

# Gender Representation in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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**Abstract:** *This article shows the Gender Representation in the plays of Mahesh Dattani using the plays On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Do the Needful, Seven Steps Around the Fire, Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen, Where there is A Will and Dance Like a Man.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Representation, Mahesh Dattani, Homosexuality, Transgender, Hetrosexuality, Manusmriti

In the present age, it is no doubt that English language is known for its ever growing use in India and abroad. National School of drama was established in 1959 e the Ministry of Culture by Sangeet Natak Academy which is located in New Delhi. It was established with the aim to encourage and an acclaim drama at national level through regional languages. Playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnardare few well known playwrights who's plays are translated from regional languages to English.

Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sudraka, Harsha, Banabhatta, laid the pillars to the history off the Indian drama. They gave some everlasting works of literature. They have been the motivation for playwrights till today.

Unfortunately, Sanskrit dramas became a high culture of art or Royal art where only Kings, Royal families and scholars where I love to watch.

So a new form of local art like folk Theatre or regional drama sprung up. Eg: Ramleela was prominent form of theatre in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Bihar. In Haryana, Swang is the folk theatre group; Bhavi is a vernacular folk form of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Yakshagana is the vernacular folk theatre of Karnataka and so on.

In the post-independence era, drama was based on the British Legacy. The theatre was well established in major Cities like Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Varnasi paving the way for Modern Indian Drama. There was a Mixture of western norms in Indian tragedy, myth or history.

The early Stalwarts in the post-independence are Utpal Dutt and Shanbhu Mitra in Bengal. They established Sangeet Natak Akademi to promote Drama and arts. Later few more Art and drama schools were established in Bhopal as Ranga Mandal, kalakshetra at Chennai and Chorus at Imphal. Slowly drama started to develop and establish itself.

"Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation if women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms were rewarded with happily ever after" ----- Anita Nair.

Representation of Gender have changed and developed with time and again yet women stereotype prevails in present society too.

Representation of women is defined by the Male gaze i.e., how a man sees women or how they society wants a woman to behave and look.

Usually women are represented as weak, submissive, emotional, focused to family and children.

Eg, 1: Doli Armaanoki, A hindi serial,

This show portrays the typical notion of tolerance of women against tortures at all level. Her husband is a drunkard, shows domestic violence, insults her and she keeps quite despite all of these. Representing the stereotypes of society. E.g. 2, The Hunger Games

Katniss is a best example for positive representation of women. She subverts the stereotypical representation of women that we come across in mainstream media. She is highly skilled in hunting and archery, self-sufficiency. She was a Fearless and rational women, who didn't allow her emotions to get in the way of her survival.

When we come across in Indian Drams in English, Mahesh Dattani is one of the lone playwright who talk about positive representation of Gender. He has written over fifteen plays and about nine screenplays. Over last 20years Dattani has created his independent identity and status. He focuses on the burning issues of that time.

In "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai", Dattani talks about how Homosexuality collapse under the strong influence of Societal norms. This is the first play in Modern India which addresses the issues of Queer which is usually hidden or not raised.

"Do the Needful", is a satire on arranged marriages in India. The theme and plot is based on Indian scenario where as its implication was on the entire universe. Homosexuality is ignored in India where as Dattani had the courage to present a play on this theme. The play deals with the gay relationship and mocks t the concept of marriage of India and tradition. Alpeh is a gay and forced to marry. He had no other go but get married to Lata. Alpeh and Lata get married but they have mutual understanding. And they respect each other decision. Through this play, Mahesh Dattani very beautifully show the thoughts and views of a gay who ignored his wife for his partner Trilok and Lata no doubt is the wife of Alpeh but still she loves Salim. Through this play Mahesh Dattani mocks at the Indian Marriage system.

Every year December tenth is observed as Human Rights Day all over the world. The Human rights is assured for every human being disregarding of their class, caste, religion, race, sexuality, gender, nationality, language, ethnicity except rights of sexual minorities violated all over India, pressuring them to lead a inhumane existence. Hijras have no space in it. They lack recognition of gender which makes them impossible to lead a decent livelihood. They either can avail employment opportunities, education, marriage rights or passport too. Even if they get a job they are often witnessed to face sexual harassment from male colleagues. In our patriarchal society, bisexual/ lesbian women are dual subjugated as women and sexually minorities, having very little space for themselves in public. Homes turn into jail. Families try to separate the couple and force the women into heterosexual marriage.

The play *Seven Steps around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani explores the social rejection of the hijras or transgender in the contemporary society. In India, we see women nature themselves according to the “feminine mystique” in order to please men to be alive in a patriarchal society like we do and finally get trapped into the image of “Angel in the house”. Betty Friedland in her book *The Feminine Mystique* aptly points that:

The Feminine mystique there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no way she can ever dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, her husband’s wife. The famous Victorian woman portrayal is as a ideal women/ wife and labeled as “The Angel in the House” where woman were expected to be submissive, loyal and devoted to her husband. The angel was meek, passive, powerless, charming, pious and most importantly self sacrificing and pure. Virginia Woolf describes “The Angel in the House” as She was intensely sympathetic, she was charming. She was utterly unselfish, she excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. She never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always the minds and wishes of others.

Mahesh Dattani which unveils the traumatic experience, pain and agony that a third gender would experience. The third gender are humiliated, deprived of their rights and ill-treated in the society. The main characters in the play are Anarkali, Kamala and Chapa. The society treats the hijras as an untouchable. They fail to understand their Physical and Mental agony. The three characters in the play that was mentioned before belong the third gender and throughout the play they suffer because of being the third gender. They are voiceless and harassed by male prisoners in jail. Uma is a sociology student who wants to interview the hijras but she comes from a rich and upper class society where the constable in the jail hesitates to introduce her to the Hijras and tell her there are many other sorts of murderers, you can interview them, why interview them. In this play Uma acts a mouthpiece of Dattani to show the sufferings of the Transgender community in our society.

Mahesh Dattani brings an outstanding insight into the thoughts of women as shown in “Where there is a Will” and “Bravely Fought the Queen”, were the women of both these

plays speak aloud about their thought, speak out, protest and they express what they feel.

Dattani plays are of today and it speaks beyond linguistic and cultural divides. Sometimes so direct that led to controversy. Mahesh Dattani uses family unit and the family setting time and again, he uses the family and home as his locale and fragments them. As the relationship fall apart, so in a way does the visual setting. He splits the sets, hidden rooms, interior and exterior are added.

This is indicative of his playing with time too. None of his plays are static within its timeframe. They keep moving between past and present and at times between life and death, with the ease with which a character enters and leaves the stage. Few comparisons are made between Mahesh Dattani plays and Ibsen works. Yes, Dattani has Ibsenite talent for revealing the secrets of the family, but goes beyond this, making his characters turn towards the future in exorcising the past: “will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?” cries Kiran in *Where There’s Will*. Unlike Ibsen’s plays, Dattani’s plays are more of healing, rather than of destruction. The mode is comic rather than tragic.

Mahesh Dattani tried to give us an image which could be created in the theatre, images which deserve to be seen by audiences worldwide and images which gave Indian Drama a vital new place in Modern World Theatre.

An impression is formed by the upper and middle class of India that gender bias is not adhered to in their kind of society. Yet, the fact remains same. “Society is a masked ball, where everyone hides his real character and reveals it by hiding.”

Dattani fragments the myth that females and males in urban India are not pushed into separate groups. For example: Amritlal Parekh in “Dance Like a Man” wants his son to surrender dance as his career just because it is not a ‘man’s job’. Hasmukh Metha in ‘Where There’s Will’, wished for a male child though he was a business tycoon and brought up in Mumbai. Baa in ‘Bravely Fought the Queen’ is very proud because she had given birth to ‘two sons’. The best example of gender discrimination can see is in Tara, where Tara leg is stolen and given to Chandan because he was a boy.

*Where There’s a Will* is a comedy with a farce touch. The play shows a strong point on how men consumed with striking the patriarchal code not to let go of their manhood in this process.

The play revolves around the life, more importantly, the afterlife of a man called Hasmukh Mehta, a wealthy and a business tycoon. It’s a story of a strange ownership of Mr. Hasmukh for his son Ajith Mehta, who later lives his entire life under the shadow of his dad; comply to his father, hardly able to find his own space and getting a low self esteem.

Mr. Mehta is suspicious about his daughter in law Preeti, who is “pretty, charming, graceful, and sly as a snake”. He is unhappy with his wife Sonal. He says “.... When I was 21,

the greatest tragedy of my life took place, I got married... I soon found what a good for nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life..."

His skepticism for his family members and his disconsolate sex life makes him to find a "right person" outside the family Kiran Jhaveri, Managing Director in Mr. Mehta's company who is 'shrewd hard-head' who gets close to Mr. Hasmukh than his family. He gives the responsibility of all his property to Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust and makes Mrs. Kiran Jhaveri that trustee before he dies.

Kiran Jhaveri is shown as epitome of the Dattani women makes her appearance in the very first play that he wrote shrewd, sharp-witted, stylish, clever and calculative. Like most women who play gendered roles. Kiran is a victim too, but who refuse to stay victimized.

In India, most of ideas, values, beliefs for woman are codified in Manusmriti. There is a saying that, "In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband, and when her husband is dead, under her son's. She shouldn't have independence". Sonal wife of Hasmukh is living in this condition. We can see that she is a victim of subjugation and exploited by her husband's authority. Mr. Hasmukh she is nothing but a faithful dog. She is obedient, meek and submissive.

Even in modern times, womanis still seen as a slave for men's lust. They are treated as an object and exploited mentally and physically. Kiran expresses her pain as "isn't strange how repetitive life is? My brothers. They have turned out to be like their father, going home with bottles of some wrapped up in newspaper beating up their wives. And I, I too like my mother. I married a drunkard and I listened to his swearing. And I too have learnt to suffer silently. Oh! Where will all this end? With the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?"

In the male dominated world, this play reflects on the complexity of patriarchy where women are destined to be in a second position. Neither economic independence nor education would help them to gain their respects unless the male ego undergoes a complete transformation.

Dance Like a Man, a play about a Bharatanatyam Dancers, their struggles that they had to face in their career. Jairaj's father, Amritlal, an Autocratic father who opposes Jairaj's dancing and becomes the epitome of patriarchal subjugation. The characters in this play, show their struggles to live up to the gendered expectations of the patriarchy, middle class society. We can see that repeatedly Jairaj is questioned about the identity, "maleness" because he chooses his career in dance.

This play explores the conventional norms on male stereotyping and gendered identity crisis. As Jairaj finds his passion condemned, his identity is stigmatized and his gender is questioned.

Due to autocracy of Amritlal, Jairaj feels himself as a failure. Mr. Amritlal Parekh is a freedom fighter but he had cut down the freedom of his own son who wanted to pursue

the career in Bharatanatyam. Amritlal impose restriction on his son and tells Jairaj "not to grow his hair any longer".

The conversation between Amritlal and Ratna gives a clear image of what is "progress" interms of Amritlal and Ratna terms and condition.

Amritlal: Do you know where a man's happiness lies?

Ratna: No

Amritlal: In being a man.... I have no intension in stopping you. I will let you dance.

Ratna: And Jairaj?

Amritlal: A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's pathetic.

Ratna: Maybe we aren't "progressive enough"

Amritlal: This isn't being progressive that is... sick... help me make him an adult. Help to help him grow up... make him worthy of you.

Tara is one of those plays which has got appreciation all over the world. It is the play of female infanticide that has been practiced even now in some parts of the world, where the male child is given more importance. The issue that Mahesh Dattani focuses on in this play are gender Discrimination, marginalization of a woman, gender objectification. It emphasizes on the discrimination against girl child in our society.

The play starts with Chandan staying in London. He has changed his name into Dan as he wanted to become a writer. He wanted to write a story of his sister Tara. Who are conjoined Siamese twin.

Dan goes back to his childhood days where he lived in Mumbai with his family. Barathi gave birth to a conjoined twin. One was girl and the other was a boy. They were conjoined at their backbone. With a surgical operation they could be separated which would be a danger to any one of the child. The twin shared one leg in common which means they had 3 legs. With an operation either of the two would get two legs and other one would have to cripple. Bharathi and Tara's grandfather insisted on the third leg to be given to Chandan so that he could lead a better life. Grandfather and mother had bribed the doctor too. Tara's father was mute and witnessed the injustice imparted on tara. But the operation wasn't successful, Chandan had to limb and tara had to cripple.

This leaves Bharati shocked and Bharathi tries to repent her mistake by giving full love and affection to Tara. She is quite worried and concerned about Tara's future. Where as Mr. Patel always was concerned about Chandan.

We can see that Chandan was more interested in helping his mother in Knitting rather than helping his Dad at office. Whereas Tara was better at office work, she could manage all the office related work easily. Mr. Patel thinks it is not a job that a boy does and ask Chandan to concentrate on his studies. He wished that Chandan would do his higher studies in abroad.

In the meanwhile, Tara friend Roopa says that in Mr. Patel's family there existed a tradition where to save themselves

from heavy expanses of marriage of their daughters; the Patel's used to drown their daughter into excess of milk and kill them. Tara was stunned at the gender discrimination.

Tara is not just an individual character but emerges as an archetype. This play not only unravels how girls are subjected to discrimination in a well educated society but also emphasize on how discrimination is encouraged by the society. In shows that discrimination against a woman starts right from the womb of the mother. Female feticide is common in our society; the society considers the girl child as a burden to the entire family.

We can say that gender inequality is a social evil that has prevailed in our society for ages and it can be erased only when people change their perspective and understand that gender inequality is a mere social construct, a person should be judged on their capabilities and quality rather on the basis of gender. Every person on this earth have their own purpose and rights and hence they deserve equal respect.

This play has dual purpose, first to expose the modern educated urban family's fidelity to the typical attitude of recommending anything that is masculine. The other purpose is to expose the corruption prevalent in the bureaucratic society.

Tara is a fascinating window into our own life and reveals to us that we may be the victims of our own prejudices, and our choices are often influenced by external factors or circumstances.

Bravely Fought the Queen also deals with the similar theme like Tara. This play focuses on the Gender discrimination and gender inequality. This play is divided into three acts- the first act is entitled "The Women", the second act is named "The Man" and the third act is named "Free for All!".

This play is about a family life, the women Alka, Dolly and Baa, they are the caregivers and home keepers while the man Nitin and Jiten have their place outside as providers. There is a sense of discontentment and suppression in almost all the characters both female and male as they strive to break free from the cliché that the society has implemented on every individual. The Bonsai plant is a perfect example about the oppresses Alka and dolly have.

..... you plant the sapling in a shallow tray- you've got to make them sure the roots don't have enough space to spread. You still have to keep trimming them as they grow.... You can shape their branches into whatever shape you want- by pinching or wiring the shoots.

Bravely Fought the Queen is the first play Dattani where he partially talks about Homosexuality. The plays show the confusion of Nitin a homosexual who marries Alka to hide his sexuality. This show that disaster where both husband and wife were going through, as they have to struggle to maintain their marriage which wasn't successful and Alka turned into alcoholic.

The frustration of the individual in this plays- be it Baa with her traumatic scars, Jiten with his vicious temperament, Nitin trying to camouflage his sexuality or Dolly trying to camouflage his sexuality or Dolly trying to cope up with her unsuccessful wedding. These are all the outcome of a weak society that bars discrete privilege but limit individuals into choice. As observed by Nidhi Singh that "the ensuing struggles is for visibility, voice and social space, not to be frozen into stereotypes but to have freedom of choice as individuals".

Do the needful is another play by Mahesh Dattani. It is the best romantic comedy play. The theme and plot is based on Indian scenario where as its implication was on the entire universe. Homosexuality is ignored in India where as Dattani had the courage to present a play on this theme. The play deals with the gay relationship and mocks the concept of marriage of India and tradition. Alpesh is a gay and forced to marry. He had no other go but get married to Lata. Alpesh and Lata get married but they have mutual understanding. And they respect each other decision. Through this play, Mahesh Dattani very beautifully show the thoughts and views of a gay who ignored his wife for his partner Trilok and Lata no doubt is the wife of Alpesh but still she loves Salim. Through this play Mahesh Dattani mocks at the Indian Marriage system.

Hence, to conclude, we see how gender is represented in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. These plays tend to portray the contemporary society the country. May it be Dance like a Man or Bravely fought the Queen. It not only talks about women related issues, but also covers the issues related to man. We often tend to forget the male perspective and concentrate on the feminine aspects. As a playwright, Mahesh Dattani becomes a universal figure.

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