

A Study of Women Characters in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

Dr. Ekta Sharma, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., UGC NET.

Assistant Professor in English
Pt. N.R.S. Govt. College (Rohtak)
M.D. University, Rohtak
ekta.sharma26@gmail.com

The widely accepted view among the public is that man and woman fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterized archetypal masculinity and femininity. This is reflected in popular sayings such as 'Just like a man!' or 'Just like a woman!' and in the kinds of features found in popular magazines along the lines of 'How manly is your man', with a list of attributes to be rated or boxes to be ticked. Masculinity and femininity are often treated in the media as polar opposites, with men typically assumed to be rational, practical, and naturally aggressive and women, in contrast, are held to be expressive, nurturing and emotional¹.

Mahesh Dattani's plays offer an excellent study on dialectics of power in society. He has dramatized the whole gamut of relationships where the dynamics of power works. He penetratively, thought provokingly, and skillfully handles the intricacies and workings of human bonding where the patriarchal power desperately tries to dominate the people around. His range and understanding of this phenomenon of human life is so comprehensive that he seems to have left no aspect of this uncovered. In many of his plays he depicts so powerfully the position of the exploiter and the exploited that they tend to touch chords in every human heart and appeal to the audience as realistic and convincing. The roots of this feature of his art and mind can easily be traced in his plays.

Dattani throws light on the impairment of husband wife relations caused by the tendencies of the husbands to dominate wives and to deprive them from their rights. In a family structure, marriage binds man and woman as David Knox says, "Marriage is a social relationship in which two adults of the opposite sex make an emotional and legal commitment to live together."² But the relationship acquires great complexity as the husband assumes patriarchal role and tries to dominate wife, depriving her all common rights and pushing her to under privileged and marginalized section. The woman characters try hard to discover their identity and reject what is patently unjust or unjustifiable, and in this way make a bid to liberate themselves from male oppression by questioning their authority and the result is failure of a relationship. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the playwright highlights the circumstances of women fighting bravely, till the end, against the odds that their husbands have piled against

them. The play throws light on the impairment of husband-wife relationship within the family caused by lovelessness. A bleak situation is presented where wives are trapped in loveless marriages with insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, who are reluctant to change for the better. Incompatibility in marriage and violence against housewives has been highlighted in the play. How unhappy and abusive childhood affects social and sexual life of the individuals and leaves ugly scars on their psyche permanently have been clearly depicted. The play is also about play-acting and hypocrisy of modern woman who tries to hide her sorrows in vain and is left to survive in the confined spaces of domesticity.

The condition of Alka and Dolly represents urban women's predicament who are in conflict with inherited values and the values they like for themselves as an individual. Though outwardly, they bask in the afterglow of wealth, power, privilege and prestige, their inner lives are tormented by a mosaic of agonizing emotional problem that serves as a firewall between them and happiness.

The play projects the image of two sisters – Dolly and Alka – married to Trivedi brothers, Jiten and Nitin, respectively. As the play opens, we meet Dolly who "...is aimlessly filing her nails. She has a mud mask on and her hair is in clips."³ Both the sisters are preparing themselves to go out for a dinner with their husbands. The 'mud mask' of Dolly becomes a powerful symbol of the masked lives of both the sisters, who masquerade as happy wives of successful and prosperous husbands. The scene reminds us of Kamala Das's poem "The Suicide", where she protests the mask that a woman is supposed to wear throughout her life

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I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role of happy woman
Happy wife.⁴

The play also deals with the emotional and sexual problems of wives, trapped in a family structure, and controlled by their callous husbands who starve them of love. The sole duty of both the sisters in Trivedi house is to take care of their senile and delirious mother-in-law, who does not allow them a moment of peace. Their husbands have got alternate ways of satisfying their lusts. Jiten is a womanizer who betrays his wife. He entertains prostitutes in his office and is such a degenerate that he compels even his employee, Sridhar, to act as a pimp for him. Alka aptly sums up Dolly's situation when she comments: "Dolly, I feel sorry for you. Having a litch for a husband" (p. 300). Jiten is a loud-mouthed fellow who uses abusive language, has no respect for woman-folk and treats them merely as sex objects. Dolly and Jiten are dissimilar and horribly mismatched. Her whole life has been wasted by him. Alka rightly says: "Poor Dolly, sitting by herself, looking pretty and... wasted. With only a half-dead mother-in-law for her

company” (p. 260). Jiten not only breaks the sanctity of marriage, but he also shatters the whole life of his wife when provoked by his mother, he hits Dolly when she is pregnant. This irresponsible and repulsive act of violence ruins their relations and happiness of married life forever. As Dolly gives birth to a premature baby who turns out to be a spastic, poor Dolly has to bear the pain of her crippled child throughout her life.

The married life of Alka is no less hellish than her sister’s, and she, starved of conjugal joy, tries to drown her sorrows in liquor and becomes a dipsomaniac. Her husband, being a gay, cannot satiate her sexual desires. Her marriage remains unconsummated and deprived of the bliss of motherhood. She feels herself cursed: “I have been cursed because I have no children” (p. 284). Alka is also expelled from Trivedi house, when in a state of drunkenness, she dares pose a shocking question to her mother-in-law: “Your sons are so different from one-another. They are both pretty like you, but otherwise... Do they have different fathers?” (p. 256). She was accepted in the family only after Dolly and Praful’s repeated requests and pleadings. Nitin, her husband, is totally unconcerned about Alka. Instead of saving her honour, he declares shamelessly: “Alka can stay here or go away or drink herself to death. I don’t care. It doesn’t make any difference to me” (p. 290).

The play delineates life-situation of a family where wives are caught-up in a bleak situation. For them, love is a mere dream to be sought in a world of fantasy. Deprived of sexual pleasures, Dolly pulls on in her life by finding pleasures in imaginary situations, in fantasizing herself with Kanhaiya and her passion for music: “The thumri plays. And it ends. Another one plays. I forget when that ends and new one begins! All I’m aware of are two powerful black arms around me and the beautiful sound of a heartbeat of a gentle soul. The voice of Naina Devi comes back. It is the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard in my life!” (p. 262).

Alka tries to seek relief and escape in alcohol, gossiping, singing and dancing. Her rain-dance is symbolic of her aspirations to get freedom and sexual fulfillment, but ironically, she breaks her heel and her ankle twists. Thus, we find that in loveless and unhappy marriages, Alka and Dolly suffer a lot. Beena Agrawal comments about this play: “In the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the female protagonists are not sinners but the silent sufferers for the wrongdoing of their companions.”⁵ But Beena Agrawal has not been able to recognize the fact that women in the play refuse to be silent for long. It hints at the drastic change in the role of woman as depicted in modern drama. No more a woman is considered weak, or falling at the feet of her husband, trying to please him always.

Writers like Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani have tried to question the image of traditional woman synonymous with a doormat-type wife. Woman in their plays knows that it is

the male who is responsible for her plight. Though he will not confess it, she is determined to make him accept and realize his mistakes and misdoings.

Dolly and Alka also exhibit a strong will to resist the forces hazardous to their existence. Dolly emerges as an extraordinarily strong woman after a long suffering and suppression. She not only identifies her persecutor, but also fights for justice: “Jiten, you beat me up! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up! ...I will not let you get away so easily! Those were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me!” (pp. 311-12).

She makes Jiten realize his guilt of the ghastly act. Jiten is not able to stand the truth but Dolly is unforgiving and reveals the painful reality of her daughter to Lalitha who is present there:

DOLLY. You want to see her dance? ...She will dance for you! Like this... (*She demonstrates a spastic's uncoordinated arm and neck movements with her eyes dilated*)

(*To Jiten.*) Right, Jitu? Isn't that the way she dances? (p. 312)

Jiten proves to be a cowardly and weak bully. He is not able to stand the bitter accusations and tries to escape the scene, and while doing so, he devastates one more life. He runs the car over the beggar woman and kills her.

Alka's disgust and abhorrence for her forced relationship with Nitin is also revealed. She fights her fears and asks herself angrily as to why she should be so cowardly and scared: “What have I done that I should feel scared?” (p. 298). She also accuses Baa for creating a barrier between Nitin and herself: “You know why I can't have children. You won't let me. That's why! ...He needs your permission to have children and by God, you won't give it to him!” (p. 284).

We find Alka in a ravaging mood in the end, while she is preparing herself for masked-ball like the brave queen of Jhansi. She says: “Oh good. You make me a tin plate armour for me. And a sword. A cardboard sword, of course. And I will remove it and swish it about, like this... (*Demonstrates*)” (p. 296). She prepares herself for fighting battle, though a losing one. It was “reflective of Laxmi Bai's fight against the British and it was a losing battle, but she never gave up”⁶ says Mahesh Dattani conversing with Ranu Uniyal.

Though the play mainly presents a gloomy picture of married life, the playwright does not emerge as a pessimist. Subtly, his women characters suffer a lot, but they never cease to fight. The play epitomizes the dilemma of Indian women, who suffer mainly due to lack of understanding and sympathy on the part of their male counterparts. They attempt to come out of

the suffering and the stranglehold of their chauvinistic husbands. They strive to search for their identity against the role bondages sanctioned by traditional society. The writer appears to satirize and condemn immorality, dishonesty, and hypocrisy in relations without sounding didactic. Dattani has successfully left a space for the readers to think about those higher values which can help sustain human relationships.

While *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a starkly serious play, *Where There's a Will* by Dattani explores the undercover reality of the society in a comic manner where husband wants to command and earn the respect and love of his wife by the power of money. Hasmukh Mehta is full of complaints and grumblings against his wife and holds her responsible for lack of emotional harmony and sexual satisfaction in his life. For his sexual and emotional fulfillment, he keeps a mistress. But how this domineering husband is gradually diminished to the point of insignificance is very well depicted in the play.

Money is the sole consideration for Hasmukh Mehta, a middle-class successful and self-made industrialist. He is the dominating patriarch who is present in the play dead or alive. He is unhappy with all his family members as all of them fall short of his expectations. Sonal Mehta, his wife, is an appropriate foil to her dictator husband. She is a submissive house-wife dedicated to her husband's choices. She is confined to household management, spending most of her time in kitchen and pooja-room. To provide him blood-pressure tablets on time is the important ritual in her life. Sonal's extreme submissiveness produces a kind of sentimental humour. She is worried all the time: "If anything happens to you, they'll say I neglected my duty" (p. 471).

Hasmukh Mehta's relations with his wife are incomplete and chaotic. All the time conscious of 'my money' and 'my house', he accuses his wife insultingly for small things and accuses her of wasting money in preparation of new dishes: "It is easy for her to forget that we were a middle class family once. She keeps cooking new foods like it's new invention. Rich food wasting so much ghee and oil" (p. 465). Hasmukh's passion for authority irks everyone in the family. Sonal sums him up rightly: "Proud? He thinks he is a king of all he surveys! And we are his subjects" (p. 472). Hasmukh has an extremely low opinion about his wife: "Do you know what Sonal means? No? 'Gold'. When we were newly married, I used to joke with her and say she was as good as gold. But ... I soon found out what a good-for-nothing she was. As good as mud" (p. 472). In this monologue, Hasmukh narrates his heart to the audience. He tries to justify his actions and addictions that he has fallen prey to. He gives his reasons for having a mistress as he finds his wife:

... mud. Twenty-five years of marriage and I haven't enjoyed sex with her. So what does a man do? ...And what about my sex life? Well, I could afford that too. Those expensive ladies of the night in the five star hotels! ...But I needed a safer relationship.... A

mistress! All right, what's wrong with having a bit on the side? Especially since the main-course is always without salt.... (p. 473)

Hasmukh's statement about his wife strikes a tone of sarcasm and he acknowledges his marriage with Sonal as a tragedy: "Then when I was twenty-one, the greatest tragedy of my life took place. I got married to my wife, Sonal" (p. 464). He always condemns his wife for her inability to provide him good and healthy married life. For him, a faithful wife is as good as a faithful dog: "Then I should be a very happy man. I've got a loving wife who has been faithful to me like any dog would be" (p. 473). Here, he makes a mockery of his wife's faithfulness and submissiveness.

The play subtly hints that woman are also responsible to some extent for their plight. Despite her mildness and compassion, Sonal lacks essential vitality. She is a weak woman, who is totally subservient to her husband, is afraid of her daughter-in-law and is dependent on her sister, Minal, for all guidance. Sonal's ignorance makes her blind to the selfish nature of her husband and the irresponsible behaviour of her son. She is yet to learn the lessons of life which a shrewd, hard-hearted lady like Kiran Jhaveri can teach. The company of Kiran, her husband's mistress, opens the eyes of Sonal. Her simple mind is stunned when she knows: "He was going around with another woman! While I was busy making parathas for him, he was seeing other woman!" (p. 485). She gets disillusioned with her deceitful husband and expresses contempt for him on realizing that Has Mukh had a mistress. She gathers courage and challenges his authority: "If I had known, he had a mistress, I would have left him" (p. 481). Her awareness of the facts make Has Mukh realize: "I've misjudged the woman" (p. 481).

In the whole intricate man-woman relationships, Kiran emerges as a lady of intelligence, who has commendable understanding of life and people. She has learnt lessons from her mother and from her own experiences in life. Her mother also had suffered a lot in her life as she, in the words of Kiran:

KIRAN. Only gave. And so she suffered.

SONAL. And you?

KIRAN. I too have suffered from too much giving. (p. 507)

It seems that Kiran's circumstances force her to challenge traditional values which she has acquired from her mother. She herself has learnt: "It's no use being useful to other people unless they are useful in return" (p. 505).

She has been a victim of abused married life with a drunken husband, but she refused to be a victim for long. She learnt to do everything with open eyes. She rightly sums up the

character of Hasmukh Mehta: "...Yes, Mrs Mehta. My father, your husband – they were weak men with false strength" (p. 508). With her positive attitude and manipulations, she managed the life of Hasmukh Mehta whatever he was – alive or dead: "He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He wanted me to run his life... Men never really grow up!" (p. 510). The company of Kiran makes Sonal also bold. She discards her husband's authority with a derogatory comment: "He was like a village buffalo. What did he understand about other people's feelings" (p. 507).

The comments and reactions of Sonal and Kiran reveal the fact that these women are not as weak or subjugated as they seem to be. The union of Kiran and Sonal emerges as a collective force born out of their long history of exploitation and suffering. According to Asha Kuthari, "Dattani explores the dichotomy between the male/ female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and what happens when a woman turns over."⁷ Kiran remains on the margins until Hasmukh dies. After his death, his will brings her right in to the centre of the action. The play depicts the efforts of the women to abolish sexual colonialism. They declare the liberation of women against the 'will' of Hasmukh Mehta.

In another of his plays, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani deftly problematizes the components of the identity of an educated woman in a patriarchal set-up. Though the play mainly focuses on the low status of the transgendered in society, it also provides glimpses into human relationships in the institution of marriage and gives thought-provoking moments to the readers regarding the traditional sanctity of marriage by laying bare the fault-lines in marital bonding.

It is the high position of her husband that places Uma higher in the social hierarchy more than her identity as an educated woman. It is Suresh's position of authority as Superintendent of Police that helps Uma to carry out her investigations in jail. The fact that Suresh remains firmly rooted in patriarchal tradition is evident when he enjoys his rights as a man with his wife in many ways. He does not fully understand and recognize the independent identity of his wife as an educated woman. That is why, he does not appreciate Uma's humanistic approach to the eunuchs. His superior position is reinforced by the control he exercises over finances of the house. Uma cannot use his money to help Anarkali. Her remark that "My husband won't let me" (p. 14) makes the situation amply clear.

However, a close scrutiny of Suresh's personality reveals that he is a weak character, who becomes a party to the crimes of rich and powerful politicians, though inside the house, he controls everything. He even tries to dissuade his wife from doing her research on hijras and from entering their secret lives. Uma is fully conscious of her social roles and responsibilities as a woman in patriarchal set up. She is determined to finish her investigation even if there is a

danger involved: "...if my family throws me out..." (p. 29). Her remark reveals her insecurities and limitations.

The playwright subtly hints at Suresh's inadequacy as a man capable of fulfilling his reproductive role. That is why, he is not ready to go to the doctor for sperms count in spite of Uma's requests. The dilemma of modern woman is depicted through Uma's character. Though she is an educated woman with great potential, her role in society is only seen as a wife, an object of sexual pleasure. Her predicament is that she is childless, but the husband does not own the stigma of his own weakness responsible for his wife's barrenness.

Miruna George comments rightly that Uma's role in a patriarchal society "...as a wife has nothing to offer, except to be fit for motherhood, a social appendage, and an object of sexual pleasure. As a wife, loyalty, obedience, and motherhood are the qualities expected of her."⁸ Yet Uma proves the fact that she values her own inner self, independent of the imposed social roles. She works hard to prove Anarkali's innocence and becomes an agent of positive change in society by expressing her emotional bond with the transsexuals. She even bypasses her husband in her concern for establishing justice. This emphasizes the fact that women characters of Dattani dare to think independently of their male counterparts.

Through the depiction of women characters, who refuse to be eternally in bondage to dead relationships, the playwright redefines the idea of marital morality, implicitly demanding the realignment of the parameters on which traditional marriage functions. His women characters are projected as rebels against established values of male-dominated orthodox society. The changing image of wives, from the suffering women to the asserting ones, redefining selves and defying traditional mores are incisively depicted in his plays.

Notes

¹John Beynon, "Understanding Masculinities," *Masculinitis and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), p.56.

²David H. Knox, *Exploring Marriage and the Family* (Pennsylvania: Foresman Scott, 1979), p.5.

³Mahesh Dattani, *Collected Plays: Mahesh Dattani*(New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), p.233. All subsequent references to the play are from the same edition and page numbers have been given within parentheses.

⁴Kamala Madhavadas, "The Suicide," *Summer in Calcutta: Fifty Poems* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1965), p.82.

⁵Beena Agrawal, *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre* (Jaipur: Books Enclave, 2008), p.27.

⁶R.K. Dhawan, and Tanu Pant, eds., *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response* (New Delhi: Prestige Publications, 2005), p.183.

⁷Asha Kuthari Chaudhari, *Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Mahesh Dattani*, p.57.

⁸Miruna George, “Constructing the Self and the Other: *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*,” *Mahesh Dattani’s Plays: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Angelie Multani, p. 80.

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