

Subverting Patriarchal Hegemony: A Nuanced Analysis of Marginalization, Agency, And Resilience in The Female Characters of Mahesh Dattani

Dr. Panchshiela Mahale

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sathaye College, Vile Parle (East), Mumbai

Abstract—This research paper explores the complex representation of female characters in the dramatic works of Mahesh Dattani, a pioneering voice in contemporary Indian English theater. While traditional Indian drama has frequently relegated women to idealized archetypes or passive victims within patriarchal structures, Dattani's plays challenge these simplified narratives by presenting multi-dimensional female protagonists who navigate the intersections of gender, class, tradition, and sexuality. Focusing on key plays including *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Where There's a Will*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, this study examines how Dattani uses domestic spaces as micro-political battlegrounds to expose the structural violence inherent in urban middle-class Indian families.

Utilizing a qualitative and text-based methodology grounded in feminist literary theory, structuralism, and materialist feminism, this paper analyzes the spectrum of female experiences in Dattani's universe. It traces their journeys from internalized oppression and compliance to resistance, subversion, and the reclamation of agency. The paper highlights Dattani's unique ability to reveal how women can simultaneously be victims of patriarchal violence and gatekeepers of the very structures that oppress them. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that Dattani's female characters are not mere dramatic devices but serve as profound sociological sites. They reflect the anxieties, contradictions, and shifting identities of women in a transitioning post-colonial India.

Index Terms—Patriarchal Hegemony, Domestic Space, Agency, Marginalization, Subversion, etc

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian English drama has undergone a profound paradigm shift over the past few decades, evolving from historical, mythological, and romantic narratives to stark, socially conscious critiques of the immediate post-colonial reality. At the forefront of this transformation is Mahesh Dattani, the first playwright

writing in English to be honored with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. Dattani's dramaturgy is celebrated for its uncompromising willingness to bring marginalized voices, invisible taboos, and suppressed domestic realities into the public glare of the stage. While his plays frequently confront complex issues surrounding queer identities, communal friction, and religious hypocrisy, his treatment of female characters stands as a foundational pillar of his social critique.

Unlike many of his predecessors who romanticized or oversimplified the Indian woman—either elevating her to a selfless, self-sacrificing goddess or reducing her to a completely helpless victim—Dattani populates his dramatic world with complex, deeply flawed, and fiercely resilient women. For an English academic or researcher, evaluating Dattani's female characters offers vital insights into the evolving socio-cultural landscape of urban India. Dattani recognizes that the modern Indian middle-class family, far from being a safe haven of emotional stability, operates as a highly political unit where patriarchal power is continuously exercised, negotiated, and contested.

His female characters are situated within this domestic sphere, which serves as a micro-political reflection of the macro-patriarchal state. By exploring the lives of these women, Dattani exposes the invisible, systemic violence embedded within everyday domestic routines. This paper presents a systematic, text-based analysis of Dattani's key works, exploring how his female characters navigate the forces of patriarchal hegemony, discover alternative modes of agency, and redefine their identities against the weight of tradition.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical scholarship surrounding Mahesh Dattani's plays has consistently recognized his contribution to

the deconstruction of middle-class social structures. Early critics emphasized Dattani's mastery of stagecraft and his unique ability to translate invisible social anxieties into physical, dramatic space. Scholars have noted that Dattani's plays are architectural constructs where physical levels on stage frequently correspond to psychological or hierarchical layers within the family. Furthermore, scholars exploring gender dynamics in contemporary Indian drama have argued that Dattani's texts systematically dismantle the binary divisions between the public masculine world and the private feminine world, proving that the private sphere is governed by economic and political forces.

In the specific domain of feminist readings, critics have extensively examined plays like *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Researchers have pointed out that Dattani exposes the deep-seated preference for male heirs that persists even within highly educated, wealthy urban households. However, much of the existing literature tends to analyze Dattani's female characters in isolation or groups them broadly as symbols of victimization. There remains a distinct need for a comprehensive structural analysis that contrasts the different manifestations of female agency across his major plays, exploring the shift from the tragic internalization of trauma to strategic financial and emotional subversion.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitative, hermeneutic, and text-based methodology to analyze the representation, psychological depth, and political agency of female characters across Mahesh Dattani's major plays: *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Where There's a Will*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The analytical framework combines feminist literary criticism with structural and materialist feminist theories. Simone de Beauvoir's foundational concept of woman as the "Other," alongside modern materialist feminist analyses of domestic labor and economic disenfranchisement, serves as the theoretical baseline for this study.

The paper systematically analyzes the dialogue, stage directions, and spatial politics within the plays to decode how patriarchal power is structurally maintained and how it is subverted by female

characters. The research avoids a purely thematic summary; instead, it investigates how Dattani uses dramatic techniques—including split-level stages, off-stage voices, and non-linear timelines—to externalize the internal conflicts, suppressed desires, and structural marginalization of his female protagonists.

IV. THE DOMESTIC SPHERE AS A SPACE OF ENTRAPMENT AND VIOLENCE

In Dattani's dramatic universe, the home is rarely a sanctuary; instead, it is a space of entrapment, surveillance, and invisible violence. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, this claustrophobic environment is externalized through the setting of the Trivedi household in modern Bengaluru. The women of the house, Dolly and Alka, are physically and emotionally confined within the domestic space, while their husbands, Jiten and Nitin, operate in the public world of business and advertising. Dattani uses this spatial division to highlight the isolation of the women, who resort to alcohol, music, and fantasy to escape the crushing boredom and unspoken betrayals of their marriages. The violence infusing this domestic space is not always physical; it manifests as a systematic denial of the women's emotional and sexual subjectivities. Jiten's brutal abuse of a pregnant Dolly in the past, which resulted in the premature birth of their disabled daughter Daksha, hovers over the household as a lingering shadow.

Similarly, in *Dance Like a Man*, the domestic space becomes a site of ideological conflict. Ratna, an ambitious Bharatanatyam dancer, is trapped within a patriarchal family structure governed by her father-in-law, Amritlal Parekh. Amritlal views classical dance as an unseemly, effeminate pursuit for men and a minor, decorative hobby for women, reflecting the conservative values of a nationalist generation. Ratna's artistic aspirations are consistently stifled and controlled by masculine authority. To continue dancing, she is forced to make compromises that ultimately fracture her relationship with her husband, Jairaj.

Dattani demonstrates that the patriarchal household operates through an invisible system of rewards and punishments, forcing women to continuously negotiate away their autonomy just to secure a basic place within the family structure.

V. THE INTERNALIZATION OF PATRIARCHY AND THE FEMALE GATEKEEPER

One of Dattani's most profound insights into patriarchal hegemony is his illustration of how women can internalize their own oppression, transforming into active gatekeepers of the very system that marginalizes them. This dynamic is central to *Tara*, a tragic exploration of gender discrimination occurring literally at the biological level. The play revolves around conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, who share a third leg that can only be successfully attached to one of them. Biologically and medically, the leg has a far better chance of survival if left on Tara's body, as it receives a superior blood supply from her side. However, the twins' maternal grandfather—a powerful, wealthy politician—and their mother, Bharati, intervene in the surgical decision. They pressure the surgeon to attach the leg to the male twin, Chandan, despite the immense medical risks to Tara. Bharati's complicity in this decision reveals the destructive power of internalized patriarchy. As a woman, Bharati is so deeply conditioned by a societal preference for male heirs that she sacrifices her own daughter's physical integrity to satisfy a patriarchal ideal. Dattani avoids turning Bharati into a simple villain; instead, he portrays her as a deeply tragic figure driven to a mental breakdown by the crushing guilt of her actions. Her subsequent, desperate attempts to bond with Tara by offering her own kidney represent a frantic effort to balance her internal moral ledger. Through Bharati, Dattani illustrates that patriarchy does not operate solely through external male coercion. Instead, its survival depends on co-opting women, convincing them to enforce discriminatory practices against their own daughters to protect their fragile status within the family.

VI. ECONOMIC DISENFRANCHISEMENT AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FINANCIAL AGENCY

Materialist feminism asserts that women's subordination is fundamentally tied to their economic dependence on men within the capitalist-patriarchal framework. Dattani explores this economic disenfranchisement directly in *Where There's a Will*, a dark comedy centered around the ghost of a tyrannical patriarch, Hasmukh Mehta. Hasmukh is a self-made businessman who views his wife, Sonal, his daughter-

in-law, Preeti, and his son, Ajit, with open contempt. He considers them dependent parasites living off his hard-earned wealth. To maintain his absolute control even after death, Hasmukh drafts a restrictive will that places his entire estate and business empire into a charitable trust. This trust is to be managed not by his family, but by his estranged mistress, Kiran Jhaveri. Hasmukh's will is a calculated attempt to keep the women of his household financially disempowered and dependent on his memory.

However, the play shifts when Kiran Jhaveri enters the Mehta household. Instead of adopting an antagonistic stance toward Hasmukh's widow, Sonal, Kiran forms an intelligent alliance with the household women. Kiran possesses the corporate acumen, legal literacy, and financial independence that Sonal and Preeti were systematically denied by Hasmukh's dominance. By sharing her managerial insights, Kiran helps Sonal and Preeti understand that their domestic compliance was a form of unpaid labor that sustained Hasmukh's public success. The women gradually dismantle Hasmukh's patriarchal legacy, transforming his restrictive trust into a collaborative enterprise that secures their financial independence. Through this resolution, Dattani demonstrates that true female liberation cannot be achieved through emotional or spiritual self-realization alone; it requires structural access to economic resources, financial literacy, and control over property.

VII. THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY AND SUBVERSION OF GENDER ROLES

In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani presents gender identity as a fluid, performative construct rather than a fixed biological truth, invoking modern theories of gender performativity. The play contrasts the artistic journeys of Jairaj and Ratna against the rigid expectations of bourgeois society. Amritlal Parekh, the patriarch, views Jairaj's choice to pursue Bharatanatyam—a dance form traditionally revived and recontextualized within nationalist frameworks—as an existential threat to his family's masculine dignity. He tells Jairaj that a man practicing dance is frivolous and lacks the serious authority required to govern wealth. Ratna, conversely, manipulates these patriarchal anxieties to carve out a professional space for herself. Recognizing that her father-in-law values family continuity and public prestige, she enters into a secret pact with him:

she agrees to help steer Jairaj away from dancing professionally in exchange for Amritlal funding and permitting her own dance performances.

Ratna's strategic manipulation of the men around her reveals a complex, highly pragmatic approach to agency. She understands that within a patriarchal framework, direct confrontation often leads to immediate suppression. Therefore, she adopts a strategy of internal subversion, using her husband as a shield and a dance partner to achieve her personal artistic goals. However, this strategy carries a heavy psychological toll. In her relentless pursuit of artistic success, Ratna begins to adopt the same controlling, transactional behaviors as her father-in-law, eventually micro-managing her daughter Lata's dancing career. Dattani uses Ratna to show that when women are forced to fight for agency within an unchanged patriarchal framework, they run the risk of mimicking the oppressive behaviors of the men they originally resisted.

VIII. SHATTERING THE FACADE OF THE BOURGEOIS FAMILY

The climax of Dattani's critique of patriarchal hypocrisy occurs in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, where the polished facade of the urban, upwardly mobile Indian family is systematically dismantled. The play moves between two distinct spaces: the office where Jiten and Nitin manage their deceptive advertising agency, and the domestic living room where Dolly, Alka, and their elderly, abusive mother-in-law, Baa, spend their days. The men pride themselves on their masculine authority, economic productivity, and moral superiority. However, Dattani slowly reveals that this entire public image is built on a foundation of financial fraud, emotional coldness, and suppressed sexual realities. Nitin is a closeted homosexual who married Alka simply to provide a socially acceptable cover for his identity, while Jiten regularly seeks out sex workers while keeping his wife emotionally isolated.

The women discover alternative ways to resist this systemic hypocrisy. Alka, when confronted with her husband's rejection and betrayal, refuses to perform the role of the silent, suffering wife; instead, she uses alcohol and public defiance to disrupt the family's carefully curated image of respectability. Dolly finds solace in a deep world of classical music and develops

an intense, imaginative connection with Kanhaiya, an unseen domestic cook. In the play's final movement, the arrival of Lalitha triggers a cascade of confrontations where the hidden truths of the family are openly spoken. The women refuse to carry the burden of the men's hypocrisies any longer. By naming the abuse, infidelity, and deception that defines their marriages, Dolly and Alka shatter the patriarchally enforced silence of the household. Their actions demonstrate that truth-telling itself is a radical act of subversion capable of undermining patriarchal control.

IX. STRUCTURAL NUANCES IN FEMALE RESPONSES TO OPPRESSION

To fully understand Dattani's complex approach to characterization, it is valuable to evaluate how different female characters across his plays respond to patriarchal structures. The playwright avoids presenting a singular, generalized Indian woman, instead charting a clear evolution from tragic submission to proactive resistance. Characters like Tara and Bharati represent the devastating consequences of unchecked patriarchal hegemony, where the woman is either physically destroyed or psychologically broken by the system. Tara suffers from a complete loss of agency that ends in physical decline and death, while Bharati is driven to a complete nervous breakdown by the crushing maternal guilt of her past complicity in discriminating against her own daughter.

In contrast, later characters like Ratna, Sonal, and Dolly demonstrate a far more dynamic, proactive relationship with power. Ratna navigates the severe artistic restrictions of her environment through pragmatic negotiation and strategic compromises, achieving high professional agency even if it strains her marital life. Sonal transitions from complete intellectual dismissal and economic dependence to collective liberation by forming alliances with other women, eventually reclaiming her economic autonomy from her late husband's restrictive estate. Dolly coping with severe domestic abuse and isolation, shifts from internal escapism to open truth-telling, thereby reclaiming her psychological autonomy and breaking the silence that protects her oppressors. These characters identify the vulnerabilities within the patriarchal structure and

exploit them to carve out individual spaces of financial, artistic, or emotional independence.

X. CONCLUSION

Mahesh Dattani's dramatic works offer a comprehensive, sociologically rich critique of gender politics within the modern Indian middle-class family. By moving his narratives into the urban domestic sphere, Dattani demonstrates that the marginalization of women is not an outdated feudal practice confined to rural spaces; rather, it remains an active, evolving force within educated, affluent urban households. His plays challenge the foundational myths of the patriarchal family, exposing the hidden layer of emotional neglect, economic disenfranchisement, and physical violence that frequently underpins bourgeois respectability.

For the academic researcher, Dattani's true genius lies in his refusal to romanticize his female characters' struggles. He presents women in all their human complexity—as individuals capable of profound resilience and resistance, but also vulnerable to internalizing the very patriarchal ideologies that oppress them. By analyzing characters like Tara, Bharati, Ratna, Sonal, and Dolly, we observe a steady evolution from tragic submission to collective, strategic subversion. Dattani's theater ultimately functions as a powerful tool of consciousness-raising. He leaves his audiences not with easy, comforting resolutions, but with an urgent call to examine the invisible power structures governing our own domestic spaces. In doing so, he ensures that his female characters transcend the limits of the stage, serving as enduring symbols of the ongoing fight for female dignity, agency, and authentic self-definition in post-colonial India.

REFERENCES

- [1] K. Chaudhuri, *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. New Delhi, India: Foundation Books, 2005.
- [2] M. Dattani, *Collected Plays*, vol. 1: *Final Solutions, Where There's a Will, Dance Like a Man, Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen, Do the Needful*. New Delhi, India: Penguin Books India, 2000.
- [3] B. K. Das, *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*. New Delhi, India: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2008.
- [4] T. Mukherjee, Ed., *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [5] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge, 1990.
- [6] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. New York, NY, USA: Vintage Books, 1949.
- [7] E. B. Mee, "Dance Like a Man: Mahesh Dattani's critique of bourgeois masculinity," *The Drama Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 45–61, 1997.