the patriarchal society. However, his plays depict that in the long run there is a process of self-discovery in the women, when they become aware of their emotional needs and accept challenges in order to live a more meaningful life. In sketching women in the act of a journey to self-discovery, Dattani has proved that he is a male artist with a profound understanding of the female sensibility. It is not surprising then, that he has succeeded in delving deep into the subconscious needs, desires and aspirations of his women characters and

has presented an unbiased perspective of the Indian woman and her true self.

The findings also revealed that Mahesh Dattani is different in his depiction of women characters from not only his male counterparts but also his female counterparts. It is not surprising that the woman writer is interested in portraying women characters, the reason being either, projection of her own 'self' or the responsibility she feels as a woman in order to bring into focus the daily struggles of a woman in a man's world. However these very reasons limit the female writers as there is a possibility of biasness in subjective treatment of their own kind. For example Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta deal with the issue of rape in their plays Lights Out and Getting Away with Murder respectively. They use drama as a medium to bring attention to the stigma of rape which is commendable, but it restricts their creativity as they are emotionally involved with the raped victims. Mahashweta Devi again restricts her subject to the marginalised communities. She is more of an activist. Dattani is different from male writers in his viewing of women in the sense that his perception is neither stereotyped nor voyeuristic which is typical of patriarchal male writings. His perception of women is also different from female writing as he views women objectively from a

male's perspective and also with a female consciousness that makes his observations sympathetic towards women.

The next finding which the study arrived at is a logical conclusion from an idea of his sympathetic and objective viewing of women. A study of Dattani's dramatic technique further reveals this presence of feminism in male writings. Dattani's use of images reveals a man's empathy for the woman's cause. Alexander Viets captures Dattani's images, "The images used to express the condition of women by one of India's playwrights are startling and vivid: "The dwarfed and stunted boughs of a bonsai tree, a young bride locked in her room for 30 years, a Siamese twin forced to sacrifice a limb for her brother, a spastic child from an unhappy and destructive marriage... Perhaps most startling of all is that this strong feminist voice belongs to a man."(Viets).

The research on Mahesh Dattani highlights the possible areas of further research on his drama. These areas are merely identified as topics as they are not in the purview of this present research and they are as follows: representation of the middle class family in Dattani's drama; treatment of the theme of homosexuality in Mahesh Dattani's selected plays; the idea of conflict and its repercussions in Dattani's plays, viz, political / familial / social /gender conflicts and finally Dattani's use of

dramatic and theatrical techniques that render a unique quality to his plays.

To conclude, woman as a subject has found a worthy and deserving representation in Mahesh Dattani's plays. Dattani's portrayal of women's characters certainly adds a new dimension to how women are viewed in Indian Drama.

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