

Summary of the UGC Minor Research Project

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Title of the Project: **Exploring Gender in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani**

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Mahesh Dattani is an innovative dramatist in his themes and techniques. He uses varied topics for writing from the contemporary society. His handling of social realities and sensational issues like unusual same-sex love relationships, women's exploitation, incest and child-sex abuse, and communal disharmony has been favourite subjects of study for his critics and researchers. Dattani has selected these unconventional issues for his writings and enriched the tradition of Indian English drama. He articulates his topics very effectively and powerfully with the adaptation of the suitable dramatic technique and stage direction. Along with varied issues, Dattani's plays deal with the issues of gender very prolifically and empathetically and calculate its effect on everyone's individual and communal life. Gender is a vital issues of the contemporary society and needs for more research. The problem of surveillance and existentialism make this issue most prominent to deal.

Gender becomes a prolific term and keeps its effect on everyone. The patriarchal society has laid down different traits of living to everyone to identify their particular gender. These traits later become tradition and everyone follows them as an indispensable part of behavior without any excuse. These traits work as gender roles for each gender. The strict patriarchs dictate how one should be according to his/her gender. Thus, gender has captured the world of human beings where their discussion never ends without mentioning it. In the everyday conversation, people frequently use this term for varied purposes. In the introduction of *Gender*, David Glover and Cora Kaplan explain:

We talk about gender roles, worry about gender gap, question whether our ideas are not gender-biased or gender-specific, and we might look for additional information on these and

related topics in the rapidly expanding gender studies section of our local bookstore.

The critics of gender see a problem to perceive how gender effects on a person to constitute individual and communal identity. Therefore, it is important to see how gender becomes prolific and enormous term in the life of everyone. For to know further, this term is needed to focus more and more. Because of its importance in contemporary society, gender becomes essential to identify for everyone. It affects on the socio- economical, political, and cultural life and on everyone's individual identity. Thus, identity becomes a complex phenomenon because of the varied issues of gender. Thus, it becomes very necessary to know why gender becomes vital as well as intensely problematic term in the critical lexicon.

Various feminist writers worldwide have been deeply perturbed over the very basic and bitter fact that fair sex is gender and male is the power. The various debates and discourses about feminists and gender issues starting since early nineteenth century and until continue to deal with the problem of getting beyond patriarchal programming. They have offered many different solutions to reduce the patriarchal problem.

Thus, gender is an umbrella term studied by various academicians in their respective disciplines. It studies in sociology by the social scientists who consider gender as a social term, cultural theorists treat gendered male and female as cultural, psychiatrists dealt it as psychoanalytical issue, physicians treat gender as a medical coined identity. All these disciplinary fields make it more complex. Everywhere gender is a base or axis of their study.

Social critics consider gender is behavioural and hence it can be identified externally with the help of some behavioural codes imposed on men and women by that particular society. The society makes compulsion to everyone to follow these codes strictly and compulsorily in their daily routine activities. These are the signs used to discriminate men and women. Gender is behavioural as well as psychological because in some cases the person born in particular sex but reflects the identity of opposite sex. It is a

psychological as well as hormonal disorder imposes strange identity to that particular person.

Gender role is constructed to impose on every man and woman. The patriarchs are dominated by the views of patriarchy that give preferences only to male gender. They percolate these gender traits from one generation to another for the continuity of patriarchy. They are very careful to strengthen the gender role on everyone by teaching it since childhood because they believe that everyone should learn it appropriately and behave according to it in their further private as well as social life. It fixes on everyone as an identity so perfectly that it proves as his or her own inclination instead of looking as imposed. On the disobedience of traditional gender behaviour and appearance, society treats them differently.

Michael S. Kimmel states that any boy or girl becomes gender according to their sex because they learn appropriate gendered traits, associated with man's hegemonic masculinity and in woman's reflection of her exaggerated femininity. Kimmel states that we do not cut our own deal in gender because the social institutions like workplace, family, school, politics etc. are gendered institutions where the dominant definitions of gender are reproduced. These social institutions create psychological differences in men as aggressive, most controlling and managing while women are passive, most reactive and exciting.

Biologists see discrimination between men and women according to their physical structures. However, Michael S. Kimmel has more accurately explored the cultural landscape of gendered identity. He points out that instead of similar biological structure men exhibit different levels of aggression and violence toward women. In the same way, women with similarity have varied experiences of passivity. It assumes that the biological difference of men and women leads to their behavioural difference that later becomes social arrangement.

The researchers of gender focus on gender socialization. In this process, children of different sexes are frequently taught what it meant to be male or female. It is difficult for a child to grow to adulthood without experiencing some forms of gender biases or

stereotyping. According to Kaplan (1997) parents are the primary influence on gender role development in early years of childhood life. Later, in the social atmosphere, children learn through reinforcement and imitation to act according to social norms to present in appropriate gender ambiance. In short, children since their childhood are socialized to think that there are certain expectations and restrictions of both the genders. Thus, gender identity is not instinct in its nature.

To be masculine or feminine is the self-examination with physical and psychological setup of that particular individual. Drucilla Cornell states, “We are all born in a given body. We all have deep and profound sexual desires that often guide us rather than the other way around.” As a humanist, she expects that everyone should have the freedom to live their life as sexually differentiated beings. It is wrong to fit everyone in the gender role of masculine or feminine.

Mahesh Dattani’s plays are chiefly concerned with plight of women in Indian society. In his plays, he yearns to consider women as equal human beings. He strongly believes that the patriarchal social system is most responsible for the lost of own identity to women. In short, patriarchy has given only identity to women as subordinated. In his plays, he has not only deals with the issues of women but becomes the pathfinder for them to seek their identity.

The plays of Dattani concerned with the problems of women but critics could not hold him as a feminist because he does not convey any feminist propaganda to communicate in his plays. No doubt, his female protagonists play a prominent role in their life. They are not portrayed in the conventional role that achieved different facets of the feminine psyche. Moreover, his women characters represent human beings with equal sensibility to reciprocate with their male counterpart.

Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* exposes the position of woman in conventional society. Dattani uses the metaphor of bonsais to compare the stunted growth of woman in the society restricted by men. He uses it in the awareness of women to understand their social as well as family position. It helps all the women characters of the

play to explore their self-identity.

Dattan has himself called *Where There's A Will* as “exorcism of the patriarchal code.” Here, he focuses on the most prominent issues of the society like gender discrimination and the domination of patriarchal authority. The story of the play is centralized on the “self-made” industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta. The four main characters of the play Hasmukh Mehta, his wife Sonal Mehta, his son Ajit and daughter-in-law Preeti belie their names with opposite function. Only the name of Hasmukh’s mistress Kiran stands appropriate to her. Hasmukh Mehta’s expectation from his son is like a strict patriarch. The same is the problem of Hasmukh Mehta with his wife and daughter-in-law. Only he believes in his mistress Kiran who latter becomes trustee of his property. She remains behind the curtain until his death. His will has placed her at the center of action. This play has two parts one prior to the death of Hasmukh and another one is post death section. The character of Kiran works as an instrument to destruct the patriarchy.

Tara is most appreciated play of Mahesh Dattani. This play addresses the question of gender with its various aspects. Dattanis himself prefers this play more because it acknowledges the female side. This play is a grave tragedy of Tara, because she learns that she is discriminated in her family since her infancy not only by the side her father but by her mother also whom she loves most. The decision of her mother deprives her to get the second leg that was her own. Dattani has presented a perfect patriarchal world in this play. Mr. Patel is representative of this patriarchal authority who makes difference in his son and daughter.

These plays of Dattani simultaneously deal with the masculine gender. Masculinity is a culture and masculine identity is considered as superior, oppressive and consequently dominant on women. The result of it is that the feminine identity becomes inferior, dominated and subaltern. Thus, to study masculinity is to study femininity because these identities are interconnected - one is dominating and other is dominated. It is a gender politics to consider these identities different from each other. In modern society, women have opportunities to be educated and seeking job or business to become independent

economically as well as socially. Therefore, it is a challenge before men to maintain their masculine identity superior above the feminine identity. For this purpose, man has kept all the power resources in his hand to keep women on deprived and dependent position. Therefore, relationship of one gender over the other is a power struggle. Thus, masculinity is always referred as a power politics.

Dattani is chiefly concerned with humanity. Therefore, he treats the issue of masculinity is treated in such a way that it could not remain dominant forever. There are variables in the masculine and feminine identity according to caste, creed, society, and economical and political power. Therefore, the plays of Dattani focus on the changing values of the post-colonial India. From the very beginning of patriarchy, masculinity is constructed and preserved under the patriarchal codes of society. The patriarchal society employs dominant culture of man. However, those who live under the patriarchal shadow suffer a lot.

Mahesh Dattani has pointed out suffering of younger men and women in the society who become victims of dominant culture of patriarchal society. In his plays, father is placed as a head of family who, by his governing nature, never allows freedom to young men to live by their own ways. In earlier period, son obeyed his father and lived a life shaped by him. However, it unknowingly lost his own identity because his patriarchal father has already overshadowed it. In the post- colonial and post-modern era, individual identity becomes the most prominent issue. In Dattani's plays, young men like Ajit of *Where There's a will*, Jairaj of *Dance Like a Man*, Chandan of *Tara* suffer by the patriarchal authority of their fathers. However, at a suitable opportunity they revolt against it or at least raised voice against this injustice to mark their own identity.

Mahesh Dattani is not a dramatist who speaks about the fantasy and romantic world only to entertain his audience but insists on to demonstrate actual happenings in the life of people who are living in exile. This makes him more realistic and humanistic because his play covers the whole scenario of society. His plays based on those themes, which previous writers neglected by considering them as taboo. Thus, no one has shown

courage or interest to write on these invisible issues with literary point of view on Indian stage except Dattani. He has taken, first time, themes of homosexuality and third gender on Indian theatre. In these plays, he arouses some questions related to their existence and tries to seek answers from his audience.

Dattani observes that those who are indulged in homosexual relationships often hates to themselves and live in shameful attitude secretly. It also shows their frustration in inability to get a partner or no courage to bear the indignant look of society towards them. In frustration, they often attempts to suicide. They live in ignorance as a marginalized because they are not allowed to take part in social gathering or public event. The government and social activists also ignore their pain. However, Mahesh Dattani looks to their issues and problems with socio- humanistic point of view and realize their existential engagement with other current issue.

Dattani looks to homosexuality as a substitute to the all time dominated heterosexuality. Through his plays, he shows homosexuality as genuine and natural sexual practice as heterosexuality. However, homosexuality has marginalized status in society because of its unacceptability and minority. However, it is wrong to consider it as unnatural on the ground of minority. As a humanist, Dattani pleads for homosexuals that they should have a right to live by their own desires and freedom to choose their companion as others. However, in the pre-dominant patriarchal society, heterosexuality is the only norm of sexuality and enjoys unbeatable position. It is an attempt of Dattani to consider homosexuality at least as a substitute to heterosexuality. In his plays, he raises his voice to sanction homosexuality and homosexual relationships.

Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a play about homosexuals. The theme and the world shown by the dramatist are not identical to the people of conventional mind. In this play, he exhibits all types of homosexuals. It appears as an informal gathering of varied gays.

Seven Steps Around the Fire is another play of Dattani which prominently deals with same-sex-love and plight of community of eunuchs in society. In this play, Dattani protests against the injustice committed by patriarchal to eunuch community. Here, the dramatist challenges to the age-old belief of heterosexual marriage. He also highlights the irony in the life of eunuchs that they are welcomed at the time of marriage and childbirth to bless but, in reality, they are deprived of both the things in their life.

To conclude, the patriarchal social system has not given equal position to all. The layers of the human beings as male at pinnacle and other are beneath to them makes an asymmetry in the society. In this descending social system, only heterosexual man enjoys the supreme position. Homosexuals are not considered as men because they never fulfill the patriarchal norms of the real man. Women are also at inferiority but except those who are in the power. The power offers the masculine position to all. Men should also accept, in few cases, the superiority of those women who are already in power. Thus, for the patriarch, women can be appeared manly when they have restrained power in their hands. Otherwise, the male who are weak considered as castrated and effeminate.

However, Dattani's plays follow the agenda of equality. In this attempt, there is a need to modify the patriarchal ideology to redefine gender and sexual identity to create a new society where everyone should be equally respected with his or her identity.

