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## INTERROGATING HIERARCHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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### ABSTRACT

This paper critically seeks to examine how the plays of Mahesh Dattani interrogate and subvert the existing hierarchical frameworks to articulate the voice of those at the margins. Dattani is among the first dramatist to respond to different forms and facets of domination and subjugation prevalent in the patriarchal, heteronormative urban Indian society. Together his plays provide the main coordinates to map his views on different aspects of subalternity. His engagement with the socio-religious realities of the postmodern age opens up contesting sites. Dattani's plays interrogate Indian society's conformation to stereotypes and works at subverting accepted societal norms and power equations. It is a deconstructive enterprise in so much as it exposes and deconstructs those manufactured versions and processes of history and society that have been invoked through the centuries to legitimize the heteropatriarchal system. Through his writing he provided the subalterns centre stage by making them pivotal characters in his plays. His plays engage in the creation of a site for ideological contestation where various voices find utterance.

Key words: subalternity, subversion, deconstruction, heteronormativity

### Introduction

Mahesh Dattani has significantly established himself as one of the foremost playwrights in the world of Indian English drama. He is among the first dramatist to respond to different forms and facets of domination and subjugation prevalent in the patriarchal, heteronormative urban Indian society. He deals with 'invisible' issues which have been swept under the rug of modern civility and places them on centre-stage for public discussion. His plays are expositions of lives within dominant hegemonic discourses and endeavour to show how these ideologies influence ordinary

everyday existence. Together his plays provide the main coordinates to map his views on different aspects of subalternity. Dattani's plays participate in interrogating social discourses of hegemony and power inequalities and open up 'taboo' subjects like homosexuality, Child Sexual Abuse and the marginalized status of eunuchs, aids victims and religious minorities for dramatic representations on stage. He is daring and innovative and has made Indian drama in English a major genre of social critique today. His plays explore issues of subalternity and focuses on the plight of the marginalized and oppressed sections of the society. Dattani's use of humour in his plays is subversive

because underneath the light-hearted humour is his indictment of the follies and hypocrisies of society and his interrogation of established norms. Dattani unearths how the subaltern seeks to speak against a background of multiple oppressions—religious, social, familial, gender and psychological. His plays interrogate Indian society's conformation to stereotypes and works at subverting accepted societal norms and power equations.

### Objectives

The present paper seeks to investigate how the plays of Mahesh Dattani interrogate and subvert the existing hierarchical frameworks to articulate the voice of those at the margins. It also examines how he engages with various facets of subalternity and seeks to reconstruct the spaces for marginalized groups of society.

### Methodology

The present study is a critical analysis of the plays of Mahesh Dattani to examine how his plays participate in the disruption of authoritarian hegemonic discourses. In the course of the study different theoretical paradigms have been used. Collection of materials is based on both primary and secondary sources.

### Voices from the margins

Dattani uses the framework of realist theatre to interrogate the hegemony of the dominant social order. His plays explore issues of subalternity and focuses on the plight of the marginalized and oppressed sections of the society. Dattani deals with the LGBTQ community and puts them on centre stage in five of his plays drawing attention to their marginalized existence and the myriad ways in which it is practiced. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Mahesh Dattani explores the community of the 'third' gender and their existence on the fringes of society. This play is Dattani's indictment of the complicity of all the social, institutional and state structures in the conspiracy to silence and erase the voice of the marginalized. The hijras on account of their having relationships with both men and women puts them in the category of bisexuals which results in biphobia resulting in their discrimination by both the heterosexuals and the

homosexuals. Tortured and criminalized under the archaic Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, every aspect of the eunuch's existence was subject to surveillance. The very title of the play undermines the sanctity of marriage by laying bare the fault-lines between husband and wife. However, it is also subversive in that it can not only describe the sanctity of companionate love in marriage between heterosexuals, but also the companionship and love of persons of the same sex. By ascribing a voice to the transgenders, Dattani transforms them into liminal beings that have subversive potentialities. Since transgenders cannot be placed into a single category of existence, they are naturally ambiguous, challenging the cultural networks of social classification. Kuhu Sharma Chanana points out how hijras are also able to create fissures and radical ruptures in the domain of familial sexual citizenship because their alternative family disposition unmasks the oppressive structure of heteropatriarchal family by presenting a contrast (19). Dattani through his descriptions of the sexual encounters between Alpeesh and the Mali (*Do the Needful*) Kamlesh and the watchman (*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*), Nitin and the auto- rickshaw driver (*Bravely Fought the Queen*) explore how gay individuals transcend the barriers of class and caste thus inverting the existing hegemony of class and caste and creating fractures in the essentialist hierarchical structure of the heterosexual world. The gay world has also appropriated the unequal structures of the heteronormative world and those at the bottom are the most exploited. Kamlesh offering money to the guard and watching him dressing up is an act of sexual dominance and ownership. Further the security guard's acceptance that he was doing it for money and the Mali accusing Alpeesh of forcing him, underlines the double threat of social stigma and legal criminalization that dissuades gays from coming out. The labeling of homosexuality as unnatural by medical science perpetuates guilt complex and internalized homophobia forcing them to negotiate the strict structures of a heterosexual society by leading double lives under different identities. Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* showed how homosexuality was discursively constructed arising from the desire to gain

knowledge and thereby exert power (Rabinow 322-323). Nitin in *Bravely Fought the Queen* secretly carries on a relationship with his wife's brother and an auto-rickshaw driver and it is this double identity and repression of desires that has devastating consequences for the family. In *Night Queen*, the two gay characters, Raghu and Ash meet in a park which points to the radicalizing of largely heterosexual public spaces like parks, bars and public toilets by homosexual interventions (Chanana 22). Dattani has shown that the fluidity and mutability of queer existence is able to create fissures in the highly oppressive monolithic structure of heteronormative society. This in a way interrogates the hegemonic structures of heteropatriarchal society by producing a counter-culture.

Dattani's plays interrogate Indian society's conformation to stereotypes and works at subverting accepted societal norms and power equations. His exploration and search for an alternative space for these suppressed identities and the consequent spatial identity arising from it can be conceptualized with reference to Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias'. They are liminal spaces where non-normative sexuality can flourish and find articulation. Kamlesh's flat in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* where he indulges in sex with his security guard and his partners is one such instance of a "crisis heterotopia". Foucault supports the idea of a society with many heterotopias, as a space for the assertion of difference and as a means of escape from authoritarianism and repression. Dattani's call for tolerance and acceptance of the gay and the transgender community can be conceptualized within this alternative frame of reference.

Dattani is not a professed feminist, but his entire opus can also be seen as a relentless assault on the dominant, heteronormative patriarchal discourse of postcolonial India. Many of his plays like *Tara*, *Where There's a Will*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Final Solutions*, *Do the Needful*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Clearing the Rubble*, *Morning Raga* and *Ek Alag Mausam* present women as gendered subalterns in a patriarchal conditioned system. In *Tara*, Dattani reveals the entrenched gender based preference in

the society. Social norms, economic factors, cultural trappings all contribute towards the injustice meted out to the girl child. The denial of the third limb is the process of 'Othering' of Tara and Bharti's complicity in the matter is a 'reification' of the above myths. It is the ideological state apparatus represented by the 'hospital' and people like Dr. Thakkar which facilitates the patriarchal order. Tara is doubly subalternized, both as a woman and by her disability. The play can also be seen as an exposition of Dattani's concern for androgyny, the importance of giving equal value to both the masculine and feminine side of ourselves that would lead to perfect harmony. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a play about the silencing of women in insensitive patriarchal set ups, a play about disciplining women's sexuality and using violence as a tool to force women to conform to social dictates of a dominant heterosexual society. Women in this play are treated as commodities. This play also exposes how gays, themselves a minority dominate over heterosexual women in patriarchal society, thus showing the triumph of sexuality over gender. Nitin is a closet homosexual but at home he assumes the dominant role of the patriarchal male due to his masculinity and throws Alka out of the house for insulting his mother and Praful. However, Dolly's fantasy about the non-existent 'Kanhaiya' works both as a feminist critique of patriarchy and as a test of the viability of feminist alternatives. In *Thirty Days in September*, Dattani lifts the veil of silence surrounding Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and incest. It is Dattani's indictment of the oppressive gender structure that places women in subordinate positions and reduces her to an object of sexual gratification. Dattani uses here the symbol of the doll as an "objective-correlative" to show Mala's transformation from a mute victim to a woman who registers her protest against the male hegemony. Mala's behavior can be seen in the light of Freud's Father-Complex theory. Mala's father abandons her during childhood citing her mother's frigidity as the reason. He becomes the object of desire and power that cannot be obtained. Her brief sexual escapades are therefore attempts to overcome her sense of abandonment and feel wanted. She now seeks men who are surrogate fathers or father figures. Shanta is the true

subaltern, having never raised her voice and bears the humiliation silently. In *Final Solutions*, Daksha/Hardika is the 'other', the 'third-world woman' who has been oppressed both by colonialism and patriarchy. Very often women appropriate and internalize patriarchal norms. Mala's conception of herself as perverted and Bharti's conspiracy with her father to give the third leg to Chandan are such instances. Women are often 'interpellated' into believing that they are inferior to men and confined to such domestic roles as society has prescribed for them. Similarly, Fatima (*Clearing the Rubble*) in spite of her resilience subscribes to the same patriarchal ideology when she conceives of a better future for the family through Salim and not Mumtaz. It is Salim that she sends to school who she hopes will grow up and take up the burdens of the family. However, Daksha's choice of music and her emulation of singers like Noor Jahan and Suraiya can function as a site of an anti-hegemonic counter-discourse and identity formation.

In many of his plays Dattani's main concern is not so much about specific forms of disempowerment but to explore how normative power operates in very similar ways subsuming all the marginalized characters. Very often Dattani shows the subaltern characters sharing a common platform to express their grievances. The exchanges of Uma with Anarkali throws open some ambiguous spaces for a women in a given patriarchal setup. She constantly tries to allay herself with the hijras by using her identity as a female to foster a sense of community with Champa. Kiran Jhaveri in *Where There's a Will* encourages Sonal to discover her own agency. They strike up an unlikely alliance that turns the tables on Hasmukh Mehta. Their mutual support and bonding is a deliberate subversion of the heteronormative patriarchal structures of power that victimizes and marginalize women. Similarly in *Do the Needful*, Lata not only defies her family tradition and patriarchal dictates by falling in love with Salim, a Muslim, but also conspires with the homosexual Alpesh to subvert this patriarchal hegemony by entering into a conspiracy of fact-suppression, hoodwinking their respective parents to pursue their respective choices. They thus create a 'third space' to articulate their resistance. They

also resort to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls, 'Strategic essentialism' a strategy through which marginalized and minority groups mediate the complexities of the social and political world.

Very often Dattani shows his women characters at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of patriarchal society, yet he refuses to see them as victims. He also portrays women who have been trying to create new spaces of opposition to the cultural and political hegemony. Fatima in *Clearing the Rubble* is clearly the anti-thesis of characters like Shanta and Bharti. She is strong-willed, non-judgmental and resilient. Further, there are forceful, shrewd, ambitious women like Kiran Jhaveri, Ratna and Nazia who through their gritty determination transcend the boundaries of the patriarchal mould. Ratna in *Dance Like a Man* strikes a deal with her father-in-law, Amritlal Parekh to disempower the passion of Jairaj. Ratna is projected as the 'transgressive' woman who puts her love for dance above her family responsibilities and relationships resulting in the tragic death of their son Shankar. Through the portrayal of the vocal and vociferous Nazia in *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* Dattani shakes the citadel of patriarchy and the stereotyped construction of gender roles. The play is also an exploration of how during conflicts, women's bodies are constructed as a contested space over which different ethnic, political and religious groups fight to acquire this symbolic territory. These plays also debunk the patriotic nationalistic construction of the middle-class heterosexual glorified "mother" image that is seen as the caretaker of future generations. Ratna's negligence of her son in her passion for dance, Nazia's willful rejection of her own daughter born out of rape and Nila (*Uma and the Fairy Queen*) leaving behind her child in Pakistan are instances of this. Even Swarnalatha (*Morning Raga*) is considered 'cursed' because her passion for music and fame is held responsible for the death of her son in an accident. Dattani's use of menstruation as an empowering image to show Bhavna attaining puberty in *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* is a covert interrogation of the myths associated with this biological process. Feminist activists have challenged the sense of shame, secrecy and silence surrounding menstruation and some celebrate it as

a source of feminine power and connection. This invites comparison to Helene Cixous' exhortation to women to use woman's biological condition as a source of the process and content of what she can write. Thus Dattani's women seek emancipation and empowerment by striving against existing social ostracization and personal dilemmas to negotiate personal spaces for themselves. Their subversion of the existing hierarchies through adoption of strategies like 'strategic essentialism', 'lesbian continuum', underlining the dichotomies between sex and gender, using the unconscious as a site of resistance, using music and fantasy as sites of anti-hegemonic counter-discourse and refusing pre-ordained subject-positions opens up many possibilities for women to articulate their subjectivities. She is no longer the 'other', the 'subaltern' with no voice of her own, or suffering from a 'lack' but someone who contests and interrogates the distribution of power and the validity of hegemonic discourse.

*Final Solutions* is a play about 'stereotyping' and 'homogenization' where an entire community is held responsible for the acts of some. This play can be seen in the light of colonial procedures which refigured the Muslim as the 'fanatic' and which still continues in various nationalist discourse. Further there has also been a persistent image of the Musalman as the stereotyped Other since the late nineteenth century (Amin 19). Here Dattani interrogates the long-existent binaries of 'us' versus 'them', 'majority' versus 'minority', 'self' versus 'other' stereotypes. Dattani's critique of religious fundamentalism is also seen in *Swami and Winston* where he exposes the power play behind the rise of Hindu fanaticism. In *Clearing the Rubble* and *Tale of a Mother Feeding her Child*, Dattani interrogates the pluralistic nature of the Indian society and reveals deep prejudice and discrimination on religious, caste, ethnic and linguistic grounds. He also explores the Hindu society's construction of the Dalit as its Other. In *Ek Alag Mausam*, Dattani tactfully underlines the economic aspect of AIDS and the importance of rehabilitation. Aparna is as much a victim of betrayal as patriarchal injunction. The play also engages with fundamental human rights issues like the right of

two HIV infected persons to get married. In *Brief Candle*, Dattani brings to the fore the ordeal of cancer patients who suffer both internally and externally. In both these plays the playwright also critiques the failure of medicines and medical care to reach the marginalized poor.

### Conclusion

Dattani's engagement with the socio-religious realities of the postmodern age opens up contesting sites that subvert the existing hierarchical framework. Through the interrogation of the prevalent norms of gender, sexuality and familial relationship his plays participate in the disruption of authoritarian hegemonic discourses. Dattani engages with various facets of subalternity and seek to reconstruct the spaces for marginalized groups of society. Through his writing he provided the subalterns centre stage by making them pivotal characters in his plays. His plays interrogate the role of discourse in constructing ideologies and thus offer possibilities of being read against the grain to reveal hidden equations of power and political ideologies. It is a deconstructive enterprise in so much as it exposes and deconstructs those manufactured versions and processes of history and society that have been invoked through the centuries to legitimize the heteropatriarchal system. Dattani's plays are what Roland Barthes calls 'writerly texts' which invites the active engagement of the reader to decode meanings and opens itself to an array of meanings and interpretations for further research.

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