

Melting Genders: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani occupies a very distinct and illustrious place in the realm of Indian drama in English. He has manifested his individuality in so many ways. His presentation of problems from real life situations is significant contribution to Indian English Drama. Among modern Indian playwrights, he stands forth with singular distinctness, striking artistic perception, and immense dramatic guts. He is the most serious contemporary dramatist in Indian drama in English. He takes up serious problems prevailing in urban India. He, very successfully, gives voice to the problems and sufferings of the marginalized people of our society. His plays contain some important elements like human pathos, passions, conflict and appeal to human sentiment, which can immediately touch and stir common audience. He puts Indian drama in English to the level of world drama. The present chapter makes an in-depth critical inquiry into the seven stage plays of Mahesh Dattani.

The word 'gender' is a highly controversial and discussed term in the history of philosophical and literary movements. Basically, by popular/simple conventions and dictionary meanings it is used to denote a person on the basis of his/her biological/sexual differences. According to the sixth edition of Dr Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1785), the word gender could refer to the grammatical practice of classifying nouns as masculine, feminine or neuter; or it could mean 'a sex'. But the meaning of this term is heavily disputed. Mary Holms gives an idea about the implications of the term 'gender', "it is generally agreed that gender difference are to be understood as a central feature of patriarchy, a social system in which men have to be dominant in relation to woman" (2). This above mentioned definition is capable enough to draw attention towards the controversy and dispute it can create among the intellectuals of different social groups. Since this term is socially and culturally constructed, it necessarily involves power politics so that a privileged social class can manipulate and control social and personal lives of the people to serve their position. As a socially constructed term, it is by ages long confidence of the conservative groups. But the unprivileged section feels unfairly treated and raises voice against the working of this discriminating term the 'gender'. Simone de Beauvoir is one of these earlier feminist critics who objected to the unfair practice of gender politics. Women were treated as lesser humans along with LGBT who were denied even a normal existence. But somehow men are also victims of this system controlled by gender construct. Some men do not feel at ease with the masculinity defined by the 'gender', they are the victims of this system. Mahesh Dattani presents a scope for such characters in his plays.

The study is an attempt to fill the gaps left by critics and scholars in the scholarship on Mahesh Dattani. Primarily, the

study will be based on Dattani's plays-as-texts. However, the insights accrued by watching the live performances will also be taken into considerations whenever it sounds inevitable. Apparently, different scholars and critics have studied the issues of women, gays and lesbians as victims of patriarchy. But their approach and study are far from being all inclusive and wholesome. Furthermore, gender as a discourse establishes the norms of behavior and body language for men also. So this study will entertain this crucial aspect as it has hitherto been neglected and sidelined. Entailing both drama as text and as performance, the study will also explore how the dramatist's understanding of real and elemental human nature has been facilitated by an aesthetics that makes the reader and the audience recognise the politics of gender as well as encourage and galvanise them to feel the need to emancipate the culture and the people from its shackles. The study further attempts to transcend disciplinary boundaries in an effort to offer more rounded perspectives on gender politics. It, therefore, entails the insights offered by the era of theory— Feminism, Post colonialism, LGBT, Ecocriticism etc. Especially, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan have opened the floodgates of suspicion and questioning the canonical, classical, central norms of human identity. But due care has to be taken in applying these Euro-centric discourses on to the third world reality of India and its literatures. A context sensitive analysis has been at the centre of this interrogation and exploration into the presentation and handling of the issues of men, women, homosexuals, eunuchs, and trans-genders.

The present study explores the various significances of the term gender. The introduction evolves a theoretical framework for the study. It explores in detail the insights offered by diverse schools of thought on the concept of gender. Furthermore, besides tracing the contributions of other thinkers, an attempt is made to explore and establish the meaning of gender and history of its evolution. This chapter is also entails a detailed and thorough critique of the criticism available on Dattani's plays. This part categorizes the criticism into several categories, thereby highlighting and underlining gaps left by critics. An attempt is made to trace the incidents and experiences in the life of Dattani that have gone into shaping his understanding of this issue of gender.

It explores how the Gender, as a socio-cultural construct to categories individuals on the basis of their sex organs, personal traits and their social performance, is received in the contemporary culture as anything but apolitical. Judith Butler's words that ". . . gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space" that through various types of acts ". . . constitute[s] the illusion of an abiding gendered self" underline the constructedness of gender (qtd. in Glover and

Kaplan17-18). And men, despite living in a patriarchal society, have to suffer in the process of becoming ideal men. Dattani's plays have a number of incidents and characters that undermine the traditional concepts of essential masculine traits as aggressive, dominating, heterosexual, assertive, outgoing and rational. Dattani's oeuvre entails a number of such male characters who appear suffocated under the pressure of this patriarchal archetypal manhood. They manifest proclivities and interests that are apparently feminine. At the same time, through characters like Jiten in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and AmritLal in *Dance like a Man* Dattani also shows the ramifications of blind adherence to archetypal codes of masculinity and manhood that necessitate aggression, dominance and sexual bravado as essential masculine traits.

Simone de Beauvoir's assessment, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" further underlines the fact that gender roles are culturally learnt and not essential traits. In the patriarchal society, women are relentlessly categorized by the Manichean aesthetics in opposition to men. Hence they are trained to become timid, shy, soft, emotional, submissive and passive. But Dattani goes on to show that behavioral traits are triggered by the external stimuli and orientation of the individual. Consequently, a woman can behave in an aggressive, confident, demanding and dominating manner if her circumstances so demand and she so desires. There is nothing inherent and natural in her nature that can force her to behave as a woman. KiranJhaveri in *Where There's a Will*, Ratna and Lata in *Dance like a Man* are some of many such characters who ooze dominance and aggression as the dominating traits of their personalities.

Dattani's oeuvre is a testimony to his belief gender is a socio-cultural construct that is imposed from outside. It has got nothing to do with individual's innate proclivities and priorities. He has subverted various dimensions of gender through a range of characters. In the case of men and women, it is said that gender forces them to train their behaviours and gestures to fall within the realm of normativity and acknowledgement. But in the case of third genders, it has gone beyond the game of centre and margin. It erases their very presence from the social discourse. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* makes references to this idea how heterosexuality has emerged as a norm through various cultural procedures of exclusion and inclusion. From sodomy and homosexuality being seen as essentially a disease and anatomical malfunction, the postmodern world has gone to the extent of acknowledging it as something normal and acceptable. Transgenders now can legally get married, contest elections and apply for jobs with a

column acknowledging their presence. Dattani has created a whole range of such characters that challenge the heteronormativity as the canonical sign of normalcy. Alpesh, Subbu, Jiten, Ed, Kamala are some of such characters.

The study is on Dattani's aesthetics through which he has presented such elemental and realistic picture of Indian society. Any society sanctions only those images, linguistic codes, and gestures which it deems normal and acceptable. Derrida has highlighted this aspect in his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of Human Sciences." But Dattani seems to have improvised and orchestrated a whole set of subversive aesthetics that not only presents the human reality on the stage but also galvanizes the audiences and the readers alike to unlearn the culturally learnt codes of gender behavior.

Undoubtedly, the post-1960s era has witnessed the trend of toppling of the cultural and canonical towers of human civilization. But amongst all this toppling, some subtle crevices here and some obdurate boulder there remain untouched or partially touched. The issue of gender is one such crevice or boulder whatever it looks like. The present study will include the interaction and negotiation of male, female and transgender as entrapped in the gender discourse. Moving ahead of the prevalent tendency of seeing women as the only victims of gender and patriarchy, this study will attempt to extend this reception of gender as an ideology that suffocates all. The study will show how apparently eulogized masculine behavioral codes of dominance, aggression, heterosexuality etc can lead a man to muffling and restlessness. The study will enlighten us not only about different and diverse subtle nuances of gender, but also about the richness, range and beauty of Dattani's theatre and aesthetics.

Delimitation is an integral and important part of any research. Any research needs to be completed in a designated frame of time. Other than that, practical considerations and the need for a focused analysis also necessitate a delimitation in the consultation area, as well as in the literatures selected for analysis. No research can be undertaken without set goals and objectives in mind. This study doesn't intend to be the final statement on the issue of gender in society and Dattani's plays. Rather, it attempts to open new possibilities of criticism in Indian theatre and drama. These possibilities can further be explored and studied in relation to other vectors of power and culture. As Dattani is still active as a dramatist, his relentless extending of his oeuvre will also keep the clock ticking for the critics and scholars on him.

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