



GENDER IDENTITY AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN SELECT PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is renowned in contemporary Indian theatre for his exploration of societal norms and individual identity, particularly focusing on gender dynamics and discrimination. This paper analyzes select works by Dattani, delving into his portrayal of these themes through critical analysis. Through rich character development and compelling storytelling, Dattani prompts audiences to confront traditional gender roles and societal injustices, offering insights into the complexities of gender in modern Indian society. This study offers a literary journey through Dattani's plays, unraveling the intricacies of gender identity and discrimination within his theatrical masterpieces. Through a feminist lens, this analysis explores how Dattani portrays the construction and deconstruction of gender identities, focusing on characters who grapple with societal expectations and the consequences of defying traditional gender roles. The study delves into the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, and sexuality, uncovering how these layers contribute to the systemic discrimination faced by his characters. By scrutinizing plays such as *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Dance Like a Man*, the paper aims to shed light on Dattani's critique of patriarchal structures and his advocacy for gender inclusivity and equality. This research not only underscores Dattani's relevance in contemporary discourse on gender but also contributes to a broader understanding of the ongoing struggles for gender justice in Indian society.

Keywords: Gender Dynamics, Societal Norms, Discrimination, Contemporary Indian Theatre.

1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani, a distinguished figure in contemporary Indian theatre, has garnered acclaim for his poignant exploration of themes

ranging from societal norms to individual identity. Through his thought-provoking plays, Dattani delves into the complexities of human relationships, cultural dynamics, and the intricacies of Indian society. Among the

prominent themes that feature prominently in his works are gender identity and gender discrimination. In the canvas of Dattani's plays, gender identity emerges as a central motif, illuminating the struggles, conflicts, and triumphs of characters grappling with societal expectations and personal truths. His narratives often challenge traditional notions of gender roles and confront the pervasive discrimination that permeates social structures. Through compelling storytelling and rich character development, Dattani challenges viewers to face preconceived notions about gender and confront the realities faced by individuals navigating identity in a complex world.

In this exploration, we delve into select plays by Mahesh Dattani, examining how he portrays gender identity and discrimination. Through critical analysis and thematic exploration, we uncover the nuances of Dattani's depiction of gender dynamics, shedding light on the profound insights and social commentary woven into his theatrical tapestry. From the poignant struggles of marginalized individuals to the intricate web of societal expectations, Dattani's plays offer a lens through which to examine the complexities of gender in contemporary Indian society. As we journey through Dattani's theatrical landscape, we unravel the layers of meaning and significance embedded within his exploration of gender identity and discrimination. Through characters who defy convention, challenge stereotypes, and strive for authenticity, Dattani invites us to reflect on the multifaceted nature of human experience and the transformative power of storytelling in confronting societal injustices.

2. Reviews of literature

Sathyaraj, M., & Kathiresan, B. (2015). Among contemporary Indian playwrights working in English, Mahesh Dattani ranked high in fame. Recurring themes in several of his plays included contemporary metropolitan families and their complex dynamics. It was

likely that he wrote on homosexuality, sexism, communalism, and child sex abuse. Playwrights like Dattani had questioned the way Indian characters were being portrayed in contemporary English theatre. There had been an amateurish effort to address the gender bias existing in Indian families and the way men were often given priority over women. Tara navigated the complicated dynamics of a family dealing with the conjoined twins' emotional separation and the manipulation of their grandparents and mother to favor the male kid. Traditional values, social stratification, and community were all themes that this drama explored. The play's heroine, Uma, was married to Suresh, the police superintendent, and she played a pivotal role in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Here we saw Uma, a sociology major working on a gender studies thesis. This suggested study would examine a transgender (hijra) case to identify Kamla's killer.

Kumar, T. (2021). The idea that men and women alike endured societal problems including gender inequality, pain, and despair was central to the study article, which drew on Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* (1990). The study aimed to shed light on gender bias, injustices perpetrated only based on gender, and the prevalence of male-dominated households in India. One of Dattani's other plays, *Tara*, dealt with sexism. The mental and physical separation of conjoined twins was the subject of the play. It was a prime example of the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure in the culture. To perpetuate patriarchal ideals, women were like keys in patriarchy's grasp. The goal of the study was to examine the play through the lens of the marginalization of women. It was more common for Indian families to choose a boy named Chandan over a girl named Tara. Even though Bharati was Tara's mother, she destroyed her daughter's life and ended up hurting herself because of her harsh conduct. As a scientist and a tech enthusiast, Dr. Thakkar erred. Bharati and her father offered him a plot of land as a bribe to have Tara killed.

Samta, M. A. J. (2019). The Indian filmmaker and playwright Mahesh Dattani was famous. He had gained fame for his thought-provoking pieces that focused on social relations and elective matters. Over the years, his plays have often tackled weighty topics including social injustice, discrimination, identity crises, societal standards, social battles, and more. Mahesh Dattani portrayed Indian culture and its beliefs on complexity, orientation discrimination, and the difficulties faced by people in most of his plays.

Prakash, T. A. (2014). Patriarchy was recognized as a global problem that women faced every day. It employed brutal tactics, including exploitation, oppression, and violence, to control and enslave women. The pervasiveness of patriarchy posed a significant barrier to women's liberation in many countries, including Indian society. Regardless of the level of economic autonomy or educational attainment, women remained ensnared by patriarchy. Despite their independence, skills, and earning potential, women continued to confront sexism, sexual assault, and commercialization in society. Indian playwright, Mahesh Dattani, realistically dramatized women's struggles within Indian culture. Both of his plays, *Tara* and *Bravely Fought The Queen*, addressed patriarchal family dynamics, gender inequality, and the oppression of women. Through a selection of plays by Mahesh Dattani, this article examined the role of patriarchy in the difficult, impoverished lives experienced by Indian women.

Rajani, L. M. (2016). The goals of the research were manifold. Firstly, the research aimed to delve into the intricate themes of homosexuality, ghettoization, and gayism within a selection of plays penned by Mahesh Dattani. Additionally, it sought to dissect the socioeconomic, cultural, psychological, and emotional backgrounds of marginalized individuals depicted in Dattani's theatrical works. Furthermore, the research aimed to

scrutinize the prevalent concepts of gender discrimination and delve into the depths of character psychology as portrayed in Dattani's plays. Finally, it endeavored to illuminate contemporary notions of youth encapsulated within Dattani's dramatic narratives.

Ratnaker, O. P. (2022). Mahesh Dattani is well-known for his diverse abilities as a writer, actor, director, and theatre legend, and was celebrated for his modern English-language plays set in the Indian milieu. His narratives were rooted in the stark realities of Indian society, shedding light on the marginalized, including women, transgender individuals, homosexuals, and minorities. In *Tara*, Dattani delved into the traumatic experiences of a female child, emblematic of the struggles faced by many Indian women. With Bangalore as the backdrop, *Tara's* story unfolded within an educated upper-middle-class family, highlighting the pervasive challenges of raising a girl in a traditionalist culture. The play's narrative, centered on twins born with an extra limb, exposed the cruel dictates of gender bias, where the male child's legs were preserved at the expense of the female twin. Dattani's poignant exploration underscored the deep-rooted gender inequality and societal discrimination pervasive in Indian culture, where women's potential was often sacrificed on the altar of archaic norms. Despite strides in education and social progress, the plight of the female child remained a grim reality, reflective of a society unwilling to relinquish its indelible grip on oppressive traditions.

Jadhav, A. (2017). The tragic plight of both sexes was realistically shown by Mahesh Dattani, who depicted how his characters' lives were ruined by gender stereotyping and discrimination. In the article, Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990) and *Dance Like a Man* (1989) were looked at through the lens of gender emotion. *Tara*, the protagonist of the drama *Tara*, went through a number of terrifying stages in her life. Unacceptable attitudes led to her death, and she lost all access to nature as a result. With *Tara* and

Ratna as examples, Mahesh Dattani skillfully defined the female characters and their standing in the story. Those in power in their society oppressed and marginalized women because of who they were as individuals. They did not have access to fundamental human rights. The inner and outer lives of individuals and their distinct personalities were explored in great detail. Female and male characters were limited in their development due to societal conventions and standards. The person had the formidable task of pursuing their passion while being confronted with inflexible societal norms. Traditional gender roles, as well as societal expectations for men and women, were considered. The wicked society in *Dance Like a Man*, where men and women were evaluated according to their occupations, dragged Jairaj into it. Some common household tasks and occupations were traditionally associated with women. On the other side, males were not supposed to be involved in such tasks. As for Jairaj, he had an intense quest to become a dancing master. However, in Indian culture, "dance" was exclusively linked to females. The whole idea of a guy wanting to dance made him feel ashamed, therefore he couldn't.

Singh, B. (2016). Among the stellar canon of Indian English writers, Mahesh Dattani stands out for his tremendous success in the Indian theatre. The most pressing social concerns of our day are adorning his plays. Additionally, this dissertation makes a sharp effort to examine *Tara* and *Thirty Days in September*, two plays by Dattani, via a feminist lens. The issues of women in both plays are very moving and significant. Tara experiences gender prejudice from the moment she is born in the first play. Despite her best efforts, she encounters nothing but gloom and despair and falls prey to gender discrimination, all while yearning to shine brightly like a star. Mala Khatri's mother Shanta knows everything about her daughter's physical and emotional abuse through her maternal uncle Vinay, but she chooses to keep quiet, much to the dismay of

Mala and the audience in *Thirty Days in September*, another drama about a girl's trauma. Even though Mala's mother has been a victim of rape at the hands of her brother as a kid, she chooses to keep quiet. In contrast, Mala grows into a courageous young woman who challenges societal norms and teaches her maternal uncle a lesson about the consequences of molestation. Therefore, this thesis is organized to address the dual issues about gender discrimination and physical abuse of a girl, which are central to these plays.

Bhadury, P., & Acharya, S. (2019). Concerning the women who play pivotal roles in Dattani's piece, the more systemic problems are on subaltern viewpoints. The intricate tapestry of contemporary urban life in India serves as his starting point. Subaltern studies' emergence in the 1970s and 1980s prompted Dattani to voice his concern for the doubly dispossessed. By using deft conversation, deft Indianization of English, and stage design, he makes apparent the invisible difficulties that are important to the subaltern worldview. The women of Dattani's society are members of the proletarian middle class, a socially and economically oppressed population that is denied social dignity and dominated by the strong. This paper seeks to explain how Dattani's subalternity defines the gap between the ruling elite and the oppressed, whose opinions have long been ignored in patriarchal, casteist, and culturally dominant narratives and viewpoints. The subalternity of women has been the topic of critical examination in a number of plays using preexisting literary theories.

Jayapriya, K., & Buvaneswari, P.(2017). The term "gender discrimination" refers to any kind of bias, bigotry, or unfair treatment of a person because of gender. Disagreement stems from people's experiences with society's unspoken expectations around gender roles. One gender is seen to be better than the other in cases of gender inequality; men are often thought of as superior to women, but males may also face discrimination from society as a whole

due to unspoken conventions. Various authors have portrayed gender prejudice in their writings. The prevalence of sexism in Indian literature is striking, given the country's cultural norms. This essay will analyze *Dance Like a Man*, a film by Mahesh Dattani, through the lens of its criticism of sexism.

Lathar, V. (2017). The topic of societal gender inequality is explored in Mahesh Dattani's play, *Tara*. This study will focus on how Dattani has handled the subject of women's marginalization in the play. The dramatic play, about conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, shows how Indian families value boys more than girls. The multifaceted and intricate character of the problem is brought to light by Dattani, who views gender discrimination as unnatural and ethical. Pervasive and deeply ingrained patriarchal ideals are shown in the play as part of society's collective consciousness. Women are more susceptible to oppression and prejudice since these attitudes are inculcated in them throughout socialization. Women are used by the patriarchal society to uphold its values. Bharati, Tara's mother, acts inhumanely towards her daughter and thereafter feels guilty about it. She drives herself insane with remorse and causes strife in her family. The gendered division of employment is another theme that the play alludes to, and how it stifles the development of both sexes' creative potential. Although Tara and Chandan have distinct abilities, Chandan experiences double marginalization due to her gender. Additionally, Dattani reveals how society is indifferent to those with disabilities. Through his actions, Dr. Thakkar demonstrates how science and technology may be misused.

Bag, A. K. (2021). When it comes to socio-literary discourses, Gender Performativity is perhaps one of the most muddled concepts. The concept of "Performance" becomes twisted when it gets mixed up with our bodily selves. Notable works by Mahesh Dattani include a broad variety of topics, including as "Performance" and other unconventional love

triangles, same-sex relationships, patriarchal subversion, child sex abuse, and more. Patriarchy and Matriarchy are two contrasting realms that he constructs for us in his 1989 play *Dance Like a Man*. The protagonists and antagonists in this drama get lost in the maze of "Performance" because they don't know who they really are. Similarly, Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) delves into the characters' struggles with self-discovery and their involvement in the struggle against sexual limits. This thesis delves into a comparative analysis of the two works, examining how they attempt to portray performativity via their self-perception and how they construct a hypothetical void for further study and comprehension.

3. Exploration of Gender Identity in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

- **Complex Characters:** Dattani creates multidimensional characters that grapple with their gender identity amidst societal expectations and norms. These characters often undergo inner conflicts as they navigate their sense of self.
- **Identity Formation:** Dattani's plays delve into the process of identity formation, portraying characters who struggle to reconcile their internal identity with external pressures. This exploration extends beyond binary notions of gender, encompassing diverse experiences and identities.
- **Fluidity and Ambiguity:** Dattani embraces the fluidity and ambiguity of gender identity, challenging rigid categorizations and celebrating the spectrum of gender expressions. His characters defy traditional classifications, embodying a range of identities and experiences.
- **Intersectionality:** Dattani explores the intersectionality of gender identity with other aspects of identity, such as class, sexuality, and religion. This intersectional lens enriches the portrayal of characters and

highlights the interconnected nature of social identities.

- **Agency and Self-Expression:** Dattani's characters assert agency and self-expression in defining their gender identity. They stand up to social norms and defend their right to authenticity, often embarking on personal journeys of self-discovery and empowerment.
- **Social Stigma and Marginalization:** Dattani addresses the social stigma and marginalization faced by individuals whose gender identity deviates from societal norms. He clarifies the discrimination and prejudice that transgender individuals, non-binary individuals, and gender non-conforming individuals encounter in their daily lives.
- **Empathy and Understanding:** Through his portrayal of characters, Dattani fosters empathy and understanding towards diverse gender identities. He challenges audiences to confront their preconceptions and biases, inviting them to engage with the complexities of gender identity in a nuanced and compassionate manner.
- **Narrative Strategies:** Dattani employs various narrative strategies, including symbolism, metaphor, and allegory, to explore motifs of gender identity. His plays invite audiences to interpret and reflect upon the deeper meanings embedded within the characters' journeys of self-discovery and transformation.

4. Challenges to Traditional Gender Roles in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

- **Character Subversion:** Dattani's plays often feature characters that challenge and subvert traditional gender roles. These characters defy societal expectations and stereotypes, questioning the norms that dictate behavior based on gender.
- **Female Empowerment:** Dattani portrays strong, empowered female characters that resist patriarchal structures and assert their autonomy. They reject submissive roles

traditionally assigned to women and strive for independence and self-determination.

- **Critique of Patriarchy:** Dattani critiques patriarchal systems that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination. His plays highlight the oppressive nature of patriarchal norms and their detrimental effects on individuals, particularly women.
- **Exploration of Masculinity:** Dattani's portrayal of male characters often challenges conventional ideas about masculinity. He explores vulnerability, emotional depth, and sensitivity in male characters, challenging stereotypes of stoicism and dominance.
- **Intersectionality:** Dattani acknowledges the intersectionality of gender roles with other social identities, such as class, caste, and religion. He highlights how multiple factors intersect to shape individuals' experiences of gender and the different forms of discrimination they may face.
- **Criticism of Gender Expectations:** Through dialogue and narrative, Dattani critiques the rigid expectations placed on individuals on the basis of their gender. He exposes the limitations and injustices inherent in gendered roles and behaviors, advocating for greater freedom of expression and self-definition.
- **Family Dynamics:** Dattani explores how traditional gender roles impact familial relationships and dynamics. He depicts tensions and conflicts arising from expectations placed on family members to adhere to prescribed gender norms, illuminating the intricate relationships within families.
- **Empowerment through Dialogue:** Dattani's plays facilitate dialogue and reflection on gender roles and their implications for individuals and society. By giving voice to characters who challenge norms and advocate for change, he encourages audiences to reconsider their attitudes toward gender and identity.

- **Celebration of Diversity:** Dattani celebrates diversity in gender expression and identity through his portrayal of characters from diverse backgrounds and experiences. His plays affirm the validity of varied expressions of gender and reject the notion of a monolithic, homogenous gender identity.

5. Marginalized Voices of Mahesh Dattani's plays

In the plays of Mahesh Dattani, marginalized voices, particularly those of transgender individuals, women, and others facing societal discrimination, emerge as powerful narratives that confront and expose the injustices ingrained within Indian society. Through characters like Mariam in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and Tara in *Tara*, Dattani portrays the struggles and resilience of those marginalized by gender identity and social norms. These characters navigate the complexities of societal rejection, marginalization, and violence, bringing to light the difficult circumstances that marginalized groups face. Dattani's empathetic portrayal of these voices humanizes their experiences, compelling audiences to confront the systemic barriers and prejudices that perpetuate marginalization. By amplifying marginalized voices, Dattani's plays serve as a platform for advocacy and social change, challenging audiences to acknowledge and deal with the injustices faced by those on the margins of society.

6. Quest for Autonomy and Empowerment

In Mahesh Dattani's plays, characters embark on profound quests for autonomy and empowerment, challenging entrenched societal norms and asserting their agency in the face of hardship. Through narratives like *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* Dattani illuminates the struggles of individuals striving to break free from the constraints imposed by gender roles, familial expectations, and societal pressures. These characters courageously navigate

personal journeys of self-discovery and self-realization, refusing to be defined or confined by external forces. Their quest for autonomy is a testament to the human spirit's resilience and capacity for growth, as they confront obstacles, confrontations, and internal conflicts to reclaim control over their lives. Dattani's portrayal of this quest underscores the transformative power of self-determination and the quest for one's truth, inspiring audiences to consider their own paths to autonomy and empowerment in a world shaped by social expectations and limitations.

7. Societal Expectations vs. Individual Freedom

In Mahesh Dattani's plays, the tension between societal expectations and personal freedom emerges as a central thematic concern, resonating deeply with the complexities of contemporary Indian society. Characters struggle with the burden of cultural customs, societal expectations, and familial obligations that dictate their roles and behaviors based on gender, caste, and class. Through works like *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani portrays the conflict between conforming to societal expectations and asserting one's innate desire for autonomy and self-expression. Characters confront the repercussions of deviating from prescribed paths, facing ostracism, condemnation, and internal turmoil. Yet, amidst these challenges, they yearn for the freedom to live authentically, transcending the limitations imposed by social constructs. Dattani's exploration of this dichotomy prompts audiences to contemplate the price of conformity and the transformative potential of embracing individuality, ultimately advocating for a society that respects and celebrates the diverse expressions of human identity and freedom.

8. Humanizing the Experience

Mahesh Dattani's plays excel in humanizing the experiences of individuals grappling with gender identity and societal

expectations, imbuing his characters with depth, complexity, and emotional resonance. Through nuanced portrayals in works like *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani captures the raw humanity of those marginalized by gender norms and discrimination, fostering empathy and understanding among audiences. By depicting the internal struggles, fears, and aspirations of his characters, Dattani transcends stereotypes and clichés, presenting authentic portrayals that resonate with the universal quest for acceptance and belonging. Through rich dialogue, vivid imagery, and poignant storytelling, he invites audiences to engage with the lived experiences of his characters, challenging preconceived notions and fostering dialogue about the complexities of gender identity and societal expectations. In humanizing the experience, Dattani's plays serve as catalysts for empathy, compassion, and social change, urging audiences to confront injustice and embrace the diverse tapestry of human existence.

9. Exploration of Family Dynamics

In Mahesh Dattani's plays, the exploration of family dynamics serves as a lens through which he examines the intricacies of interpersonal relationships, societal expectations, and the impact of gender roles on familial structures. Through works like *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara*, Dattani delves into the complexities of familial bonds strained by conflicting desires for individual autonomy and adherence to tradition. He portrays the tensions that arise when family members challenge traditional gender norms, confronting generational divides and cultural expectations. Dattani's nuanced portrayal of family dynamics reveals the delicate balance between love and control, duty and personal fulfillment, as characters navigate the complexities of familial relationships amidst societal pressures. Through rich character development and compelling narrative arcs, Dattani invites audiences to reflect on the transformative power of familial bonds, the challenges of navigating

tradition in a rapidly changing world, and the universal quest for acceptance and being a part of the family group.

10. Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's plays serve as powerful vehicles for exploring the subtleties of gender identity and discrimination within contemporary Indian society. Through rich character development and compelling storytelling, Dattani questions conventional gender norms and confronts societal injustices with depth and empathy. His exploration of complex characters, fluidity in identity, and intersectionality highlights the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics. Dattani's works amplify marginalized voices, portraying the struggles and resilience of individuals facing discrimination on the basis of gender identity. Moreover, his portrayal of family dynamics underscores the tension between social norms and personal autonomy. Ultimately, Dattani's plays inspire empathy, foster dialogue, and advocate for social change in confronting the complexities of gender in modern India.

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