

The Adverse Influence Of Hegemonic Patriarchy On Women In The Plays Of Dattani: An Analysis

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a name that guided a faltering Indian English Drama on the path of reliability, steadfastness and distinct identity. A director, actor, dancer, teacher, and writer, he was born on August 7, 1958. He writes about the marginalized sections of our society such as minorities, women, gays, and transsexuals. His works deal with burning social issues of contemporary Indian society. One of the key issues that Dattani deals with in his plays is 'Patriarchy' which is a serious concern for the world in general and India in particular. Patriarchy is known as a socio-political system which makes the women inferior to men and allows men to exercise their power over women. Dattani finds fault with the treatment of women in the modern times. He feels that women still are not given complete freedom and exploited fully which makes them belong to the subaltern community. This paper is an attempt to analyse the struggle and plight of women caused due to Hegemonic Patriarchy. Two of Dattani's most popular plays, 'Where There is a Will' and 'Tara' are chosen for study. This paper further attempts to study the dramatic devices through which Dattani elevates the socio psychological plight of women caused due to the domination of men.

Keywords: Indian Drama, Hegemonic Patriarchy, Plight of Women, Gender Problems.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is a name that guided a faltering Indian English Drama on the path of reliability, steadfastness and distinct identity. He is one of the most versatile dramatists that Indian drama has produced. A director, actor, dancer, teacher, and writer, he was born on August 7, 1958. He writes about the marginalized sections of our society such as minorities, women, gays, and transsexuals. His works deal with burning social issues of contemporary Indian society. His plays have been staged to critical acclaim all over the country and abroad. He, in his plays, keeps women at the centre of his dramatic world and may be called an avant-garde feminist. His plays not only bring up gender issues and the space allotted to women in a patriarchal society,

but also they deal with gender biases and prejudices which still affect the lives of many girl-children even amongst educated and urban families. Dattani is known for his experimentation with the themes and innovative techniques which brings him the image as one of the greatest dramatists. Each play is unique in its approach to both the invisible and socially burning issues. He believes in presenting what we usually see and hear about in our contemporary society. He opines that

"Theatre survives only when we see our aspirations, our struggles, our hopes and values reflected in it and when we don't see ourselves in the theatre, we'll stop believing in theatre....Theatre is a reflection of what you observe, to do anything more would be to

become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre". (Prasad, 2007 : 262).

Mahesh Dattani is one of those writers who have very strongly tried to hit the minds of their readers and audiences with their writings and screenplays. He stands by the marginalized, victimized and oppressed sections of the society. He always engages himself in the endeavour to change the society and make it a better place for the weaker sections by bringing their problems to the centre and by making his audience develop the feelings of love and compassion for these underprivileged sections who are exploited and deprived of their basic rights to live happily and equally with others. Dattani finds fault even with the treatment of women in the modern times. He feels that women still are not given complete freedom and exploited fully which makes them belong to the subaltern community. It is obvious that "Since ages, man, in order to establish his superiority over those low in rank, caste, race, economic status, religion and so on has exercised authority" (Kumar and Arora, 33).

Patriarchy and Its adverse influence

One of the key issues that Dattani deals with in his plays is 'Patriarchy' which is a serious concern for the world in general and India in particular. Patriarchy is known as a socio-political system which makes the women inferior to men and allows men to exercise their power over women. This dominance of men leads not only to the weakening of the position of women but also exploitation and discrimination of women in the name of standards and norms set by the society. Women experience this subordination, which is purely unnatural, not because of the biological factors but the sociological constructs of the gender. This discrimination has turned out to be a perennial problem which is beyond any cure. In fact, Patriarchy is one such phenomenon that instigates men to show indomitable spirit with which they can supersede women in all aspects of life.

It is 'traditions' which have shown adverse impact on the growth of women by organizing the lives of women across various cultures in all ages. The cultural set up of a society plays a key role in forming the rules, norms, values, roles and gender perceptions which define the

appropriate and desired behaviour of each gender. In the words of Andrienne Rich, Patriarchy is "the power of the fathers, a financial, social, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour—determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male." (80)

Indeed, patriarchy is a system that is fully controlled and operated by male. It gives the supreme authority to man and woman is supposed to accept the second role which is controlled by man. In a country like India where cultural values control the personal preferences and interests, a woman is expected to adopt to the conditions of her husband's family. She is expected merge her life with her husband and need to lead the rest of her life under his shadow. A woman is supposed to be quiet, courteous, tolerant, sympathetic, soft, decorous and submissive since her childhood and she should never speak against the wish of her father or husband. She is not allowed to do anything which is defined as male qualities by the society. If a woman tries to do any act which is masculine, society casts severe aspersions and sometimes she is even punished severely. It is unfortunate that even in the modern world women are not given equal opportunities. In every walk of their life, they should deal with the unfair domination of men that leads to acute psychological struggle. Women need to suppress and repress their emotional turmoil which may sometimes take the form of neurosis and develop suicidal tendencies in them. M.Rajeshwar remarks, "women are mercilessly denied opportunities for open expression of their true feelings in the tradition bound Indian patriarchal society. In this respect and in many other respects they are at great disadvantage when compared to men." (Arora 100). It is only a woman who can brook the unjustifiable and irrational domination of men and can still lead a normal life by maintaining complete composure and calmness. But, when a woman fails to cope with the domination of male, and manage her mundane household activities, it causes chaos not at personal level but the entire family gets affected.

Every religion sets the foundation for the stereotypical role of women as subservient to

men. There are many references in the history where woman is looked down upon. Starting from the Greek times to the contemporary world, a woman is treated as a second grade citizen whose capabilities are completely undermined and undervalued. Simone de Beauvoir opines that the history itself is a collection of constructive efforts of the people in power to silence suppress the female. She says that "It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine" (126). It is only towards the end of the twentieth century, there started a change in the approach and attitude of men towards women. There are many playwrights who have empathized with the struggle and sufferings of women and tried to present them to the readers through their works. Among these writers, Mahesh Dattani holds a very special position as he, though not a feminist writer, could depict the delicacies of women's concerns in the most diligent manner. He is known for his adept in delineating the struggle of housewives in the modern world, their efforts to find a respectable position, the adverse influence of orthodoxy and conservatism. He elegantly presents the subtle emotions of women belonging Indian middle class families with his exceptional dramatic imagination and incredible insight. He tries to underscore the fact that despite all great claims of modernity women are still undervalued and treated as a device which is meant only for procreation and satisfying the carnal desires of men. They are considered as irrational, illogical, sensible, sympathetic and emotional. This inferior image of women is the core concern of Dattani's plays which make a sincere effort to portray the gender problems caused due to patriarchy which is prevalent in the modern Indian urban society.

Most of Dattani's plays aim at posing direct questions to the society expecting a positive change in the attitude of people. The three most popular plays that underscore the plight of women are 'Where there is a Will', 'Bravely Fought the Queen' and 'Tara'. All three plays deal with the problems of women caused due to the hegemonic patriarchy. In 'Where there is a Will', it is Hasmukh Mehta who wants his entire family to be under his control. He considers his son to be a useless fellow who is good for nothing. He feels that his son wastes his hard earned money and he does not know the value of life. Hasmukh would always tell

about how he used to be when he was young and the respect that he had for his father. He wants his son to be like him working hard and spending money carefully and leading a strict life. He does not even treat his wife, Sonal as a human. He says that his wife is like his dog which shows its gratitude for being fed by its owner. He thinks that his wife is also with the same attitude who shows great respect for him only because he takes care of her. Hasmukh's wife has learnt to live by obeying the orders of him. She has completely dedicated her life to him. She plays the role of a typical Indian wife who bears with all the familial burdens besides the torture of her husband. Though she is treated impudently, she still takes great care of her husband. Hasmukh suffers from various health problems such as High Blood Pressure, Diabetics and Stress and it is Sonal who regularly monitors his health by giving him tablets in time.

Analysis of Where There is a Will and Tara

The play 'Where There is a Will' presents certain facts: most of Indian housewives do take sincere care of their husbands though they are not treated as humans. They dedicate their entire life for their husbands. On the other hand, there are husbands who just treat their wives as sex objects. "For the woman, the man must become all; he is allmeaning, the justification and definition of her existence, whereas for him, she is a pleasure, an extra, somehow inessential." (Pateman 307). Sonal is completely under the control of Hasmukh. She is exploited and victimized by her own husband who is not only an adamant husband but also a cruel father. Apart from Sonal, it is Ajit, son of Hasmukh who is another victim of Hasmukh's dominating ruthless nature. He made his son suffer because of his dominating attitude. Hasmukh expects that every son should be like him. He considers himself to be the best son which made him become so cruel that he treats his own son with high expectations. Kate Millet opines in her 'Sexual Politics' that "the principle of patriarchy appears to be twofold: male shall dominate female and elder male shall dominate young." (166). Hasmukh is of the opinion that the prime responsibility of a son is to carry forward the legacy of his father and to follow the path shown by the father. The

following lines clearly indicate that how irrational the thinking of Hasmukh.

Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? No. There is more to it than that. What? May be he needs a faithful companion? No. If that was it, all men would keep dogs. No, no I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name. (CP 474-475).

Hasmukh is a father who is fully disappointed with his son, Arjit. And this disappointment is the result of his over ambitious nature and patriarchal attitude that has not only made his son hate him but also caused a huge rift between father and son. Hasmukh wants to have complete control over his son which is strongly retaliated by his son. Arjit hates his father for having such a dominating behaviour. He openly disparages his father for his despotic nature. Hasmukh realizing the fact that it is not easy for him to make Arjit follow his orders, starts insulting and humiliating him by not allowing him to take the charge of his office responsibilities. On the other hand, Sonal, being the wife of Hasmukh, cannot escape the exploitation and victimization of Hasmukh. Preeti, the daughter-in-law of Hasmukh has also been made a victim of Hasmukh's despotic nature. Hasmukh has no respect even for Preeti, who is married into their family. Preeti had to endure with the reprehensible behaviour of Hasmukh for he is the head of the family and the decision making authority. Through the character of Preeti, Dattani has tried to present the pains and struggle of many of the women who get married into a family which is completely new to them and face inexplicable torture because of people like Hasmukh. Preeti also faces the same patriarchal domination that Sonal undergoes. Dattani, through the character of Hasmukh, has made an attempt of making his audience realize the importance of being sensible with our family members specially with women who have to make a new home after their marriage. Dattani strongly sympathizes with the Indian married women and encourages his readers and audiences to question and rebel against the patriarchal authority which is the real reason for the

immortal impression that male should dominate the female.

Dattani uses a very creative and intriguing dramatic technique 'Ghost Appearance' in the second act of the play to show that Hasmukh even after his death also wants to see how his wife and son manage their life. He comes back to his home in the form of a Ghost and observes his family members. Through the image of a 'Ghost', Dattani aims at signifying the fact that people with patriarchal nature cannot easily change their attitude. It is very difficult for them to change their thinking and accept the reality. Hasmukh cannot digest the fact that his family is very happy after his departure. However, his wife Sonal finds it difficult to lead her life without Hasmukh. She is the only member in the family who really suffers the loss of Hasmukh. This nature of Sonal makes Hasmukh understand how deeply an Indian wife loves her husband. Hasmukh knows that he has never treated Sonal like his wife and degraded her badly. The authoritarian nature of Hasmukh who has strong patriarchal ideas has brought him nothing but disrespect of his own family members. It has caused the entire family severe suffering making Sonal undergo pains inexplicable. Hasmukh feels ashamed of himself when he witnesses the real love of Sonal who bearing all the emotional and psychological struggle shows immense respect for her husband. On the other hand, Hasmukh engaged himself in extra-marital relationships. He is a promiscuous guy. He says, "enjoyed sex, twenty five years of marriage and I haven't enjoyed sex with her. So what does a man do? I started eating out well, I had the money. I could afford to eat in fancy places. Afford that too. Those expensive ladies of the night in the five star hotels! Something between a wife and a pick up, yes. A mistress! It didn't take me." (CP:473). Hasmukh gets shocked to see the firm character of Sonal to be loyal to him. He wonders how Sonal could be such loyal to him. When Hasmukh was alive, he never understood the love of Sonal. He always would complain that the biggest mistake that he did in his life is getting married with Sonal. But, He realizes the harsh reality after his death which is what Dattani wants to highlight. Dattani's focus is on the senselessness of strict adherence to the patriarchal codes set by the society. He strongly believes that this process of making one gender follow the irrational codes ignoring the

sensibilities of women, who are an essential part of the family, can harm the very integrity of the foundations of the family itself.

Dattani designed the play not only to entertain and but also educate his audiences. He perfectly blended both humor and humane consciousness which ensures the reach of the intended message to the maximum. The analysis of the invisible presence of the lead character, Hasmukh Mehta, revealing the original feelings of all the family members ; the pain of Sonal, the relief that both Ajit and Preeti feels, represents the command of Dattani over the dramatization of the theme which grabs the complete attention of the audiences and readers and takes them into a world where they connect themselves with the characters in the play and start understanding, feeling the pains and sympathizing with the characters. Hasmukh Mehta is one such character with which all men who possess the quality of hegemony can identify themselves.

Victimization of Tara

Another world famous play of Dattani is 'Tara'. Tara is the story of two conjoined kids. Tara and Chandan. It explores the exploitation of a girl child based on the gender. One of the major themes of Tara is Gender discrimination in which a clear favouritism towards a male child can be found. The play deals with the emotional and psychological battle of a mother and daughter of an upper middle class urban educated family. The emotional separation of two Siamese twins is the centre point on which the entire play is built on. Tara's mother gives birth to two conjoined kids, Tara and Chandan, with three legs out of whom only one will have two legs after operation. It is Tara who have better chances of having two legs after separation. But unfortunately, the entire family give their consent in favour of the boy which is a sign of sheer exploitation of a girl who even before her birth faces the victimization in the form of patriarchy. The family was influenced by maternal grandfather of the children who bribes the doctor and drives him in the direction of favouring the male child. This decision of favouring Chandan has spoiled the life of Tara and made her crippled for the rest of her life.

'Mr. Patel', Tara's father and Maternal grandfather of Tara played a key role in Tara's

life. Mr. Patel who is a clear emblem of Male chauvinism, demands the family to abide by his directions. Mr. Patel is the final decision maker of the family. He is the one who even influenced Tara's mother who is helpless and agreed upon the decision of giving two legs to Chandan. Mr. Patel believes that a woman is incapable of taking the responsibilities which a man can easily handle. He is of the opinion that Chandan, being a boy, should be given priority over Tara as he can take care of the family in future and become the bread winner for them. It is unfortunate that Mr. Patel, being a father, shows biased attitude towards his own daughter which is because he is fully possessed with patriarchal ideology. This is very common in most of the typical Indian fathers who believe that a boy will be taking care of the entire family once he completes his education and finds a job.

Tara's mother, Bharathi is also equally responsible for the handicapped life of Tara as Bharathi didn't confront with the family members, especially with Tara's father, Patel whom she could have objected. Dattani tries to present the fact that even women, mostly Indian mothers, do have the feeling that a boy can lead a better life than a girl and can take the onus of looking after his family much better than a girl child. This typical belief which is widely prevalent in the society must have stopped Tara's mother from expressing her dissent to the family's decision of favouring the boy over the girl. Here, Dattani wants his readers to know the fact that most of the women leading a domestic life are also convinced, and started accepting the fact that leading the family and looking after the needs of the family members is the prime responsibility of a man and he can perform that job much better than a woman.

Tara, who is a brilliant girl with high enthusiasm and great spirit, has to suffer and lead a diseased life because of the belief system of the society she is part of. The hegemonic patriarchy which legitimates the dominant role and position of the head of the family member who in general is a male person is what costed Tara her life. Because the family believed in the words of Mr. Patel who is the head and the one who takes care of the kids including Bharathi, no one could speak against to his decision. Dattani makes a very strong appeal to his audiences that we should try to get out of the

clutches of these conventional and orthodox beliefs which sometimes cost us irrecoverable loss and cause inexplicable pain besides spoiling the relationships between a husband and wife, a husband and son, and a mother and daughter.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the belief system of a society cannot easily be changed or replaced with new ideology. However, Dramatists like Dattani are show great concern towards bringing radical changes which will help the oppressed and exploited sections of the society live and lead their lives better. Dattani through these plays, "Where There is a Will" and "Tara" strongly questions the society that why only men should take the responsibility of leading a family. He firmly believes that the position of women in our society has not changed much over centuries. She still leads a life which is fully under the control of men. The order of patriarchy which decides the role of a woman basing on the gender and dominates them need to be seriously reformed in order to ensure a safe, pleasant and secure future for girl children. Dattani seems to elevate this message through these both plays and overtly appeals the people to come forward to stand with the oppressed and marginalized.

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