

Women as Shakti in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

In contrast to many contemporary Indian dramatists who project Indian women as passive victims of male domination living like second class citizens, Dattani highlights them as individuals of spirit and a will of their own who can sustain their position and identity in spite of several hurdles and obstacles they face in their growth and fulfilment. As the dramatist himself graphically depicts, they are like bonsai plants that have been clipped and trimmed, their personalities pruned to male will and pleasure and made to dance to their tunes. Dattani reveals an uncommon and uncanny facet of Indian women as to how they are able to sustain themselves and often triumph over adverse circumstances revealing the core of vitality and force of life in them who never surrender but look for alternatives. It is this new dimension that this paper highlights in the plays of Dattani.

Keywords: Dattani's Women Characters, New Perspectives, Patriarchal Society, Radical Approach

The plays of Mahesh Dattani are well known for their freshness, vigor and radical approach towards analysis and resolution of Indian social problems. As he himself admits in one of his interviews, his purpose as a dramatist is to shock and startle his audience from their sense of complacency that all is well with the world and there is nothing to worry about. He is a reformer and a crusader for social justice using the plays to promote higher social awareness among his audience. One specialty of Dattani is that he not only chooses uncommon and unusual themes for dramatic presentation but also never repeats his themes twice, vindicating his enormous creative potential and catholicity of outlook on society. More than anything else, it is the condition and status of Indian women from girlhood to ripe old age that draws the special attention of Dattani. In almost every drama he includes one vital woman character, who is vigorous in spirit and individualistic in outlook to project that in a dominantly patriarchal society where women are permanently relegated to second class citizen status, women are not passive playthings in the hands of men but resist and question whenever their individuality is being invaded or suppressed. They suffer but do not surrender it is in the sufferance that their strength lies. On the other hand, they are smart, resourceful, and quick to adapt and respond to any exigency that may arise. It is this new facet of Indian women, fighting the ethos of oppression and subordination that Dattani highlights in his plays. In almost all the plays women indicate their spirit of individuality. This paper presents Dattani's perception of Indian women as creatures of spirit whom centuries of indoctrination did not entirely succeed in snuffing out the spirit of questioning again and again till their rights and freedom are restored.

In the very first debutant play, *Where There is a Will* that he wrote Dattani produced a brilliant woman character 'Kiran Jhaveri', who is smart, clever, and adaptive. She is the mistress of an industrialist Hasmukh Mehta who is impressed by her competence and intelligence and entrusts her as a director to his entire properties in his will, as he does not trust his daughter-in-law and has a poor opinion of his wife and son. Kiran proves to be not only efficient, but also honest and wins the love and goodwill of the family by her integrity and openness. She is the dramatist's idea of a modern, educated Indian woman who can hold her own in any company, and has the patience and mental stamina of traditional Indian women, who can combine the virtues of both Indian family and western society. He proves that, given an opportunity, Indian women are in no way inferior to men, and it is an only society with its male-dominated social order that deprived women of their rightful share in society, confining them to their homes and crippling their abilities. Kiran is everything that modern society expects its member to be educated, smart, intelligent, honest, and unprejudiced and having the strength to take on the ebb and tides of life with equal poise. She is the ideal woman of Dattani.

In the second play *Dance Like a Man* Dattani produces a complex woman personality 'Ratna', who is smart enough to achieve what she wants in life, in spite of heavy odds against her by the opposition of her father-in-law who is of the firm opinion that dancing is a degraded form of occupation meant only for *devadasis*. He objects to her practising dancing and more so his son participating in and practising dancing. He fears that it is unmanly activity and not suited to a young man coming from a prestigious family. After much argument and debate, he agrees to allow his daughter-in-law, to practise dancing, provided she helps him to make a man out of his son. Towards the end of the play, Ratna succeeds in achieving what she wants through careful planning and out-witting both her husband and father-in-law though without committing any harm to the family. Ratna is a dynamic and vibrant character who highlights the capacity of women for independent thinking and capacity for negotiation through all obstacles of life.

In the next play, *Bravely Fought the Queen* Dattani outlines the independent spirit of women and their refusal to surrender to the force of circumstances. When things do not go smoothly and comfortably, especially for women, a family frame becomes a trap suffocating their individuality and strangling their identity. The dramatist portrays such a situation in the family when Dolly the housewife is harassed and persecuted by both husband and mother-in-law for no fault of her own but has to bear the brunt of anger of the misdeeds of her father. As women in family circuits are easy targets for men to ventilate their anger and frustration, Dattani sympathises and actively supports the cause of family women who are quite vulnerable and defenceless against the hegemony of men, Dolly, in the play, fights to the end to defend

her individuality and independence of mind and suffers silently for the crassness of her husband. She fights bravely her persecution though she knows that she is on the losing side as society is in favour of men. The play is quite popular with the audience for the exposition of the family politics and how women are permanently placed on the margins of power to be at the beck and call of men.

The Sahitya academy winner, *Final Solutions* (1993) is a play that deals with a perennial unresolved problem of post independent India, the fracture between Hindus and Muslims. No leader or movement was able to heal the split as no final solution has been discovered yet, but which reveals the role that can be played by women in the healing process. Dattani highlights that women are more flexible in the attitude and mentality and are amenable to reason but due to the traumatic events of partition their minds were permanently scarred for one generation. Even though the central theme is not connected to the issue of women, the dramatist provides more space for women to play their role in bringing the society back to normality. The play introduces the attitudes of three generations of women Hardika, Rama, and Smita and how generational change is brought about and also the role of education in bringing about incremental changes.

Dattani's career as a dramatist with social concern reached a pinnacle with staging his play *Tara* which is a patent highlighting of the condition of Indian girls as second-class citizens and less desirable human beings. The play deals with Siamese twins with opposite gender with three legs between them. The blood supply to the third leg goes from the girl's body but due to the prejudice against the girls and preference to boys, the third was allotted to boy's body which eventually dies due to lack of blood supply. There cannot be a more blatant discrimination against girls other than denying and depriving an organ given by nature due to hardbound prejudice of society. The play sent shock waves into the readers, researchers, and audience as it highlight the clear gender divide in Indian society and how parents exhibit clear preference to boys at the expense of girls well- being. The protest of the dramatist is that women are the undeserving victims of male hegemony which has become encrusted into the Indian value system. By this shocking play, Dattani was able to underscore how biased and skewed the gender value system is and how it is time to restore healthy gender balance if society is to progress.

Dattani is like a social scientist who is not afraid of bringing out the hidden muck of society under the mask of decency and how respectable people indulge in heinous behaviour. In the play, *Thirty Days in September* Mala, the main character, suffers from prolonged mental trauma created by the sexual abuse by her uncle from childhood to the extent that she seeks psychological counselling to regain her normal state of mind after his death. The play shocked the audience by its brutality and the dramatist confessed that not only was he severely disturbed while writing the play but later was met by many women in

private who narrated similar torture in their childhood. It is not a play of weird imagination but a concealed fact of family life, where girls are subjected to silent tortures by beastly men glutted with lust. At the end, Mala recovers her mental equilibrium showing the inner resilience and spirit of Indian women whose will and strength protect them during their psychological crisis. The play is an eye-opener for both readers and audience of what happens within the families and how it is concealed by family members.

The sufferings and trauma of partition which is a catastrophe in the history of Indian nation did not escape the meticulous attention of the dramatist. More than men, it is women who suffered more during partition, often committing suicide to save their honour, and being rejected by their families after being kidnapped and dishonoured by brutal men. Dattani highlights the life of one such artist 'Nazia' in the play, *Where Did I Leave My Purdah*, who was raped by Hindu fanatics but survives the ordeal for the love of her art as an actor. She undergoes several traumas in her life but rugged enough in spirit to overcome all of them, still pursuing her art at the ripe age of eighty. In her, the dramatist creates a woman of passion, vitality, commitment, and Joie de Vivre. Age does not tone down her spirit.

It is a common observation that women are more practical in their approach towards resolving life problems, uncluttered by sentiments or ideals and Dattani creates one such character 'Niharika' in one of his latest play, *The Big Fat City*. Even though the tone and tenor of the play is humorous, the dramatist succeeds in outlining the pragmatic mentality of women and how smart plans and schemes to procure at least one bedroom flat in a highly populated city like Mumbai where living space is scarce and precious, go awry.

In the latest play, *A Brief Candle* Dattani underscores the sufferings of a woman 'Unni Krishnan' suffering from breast cancer and the misery and agony of 'death in life'. Family being the core of Indian society, woman as a wife, mother and daughter form the matrix of relationships. At the same time, woman as a sensitive and caring human being is not given the care and respect that she deserves but treated as a chattel and unpaid servant. Due to lack of any support, the position of the Indian woman has become vulnerable and prone to attack from many sides. This is the stark reality of Indian family system and family relationships as portrayed in Dattani's plays. To read his plays and watch the characters enacting their roles is to transport the audience to the everyday world that one encounters in society. Therein lies Dattani's strength as a dramatist.

Dattani extends his observations to the nature and functionality of the Indian family system where the partners feel trapped and suffocated instead of feeling fulfilled in their relationships. In this context, the following comment by Erin Mee is worth quoting:

Mahesh Dattani frequently takes as his subject the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire. Their dramas are played out on multi-level sets where interior and exterior become one, and geographical locations are collapsed in short, his settings are as fragmented as the families who inhabit them (Erin B. Mee).

The creativity and dynamic imagination of Dattani lies in revealing in multiple facets of Indian women and how in spite of bearing the yoke of male domination were able to assert their individuality and desires of the heart. Unlike the popular stereotype, Indian women are not weaklings servile and submissive to men, but smart enough to overcome the structural hurdles and after overcoming them to achieve what they want, or at least tenaciously pursue their goals in spite of frequent failures. He pays homage to Indian women through his plays by highlighting their capacity for survival in an oppressive environment stunting their growth and aspirations whose condition he compares with bonsai's plants.

To Dattani, drama is a means of social awakening in the Shavian tradition and by projecting on the stage, problems and issues which are either swept aside or taken for granted, he renders a useful social service of "educating the educated" who have to shed and discard much of their antediluvian mind set and reform themselves in consonance with the world of gender justice and gender balance.

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