

Women's Ordeal in the Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is the most powerful and potent dramatic voice in the present Indian English dramatic world. He has enriched and embellished tradition of Indian Drama with his experiments and innovations. With the arrival of Dattani on the literary scene, the scenario begins to change. His plays are originally written in English. He has authored a good number of dramas diverse in themes, techniques and devices. He has facilitated in bringing out Indian English drama from apologetic existence. Under the patronage of dramatists like Dattani, the withering tree of Indian English Drama has started taking its roots and growing rapidly.

Keywords: women, voice

Mahesh Dattani, a contemporary Indian writer in English draws his inspiration to write from the bitter realities of the world, particularly society. The society of India is based on patriarchy, where the male is the centre of power and authority, and his power is unquestionable. There is no freedom, space, voice and stand of other members of the house specially the women. The position of women is always ambiguous where she struggles. In his plays, the women characters are trapped in the clutches of patriarchy. There women, who are the victims of suppression, are also the prisoners of the past; their past had influence in their present too.

His first play *Where there's a will* is divided into two halves. The first half of the play covers the period of Hasmukh's life and the second half deals with the period after his death. i.e. physically in the first half and metaphysically in the second half. The title of the play is very significant. The word WILL has two implications. It indicates a legal document prepared by the head of the family. This word WILL also means the will power to stand on one's feet as in the case Kiran, Preeti and Sonal family. The characters in the play *Where there's a will* by Dattani could not find any door open to solve the problem of the WILL.

In this play character Hasmukh is the patriarch and a promising business man. He regards everyone in the house as useless. He is a nagging and stubborn person.

He interferes in the smallest matter of other family members. Sonal, Hasmukh's wife who does not have inbuilt abilities to tackle the family, she is hedged by her sister's idea of how to run the family and how to look after her husband. According to Hasmukh his son is a big zero, he doesn't allow his son to speak to government officers. Preeti seems to be a brilliant daughter in law who manages everyone. In the words of Hasmukh, she is presented in the play as an individual who knows how to proceed to the next goal without help.

Almost all the characters are in contrast with their counterparts. Hasmukh is a despotic husband but his wife Sonal is an obedient housewife. Hasmukh dominated the corporate world whereas Sonal reigns in the kitchen and pooja room. He always complains but Sonal is adjusting in nature. Like a traditional mother, she is very caring mother. She looks after her son very well. However, Sonal is not satisfied in her married life with Hasmukh as she reveals it herself. But she does not protest. In childhood, she is under the control of her father, in youth under the control of husband and after that under son. She is not left independent. In this play, Sonal is victimized by her

husband's authority. In a few instance, she is governed by her sister also. Her sister Minal says to her that, "You are not firm with him. You know he has an abnormal heart, but you still let him carry on smoking and drinking" (CP 467).

On the other, Hasmukh paints himself as a symbol of authority and perfectness, but in reality, he is not so. He hides his own weakness. Dissatisfied with his married life, he had a mistress called Kiran Thaveri, who looks after his office and later took over his house after his death. In fact, she was the train behind him. Hasmukh wants to control the life of everything and everyone that surrounds him. He not only controls the life of his family members while he was alive but also makes an arrangement to control their lives after his death through his well.

On the whole, Sonal Mehta is the silent suffers and whereas Kiran and Preeti represent the modern women who are capable of handling both household and outside world with plumb. They fight against the patriarchal unjust authority for their rights and equality. But Sonal is the most tragic comic character. The tragedy of her life is that almost all the characters flame her in one way or the other. She herself realizes that she was first a machine which would listento commends. After Kiran's entry her condition became intense. Later she found a true friend in her. Through her support and help, Sonal is able to gain confidence in taking decisions in her life.

Kiran is the most important female character in the play. She is also a victim of patriarchal society. However, she raises her voice against the injustice. She represented as the new women of society. Kiran herself being a victim, very well understands the suffocation and dilemma of Sonal. Kiran boldly says that women are suffering not because of their faults, lack of education and employment, but they are victims of man's false ego and pride. This male chauvinistic attitude is the cause of all their woes and sufferings. And the play ends in a very interesting way. Sonal, Kiran and Preeti have decided to be one. Sonal heads the family but Kiran is in the place of Hasmukh. Thus, all the women characters join hands to eradicate the evil of male dominance and their lustful intentions. They are endowed with the ability to assess and subsequently shacking offs the unjust shackle of patriarchy.

His play *Tara* shows how importance of male child affect the life and growth of female child in the society. It

explores the theme of discrimination against women in general as well as Patel family in particular. The play *Tara* is the story of Siamese twins connected with each other down the chest and requires an efficient surgical operation. The problem is a psychological one in which the mother and her father's decision plays a vital role. The twins take birthwith three legs and girl Tara mainly owned the third leg till the moment of the surgery. But after the surgery, the boy gets the leg. Tara loses the most important organ of the body, and that is her leg.

A mother usually loves all her children equally. She understands the pain of her child, especially if the child is a girl because the mother knows that how much a woman suffers in the society. Bharati is a mother and a woman as well. But she doesn't do a fair judgment to her daughter. She chooses her son over her daughter. It is true that Bharati was provoked by her father, to take such a decision. This shows the weak character of Bharati. She fails to stand firm and she fails to raise her voice against the injustice done by her father to her daughter. Bharati doesn't show unconditional love to her daughter when Tara take birth. She suffers whole life with this guilt, and that is the reason she tries to compensate her passion to Tara, in every possible way she can.

She suffers from the fear of losing her daughter comes to know the truth; she might start hating her mother. Bharati doesn't even allow Tara, to talk to her father much because he aware of the fact. Tara loves everyone in his family, but she loves her mother the most. She even considers her mother as her idol. But Tara gets a jolt of her life when she gets to know the truth from her father Mr. Patel, Tara becomes speechless, and she fails to believe that her mother could do like this. But before she could speak to her mother regarding this, Bharati goes insane. Bharathi decides to give her daughter, all the happiness of the world in every possible way. She even donates one of her kidneys to her daughter, so that she can survive in the world for some extra period. Bharati's wrong decision ruins the lives of both Tara and Chandan because the surgery couldn't bring success. After the surgery both Tara and Chandan become disabled.

Bharati doesn't encourage her disabled daughter. As a mother, she should have helped her daughter, though Tara is strong enough to manage her life on her own.

Instead, she says to her son Chandan, that the world would accept him, though he is disabled. But the world is not going to take Tara. She shows discrimination again, at this point of view. Bharati is a woman, who doesn't have strong personality. Bharati is an apathetic victim of patriarchy; she blindly obeys her father's decision. Tara is also the victim. When Tara comes to know there, it was her mother who made such a decision whom she trusted the most, she couldn't bare this truth and this shock takes her life away. She is not dead, but she was victimized to death by the society and moreover by her own family members.

Tara could have made her boldness and her strength to fight the society to engrave a place of her own, if her parents have given her moral support; she might have shown like a star as her name signifies. Her last statement in the play is for her mother where she says, "And she called me a star". (CP 379)

His play *Thirty days in September* mainly revolved around the story of two people, Mala and her mother Shanta. It throws light on the issue of incest and child sexual abuse. Both the women were sexually molested by the one who belongs to their own family. It was Vian, Mala's own maternal uncle who demolished her physically and that caused mental and emotional disturbance in her. The sexual molestation affected both the women but Shanta maintained silently due to social stigma and Mala, on the other hand, revolted against it.

The play opens with the conversation of Mala and her counselor, which lays bare her puzzled state of mind. She frankly revealed her real identity to the counselor. For Mala, life became intolerable both inside and outside the family. Mala was unable to understand the reason behind the silence of her mother. The act of sexualized violence and her mother's silence both were assaulted, not only the body of Mala but also her psyche too.

Her anger towards Shanta became more violent when her mother, instead of talking to her, escaped into the pooja room and kitchen. She was unable to free herself from the trauma of past experience and developed a deep sense of victimhood. When Deepak was proposed to Mala for marriage, she revealed to him her passion for sex with several people, arguing that even if she had to accept to marry him. She behaved indifferently to Deepak who

understood her pain and he helped to overcome from oppression.

The mother Shanta, despite knowing everything, wanted her daughter to start after with Deepak. She compelled her daughter to forget everything that had happened to her at the age of seven. She reiterates, "I forgot I forgot everything be like me". (CP Vol.2 29)

The mystery of the past revealed after a year's long silence and utter that she was also suffered the molestation for ten years by the same person when her daughter was six; this made Mala dumbstruck and stunned. She regrets, "While I accused you of not recognizing my pain, you never felt any anger at me for not recognizing yours. We were both struggling to survive but I never acknowledge your struggle". (CP Vol.2 58)

At the final stage of the play, we acknowledged the harsh reality that Shanta and Mala were molested by the same person, Vinay. When her mother revealed her part in the reminiscence, Mala sympathizes automatically with her and the relationship bond towards each other. Although Dattani projects the character of Shanta and Mala as the victims of Mala's dominance and oppression, he does not offer any redemption to the marginalization of women in patriarchal society.

In all his plays, Dattani portrays Indian women in different hues and shades of individuality that made them resist, react or succumb to a society that is patriarchal in content. Dattani's women are neither openly rebellious nor completely submissive. He projected her fortunes and misfortunes; they have flaws yet he does not ignore their strength. Each woman is different from another woman, each endowed with her own qualities. He was drawn his women with great sympathy, but they are no means saintly victims. His plays dramatized largely the issue of gender discrimination and female oppression by patriarchy.

Mala in *Thirty days in September* was sexually oppressed by her own uncle. Baa, in *Bravely fought the queen* was a widowed old woman, haunted by the violence inflicted on her by her late husband, Alka was a woman trapped in a marriage where her husband was a homosexual; Dolly was physically abused by her husband almost on a daily basis. In *Tara*, Tara is discriminated by her own family, due to which she was doomed to be lame.

Hence Dattani has created similar range of female characters in his plays. He presented the multi-faced Indian woman. They represent the twenty first century modern woman who was characterized by authentic, candor, assertion, independence and courage. The physical weakness of women and the idea of dominance over women provoke some to the deed. In Indian society which is ridden with inhibitions, sexual feelings are usually repressed. Such feelings find gratification in the act of molesting both physically and mentally. It could be the lack of other meaningful relationships that lead men to such acts. One theory says that men abuse women to disguise the fact that they fear them in some way. Sexual conquest may be seen as one of the qualities of the macho male. Men resort to violence when they feel they lack the skills, talents and resources to fulfil the cultural expectations of superior patriarchal status.

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