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NEOTERIC IDENTITIES OF WOMEN IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

The plays by Sahitya Academy Award winning playwright Mahesh Dattani, span a broad cross section of society, dealing with burning issues of the present day that make sensational headlines: gender issues, sexuality, the prejudiced treatment of the girl child and the predicament of women in a male-controlled society. In his plays such as Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen, do the Needful, Where There's a Will and Dance Like a Man; Women are depicted as shifting away from gendered paradigms, opting against fixed and limited patterns in life and discovering multiple possibilities of liberation from age-old values and social and cultural norms which seem to be losing significance and relevance in the present day world.

Keywords:old values, discrimination, marginalized,distrust.

In his plays there is a wide range of women-right from the outdated, possessive mother-in-law, down to the modern, outgoing woman with sexual directions of her own choice. He provokes community response to his plays which are enacted and his view is that theatre is a shared experience and the audience can form his own opinions after viewing the play. Without being didactic, Mahesh Dattani has simply reflected his observations of society. Dattani once said.

The function of drama, in my opinion, is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society, but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly, but funny. [Qtd. By Roy]

You can't treat a play like a roller coaster ride which even at its most terrifying moment you know will end soon and quite happily when you hit terra firma. It's only when you are left hanging in air you start to question your own personality, perceptions.. the theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began. [Qtd. By Nair]

When questioned by Anita Nair in her interview with Mahesh Dattani as to why the traditional woman is portrayed with some contempt by him and in contrast, men are not treated with such disdain and are often shown to be as victims suffering from a woman's machinations-Dattani's observations are as follows:

It's to do with perceptions. I don't mean to say that this is a definitive view of life. But several of the images that we carry around in our minds are politically generated images and we accept them to be as true. However I don't think so and my characters are simply a personification of my perceptions. [Qtd. By Nair]

The prejudice towards the male child in a highly educated and an upper middle class Bangalore society is revealed by Dattani in a play entitled Tara. The play is a story of Siamese twins, who are born with three legs, and even though the blood supply to the third leg was from the girl baby, the mother of the twins and her father bribe the doctor to fix the third leg on to the male baby's body so as to make him complete. The decision, to make

the male child complete with two legs, is not made on medical grounds, but is influenced by the grandfather, a moneyed politician. To add to the ordeal, the grandfather single denomination is for the female one. The mother covers up the guilt ethics by her show of love and affection for Tara. As far as the father is concerned, he adopts an indifferent attitude towards her and even though he knows that whatever is happening is not in favour of the girls child, he just keeps mum and this is actually an offence which he commits against her. Consequently the father's neglect towards her, makes her refuse to go for physiotherapy sessions, or to go to the college for higher studies. The bubbly spirited girl adopts a withdrawn attitude toward life.

This discrimination against the girl child by family and society, is actually a revelation of the mental make-up of society, the collective unconscious which works against the girl child. It is ill-fated that the mother is also anco-conspirator in the act of attaching the third leg to the boy's body. It is the cultural heritage, the imbibed social constructs which have to be erased or re-oriented in keeping with the present day condition or situation of the girl who is actually striving to establish an equal status with the male child. The fact is that nature had created the boy and the girl as conjoined twins, like Ardhanariswar, two sides of the same self and if one half is neglected, the other half also is incomplete, and does not achieve full growth as a person. What needs to change is the age-old social mindset, the engendered notion of considering the male as the sole breadwinner and as the one instrumental in perpetuating the lineage.

The play *On a Muggy Night* in Mumbai depicts homosexuals who are unable to understand why people get married at all; but half-heartedly agree to marriages so as to appear normal in front of society.

Deepali : If you were a woman, we would be in love.

Kamlesh : If you were man, we would be in love.

Deepali : If were heterosexual, we would be married.

Both of them do a mock "Aaagh". [65]

In an attempt to keep up pretences and put on a behaviour which is acceptable to society, they fall victims to the expectations which society creates, and naturally, there is distrust and betrayal. Society expects that human beings get married to the opposite sex and this creates problems for those with deviant sexual orientations. The traditional concept of marriage, the very sanctity of marriage and the importance of oaths taken during marriage to live together and face all trials and tribulations in a united manner and to believe the statement, "Two hearts and one soul" are all getting diluted in this new culture which seems to be catching on fast.

The play *Do the Needful* delineates splendidly the deceptive behaviour of a couple who keep up an appearance of marriage while clinging on to the partners with whom they had already developed an intimate relationship. The protagonist Alpesh who is gay reverts to his premarital sexual orientations and carries on his homosexual relationship and the so-called wife Lata who is in love with Salim carries on her relationship with her Muslim lover. When Alpesh asks her to tell her parents the truth she observes:

Alpesh : Why don't you just tell her you are in love with someone?

Lata: Look. I don't think you understand. They know. They

just want me to get married to anyone. I have no say in the matter. [151]

the parents are of the opinion that their children can be happy only if they get married within the same clan. The parents have a strong prejudice against the Muslim clan and they brand the Muslim boy a terrorist. In a note on the play "Final Solutions", Alyque Padamsee has raised an important issue:

can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever-locked in combat.... Arabs against Jews, whites against blacks, Hindus against Muslims? Are there any final solutions? [161]

The collective psyche is what needs to be modified. The girl Lata thinks of running away with Salim many a time, as she is afraid that her parents would not approve of anything less than an

arranged marriage, even if it is with a divorced homosexual by from a Hindu family; as they do not approve of her relationship with a Muslim boy. As her family believes, an arranged marriage is the road to marital bliss, the girls has no other choice but to agree to settle for an arranged marriage with a man whom she very well knows is a homo. She tactfully deceives her family to believe that she lives a happy married life with the man of their choice. In actuality, she was carrying on her relationship with her lover. In order not to displease the heterosexual leanings of their family members who trust that only a normal wedding between a male and female is essential for happiness in life, Alpesh also deceives his family members by putting on an appearance of normalcy and happiness in his married life. The only positive accomplishment is that Mahesh Dattani's women are not victims, they fight back at every available chance. They are marginalized but they fight back. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* Dattani champions women and has rightly claimed:

I am fighting for my feminine self. And since I have the male self, which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It's subsumed, yes, it's marginalized, but it fights back [Interview Katyal]

In this play there are two sisters, the elder one is Dolly and the younger one who is addicted to drinks is Alka and they discuss family affairs with the visitor Lalita. Neither Dolly nor Alka seem satisfied with their situation in life. As far as the men are concerned there is Jiten, who is just like his father, according to his mother Baa. It's quite surprising to note that the similarity between the father and the son is that they treat women as sex objects and get prostitutes for their satisfaction. Baa reveals how her husband was a cruel dark man who used to beat her up, "I have married such a villager! Aah! You slapped me? Never, never slap me. Nobody has hit me. The men in our family are decent" [288]. Baa feels that her elder son Jiten totally resembles her husband and so she gets drawn towards her younger, sober, subdued, sympathetic son who resembles her. Dattani has presented Jiten as a sadist who indulges in hurting other characters present around him.

Women are not consulted even in matters related to them. In a business meeting regarding promoting the sales of undergarments there is discussion whether women should be interviewed regarding their opinion, he strongly opposes the suggestion and his speeches expose his chauvinistic attitude:

Men would want to buy it for their women! That's our market. Men. Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power. Yes! So There's no point asking a group of... women what they think of it [276]

The play also reveals how tyrannical and possessive a rich and assertive mother-in-law also. Old age, paralysis and a demented state of mind have done little to suppress her authoritative behaviour for she keeps calling her daughter-in-law for attending on her by ringing the loud electric bell. There is also a subtle reference in the play to the fact that Baa was influencing her younger son not to have children. As far as she is concerned, she also did not have a very pleasant youth, for she and her sons used to be beaten up by her husband and she was always prevented from singing in public.

The unborn foetus in the womb of Dolly suffers because of Jiten's beating up of his wife when she was pregnant. The child is sent prematurely and turns out to be a disabled one. The pathetic screams of his wife echo in the minds of the audience even after they leave the theatre: "And you hit me! Jitu, You beat me! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up" [311]

The younger sister, Alka was actually duped by her brother to marry a homosexual with whom he was carrying on a relationship. Alka does question her husband's authority and disloyalty and her brother's hiding the fact of being a homosexual. So Dattani has revealed men as being deceptive and deceiving. Alka's hysterical shrieks at her brother, reveal how men are insensitive to women's needs and affections and deal with as disposable material:

The saint gives sister to the sinner and disappears! Finished. Matter over.... The saint has another sister who is bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend!

The sinner's brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a coincidence. [300]

The only liberated woman with a balanced outlook on life, is the visitor Lalita, who mingles confidently in society, enjoys an occasional drink or two, and leads a disciplined life helping her husband in his business matters by gifting his business partners with bonsais which she has painstakingly tended to and pruned with her own hands. She leads a very planned life saving money to buy a house and preferring not to have children till then.

In this play we find women like Dolly venting out their frustration by fantasizing in imaginary relationships with subordinates like the cook in the house or indulging in alcohol like Alka also gives vent to her suppressed emotion by going to a ball dressed up like the Rani of Jhansi. These seem to be some of the methods by which they exasperatedly cling on to sanity, amidst all the trauma of having to maintain a pose of harmony in the household.

In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani has pointed out the follies and prejudices of Indian society as revealed within the microcosm of the family unit. Dattani has himself pointed out that it is the sovereignty of the patriarchal code and male chauvinism which is the cause of disruption of life in the play. When women are suppressed to a great extent, and if fear holds the key to relationships, then there are bound to be retaliations and effects like the ones which happen in his play. There is no faith, understanding or a feeling of security or oneness between characters and the patriarchal head Hansmukh, who orders everyone around and does not allow anyone to grow up by delegating responsibilities in running the family or in business matters.

What happens in business circles is the theme of this play. A business tycoon Hansmukh refuses to allow his son's business proposals to allow his son's business proposals to materialize fearing that if he listens to his son, they would become paupers. Hansmukh neither treats his son affectionately nor does he trust his charming, pretty, intelligent daughter-in-law. Instead of delegating and authorizing others, he follows a dictatorial regime and all that he trusts is his own business

acumen. This is a case of inefficient management of available resources. What causes Hansmukh to be rude to everyone is the fact that Hansmukh is a weakling, an insecure man who was following his father's footsteps in ruling over his family without giving anyone any freedom to talk, think or act. Instead he has a mistress to whom he entrusts all his affairs of business. Lack of trust, love and affection and the frustration of not being included in business affairs induces the daughter-in-law Preethi to hasten the father-in-law's death by replacing B.P. tablets with vitamin pills. The daughter-in-law feels that the father-in-law was a slave driver and his mistress feels that he was insensitive to other people's needs. All this is a sign of weakness-the rudeness and the bossing over all others to mask his own weakness. So when the head of the family succumbs to his B.P. and cholesterol, the marginalized, or in other words, the women, emerge stronger than before and move in to take their rightful place.

Even after his death his patriarchal dominance is felt by his successors in the form of his will by which he had handed over all his assets to his mistress, Kiran Jhaveri, with instructions that it should not be inherited by his son until he was forty-five and that he should attend his office from nine to six and that his mistress should train him in business matters. Anyhow after his death, his wife, who had got used to getting guidance and being ruled by her sister's opinions, slowly begins to become independent and the selfish daughter-in-law grows up to understand that giving is more important than taking and the mistress Kiran Jhaveri, who had struggled as a drunkard's daughter and later on as a drunkard's wife and a rich man's mistress, as well as a business associate, finds happiness in being accepted with love and affection as part of Hansmukh's family. Ultimately, once patriarchal dominance is suppressed or wiped out, there is a positive growth in the other characters.

The play *dance Like a Man* is an explicit delineation of gender roles and the struggle by the protagonist to rise above engendered assumptions of the inappropriateness of a male learning to dance Bharatnatyam. In this play an autocratic father, Amritlal Parekh, stifles the growth of both his son and daughter-in-law by his domineering attitude.

The play examines authority and social and cultural prejudice against a man learning to dance and the struggle of the characters grappling with the situation to keep their passion for dance alive. There is tension, distrust and suspicion in the characters because the old man Amritlal Parekh who is a freedom fighter and a reformist, curtails the freedom of his son who wishes to become a Bharatnatyam dancer.

Lack of leniency of Amritlal's part disrupts familial peace and there is bound to be repercussions as and when occasion arises. The old man feels the Bharatnatyam is not for socially respectable people and that it is only for prostitutes. The younger generation has different opinion and the son and daughter-in-law, Jairaj and Ratna, leave the house but finding it difficult to settle down anywhere else they return to the patriarchal dominance of Amritlal.. Ratna seems to be lacking the primordial maternal instincts, and the basic mother-child emotional bonding, when she carelessly allows her ayah to take care of her son. The blame for the child's death falls on Ratna as she is considered to be ambitious.

Disappointed in all spheres of life, Ratna passionately tries to achieve success in life and she panders in grooming her daughter to become a famous dancer; so that she could accomplish her heart's desire to dance through her daughter's achievement as a great dancer. The greatest sufferer as well as achiever is Ratna because first she has to dissuade her husband against his own passion, then tolerate his frustrated drinking and finally emerge victorious in seeing her dreams being realized by her daughter. Ratna emerges victorious because of her never-say-die attitude. It is the social constructs once again which are fond inadequate and which are at fault.

Patriarchal dominance, possessiveness towards sons and cruel and insensitive treatment of daughter-in-law by an affluent mother-in-law, dishonesty and deceptive behaviour of young women regarding their socially unacceptable sexual orientations, social bias against the girl child, and the struggle to realize disillusioned personal ambitions through one's own offspring, are some of the concerns through which Mahesh Dattani

elucidates how social constructs and engendered gender bias are instrumental in inhibiting or hindering a balanced growth in society.

In a note on the play *Tara*, Erin Mee has pointed out that "Dattani sees Tara as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is male..." [320]. Society has strong well-defined notions of what is expected of genders and a male learning to dance is a taboo and is not allowed to happen. It is high time society comes which are in the offing. Dattani is creating an awareness in society and has made the realization dawn in his audience, of what is happening in society, of how faulty engendered notions of gender are; so that one is not caught unawares. Through the medium of his plays, Mahesh Dattani has shaken the audience out of their complacency by elucidating the fact how all presumed and accepted notions on gender roles and sexual orientations are crumbling, and it is a matter of concern for us all. BBC Radio's Jeremy Mortimer's observation is:

Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions. And by revealing the complexity, he makes the world a richer place for us all. [Qtd. By De]

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