

Dattani's Relevance in Changing Gender Scenario

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Abstract: Male and female, the two opposite genders essentially have their importance firmly rooted in the biology of procreation and the longing for an 'everlasting life.' Though later, gender becomes a major driving force in social and cultural realms, despite diminished importance of procreation. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the relevance of Mahesh Dattani's plays in context to the rapidly changing gender scenario in social context. Issues that were absolutely non-existent just a few decades back are throwing branches and evolving into an ever-expanding canopy of gender identities. The rapidly changing gender scenario manifests through examples like women becoming bolder, positive outlook and support for girl-child, increasing acceptance of homosexuality and such alternative sexual orientation, bending gender stereotypes, and matters that once used to be pushed under the carpet often being brandished by the people of alternative sexual orientation. Mahesh Dattani courageously, and faithfully exposed the hidden realities of gender, sex and relationships drawn from the remotest nooks and deepest crevices of human consciousness through his plays, his preferred literary form. Such works offer insights into the human thought process, and guides us out of conflict zones of crime and callousness, and lead toward peace and prosperity. The sensitivity of a writer reflects in literary works in the form of psychological, social and cultural realities of mankind, and also affects the stance of people about various matters of human concern and their evolution in future.

Keywords: Discrimination, Marginalisation, Gender identity, Sexual repression, Homosexuality.

Introduction

The title of John Gray's celebrated work '*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*', is not vague. It is firmly rooted in the globally accepted belief system that qualities like assertiveness, strife, pride, risk taking, adventure, fearlessness, high physical potential are qualities attributed to the planet Mars. These qualities are considered hallmarks of manliness supporting the notion that the men are from Mars. Women are said to be from Venus as it is supposed to be the ruling planet of love, sensuality, emotions, beauty, home, food, music, art and matters pertinent to colours, sound, fragrances, flavours and the delightful touch. Men and women are different, as they have always been, but gender which used to be an irrefutable fact, does not remain so anymore. Social environment greatly affects gender perception of a person, as does culture and politics, and it has changed in due course of time. It is not something quantitative, but qualitative.

Time induces change in everything, including society. Gender scenario is one aspect of society that has been greatly affected by Time spanning pre-historic to present. But the last few decades have seen more significant changes in gender scenario than in the past several centuries.

Incidents of aberration in gender identities in the past were few and far between and usually occurred as events in the life and times of an individual tied more often to the circumstances and environment. Groups and communities of people with unconventional gender identities by choice was something totally unheard of only a few decades back. Dattani started writing only a few decades back.

Starting out on his creative journey as a copywriter with an advertising agency, Dattani broke fresh ground by opting to lend a voice to the silent, suppressed, frustrated, unrecognized and marginalized communities of people with unconventional gender identities and those involved into taboo relationships. No other playwright, or for that matter author of any literary form, had worked on gender issues, especially ones involving characters having deviated sexual orientation.

Those were the times when issues related to gender identities and sexual orientation were pushed under the carpet, and those daring to reveal deviations from the norms in these areas were hushed up due to societal pressures for

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adhering to the norms, as compulsory concord with the socio-cultural norms and bindings of gender stereotypes were the order of the day. The fate of rebels and daring deviants were alienation and marginalization. His *Final Solutions*, *Tara*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and other plays all hold testimony to Dattani's relevance in evolving gender scenario and shattering of gender stereotypes.

The objective of this research paper is to study selected plays of Mahesh Dattani in order to explore through the process of playwright as he refutes the conventional understanding about the construct of gender stereotypes. Pondering on the thoughts and deeds of characters also give authors and their audiences an opportunity to review the ethics in temporal and spatial contexts, thereby aiding greatly to the development of public understanding as well as decision-making by lawmakers, which in turn leads towards the objective of establishing a fair and fearless society by creating a crime-free and conflict-free socio-cultural scenario.

Dattani's work on gender scenario is not only pioneering, but prophetic as well for he worked on the very aspects that were nascent when he chose them as the themes of his plays, and became rampant in present times. The issues covered therein have topical relevance and its difficult even for the fussiest critic to pick out anything that is impertinent. A nonconformist at heart, Mahesh Dattani has never been the one who would scare away from the aberrant and fear of rejection could never intimidate him to drop his favourite topics. When Dattani started off, society was less of libertarian, so he deserves credit for providing literary comradeship to his contemporaries and paving the way for juniors. There should be no hesitation in strongly feeling that writers like Tasleema Nasreen, Nasira Sharma, Abha Dawesar, Anita Nair, Abdul Khalid Rashid, Satya, Suniti Namjoshi, R. Raj Rao, Hoshang Merchant, Geetanjali Shree, Manju Kapur and Rajkamal Chaudhary must have gathered strength and inspiration from Dattani for writing on characters classified as strange, confused, distorted, odd, perverted, freak, and divergent by those having conventional and orthodox outlook.

Content

Identity of a human being has various aspects, but gender is one of the sure ways of ascertaining an individual's identity. We can say that the identity of a person is more to be reckoned with gender of the person than anything else in society. It is supposed to be individualistic, and not generalised. But it is convenient to generalise. It takes effort for being thorough. Society generalises, that's why the popular notions of good and bad are the key reference points, despite being vague. The same holds true for the gender identity of human beings.

Emotionally androgynous beings having a medley of both masculine and feminine characteristics, human beings are by nature truly ambiguous with the characteristics of one gender overshadowing the other, but clearly display a certain sexual identity, male or female, socially induced for the sake of convenience. It is a matter of common information that while most women have certain psychological characteristics attributed to males, while men tend to suppress the feminine sides of their thought process. It is now becoming acceptable or rather fashionable for men to be women-like in terms of being 'sensitive' to others, and women with more manly thought process are coming up with truly daring revelations as well-defined boundaries between genders are becoming more blurred. This has created an atmosphere in which people with alternative gender identities fear less for the revelation of their true identities. Homosexuality is just one of the many, and it comes in a variety of hues. John McRae puts across this thought in following words, "For the fault is not just the characters'—it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity." (53- 66)

Dattani chose to base his works on homosexuality when it was a taboo subject. There was a time when people used to maintain a fair distance with people having 'non-conformist' sexual orientation. These include members of LGBTQ community.

Years back, when Dattani started writing about secretive themes like homosexuality, he was not overwhelmed by the outlook of temporal society in which many of his subjects and their deeds were considered taboo. That is why, years later we still find the refreshing flavour of the evolving gender scenario. '*On A Muggy Night in Mumbai*' is a playground for those branded rebels in the politics of sexuality as well as those who were able to keep it a secret. This is why his protagonists are, largely, sure of their sexual preferences. While Deepali and Kamlesh have already accepted their sexuality, Bunny and Prakash have yet to come to terms with it. Going to any length to hide their homosexuality, even after learning of their sexual orientations, Lata and Alpesh decide to get engaged, and later married, thus 'doing the needful' because they were actually involved with their respective partners. Lata, with her lover Salim, and Alpesh with his gay partner Trilok. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Alka's husband Nitin is in a homosexual relationship with Praful. So, playing utterly selfish for his own relationship with Nitin, he fixes his sister Alka's marriage with his partner Nitin, in order to have easy access to his partner while hiding his homosexuality.

Dattani's Relevance in Changing Gender Scenario

The content of plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Do the Needful* has now become acceptable within the folds of mainstream society and is part of the increasing social consciousness, consonant with the times. Even religion and law have accepted it.

Juan Carlos Cruz a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a prominent Chilean priest shared his agony with Pope Francis who reportedly told him: "Juan Carlos, that you are gay does not matter. God made you like that and loves you like this and I don't care. The Pope loves you like this. You have to be happy with who you are." Such expressions coming from the head of the Roman Catholic church, is doubtlessly the first such unequivocal acceptance of homosexuality ever expressed by the pontiff of the church that deems gay sex as serious transgression of church's morality code. Earlier, in 2013 too, the same Pope Francis had suggested a shift in rigid attitudes of church towards homosexuality during an interaction with media:

"If someone is gay and is looking for the Lord, who am I to judge him? You should not discriminate against or marginalise these people." (7)

Recently, a five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India has scrapped the 156-year-old law (*Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code*), declaring consensual sex between two same sex adults as totally acceptable and lawful. The court has also urged the medical community to stop being a party to stigmatisation of homosexuals by "trying to cure something that is not even a disease." The judges have declared the law in question as oppressive, unreasonable, and autocratic. (5)

Though the plight of those with sexual deviations now seems to be addressed, the condition of womenfolk, despite many laws favouring them, is pathetic in the wake of maltreatment meted out to them due to gender bias. Women face tyranny even in 'modern societies' of this day. Their existence is continually at the stake in the wake of social maladies like female foeticide, child marriage, dowry, and domestic violence, etc. In this Age of Communication, ideas spread so quickly that even the phenomenon is now called 'going viral!' Decreasing economic disparity and increasing flexibility, and insights into the relevance of conventional ethics and social acceptance in India's secularism-based multicultural society further help in evolution of thought about the subject matter and is also conducive in amending existing laws and framing new ones.

His plays like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Where There's Will and Seven Steps Around the Fire* are all centered around gender issue, and there may be quest for creating an identity for self and the off-springs, gender discrimination, domestic violence, problems with eunuchs, homosexuality, and alienation. Dattani's *Tara* illustrates how society that appears to be progressive in its outlook towards women is paradoxical in action. In this play, gender bias leads to discrimination and results in grave injustice and harms both the male and the female. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is another play that portrays women subjected to violence. They are put on a pedestal by the society and glorified as mothers and wives, but they don't get respite from their dilemma and domestic abuse.

Dance Like a Man breaks the stereotypical image of gender specific roles of men and women in our society. Its protagonist is a man who chooses dance as his profession, in opposition to the socially accepted behaviour pattern designated to masculinity. Gender identities are erroneously thought to be confined to the dictionary meanings of feminine and masculine, and that the gender identity is more often than not, assigned or adopted and not bestowed by nature. Dattani has freed himself from this notion in *Dance Like a Man* in which the protagonist is a man who aspires to be a professional dancer. But his father Amritlal says:

Amritlal. A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's pathetic. (Dattani, 160)

Religious disharmony and male domination are two parallel themes in *Final Solutions*. The thought process and conditioning of three lead female characters Daksha, Aruna and Smitha and their dilemma form the core content of this play. The past and present status of women are juxtaposed in this play.

Gender discrimination doesn't stop at the weaker of the two sex, it also affects the third gender, the *hijra* community, and their plight, the alienation and humiliation they have to bear with is the content of *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Bangalore police's Chief Superintendent Suresh's wife Uma Rao lands into the surreptitious world of the *hijras* while rummaging for information for her thesis on class and gender-related violence. Upon observation, she is able to draw a parallel between their lives and her own as she could relate her feeling of isolation and pressure to conform to the social norms, playing a subject in her husband's dominion. *Thirty Days in September* unveils the scary and scandalous world of incest, sexual abuse of a juvenile and splintered relationships. It is a heart-rending portrayal of the darker side of child sexual abuse which results in fragmented relationships. The credits for inspiring and motivating Mahesh Dattani to cover gender issues in this work should go to RAHI, a non-profit organisation which invited him to write on the subject. Dattani ingeniously wove the data gathered by RAHI to spin a saga of helplessness

and decadence. The recent upsurge in reporting of incest cases that society has kept their eyes closed to, rampant sexual abuse within families, yet hardly any having the courage to come out in the open for the fear of social rejection. Highlighting the situations behind this biggest impediment against curbing this anomaly adds greatly to the relevance of this play. Yet, this play is often wrongly considered as an amplification of a freak case, but incest and child sexual abuse occurs everywhere. It seems that there is an upsurge in such cases in recent times, which is due to the fact that more incidents are being reported than ever before.

In *Ek Alag Mausam*, Aparna is initially portrayed as a helpless young woman who contracts AIDS from her HIV positive husband, who leaves home never to reappear again, as he was too embarrassed to face her. His helplessness is contrasted with her own independent decision-making and her unwavering determination in later years corroborates the changing gender scenario; how difficulties doubles a woman's determination. *Ek Alag Mausam* is a play that Dattani also adapted into a film. A film with a message that love can conquer the fear of impending death, illustrated through a story of HIV positive lovers.

Dr. Machado. (moving around) Aren't we all dying? Isn't everyone in this world dying? (Pausing for effect) I am not HIV positive. But I am also dying. But do I think about my death all the bloody time?... (Dattani, 486)

Aparna thinks that George must have been promiscuous but he was not. Being a woman, Aparna had hardly any way to check against the infiltration of HIV virus. Juxtaposed against the love-saga of the two HIV positive lovers, Aparna and George, the plot of the play highlights the strong mental conditioning of the female protagonist Aparna.

Present Scenario

A person's gender has always been one of the basis of identity; what once used to be a fixed fact, is now giving way to new possibilities in present scenario as homosexuality and alternative gender orientations, viz., crossdressing is fast becoming socially acceptable. Earlier such situations were considered to be anomalies calling for therapeutic interventions, but now acceptable as aspects of the personality. The demolition of gender stereotypes has made room for easier acceptance for alternative sexual orientation in the wake of clear understanding that gender orientation and homosexuality are inherent traits and such people should not be treated as social untouchables. Mahesh Dattani has been way ahead of time, that's why he was able to figure out the rising acceptance of LGBTQ community.

Conclusion

The plays of Mahesh Dattani selected for this research paper were critically reviewed for identifying and highlighting the changes in gender stereotypes and the overall gender scenario, including gender identities, and related issues.

A man marrying a *hijra* in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* illustrates that alternative sexual orientation is no more a taboo talk. Once prominent writers like Mahesh Dattani take up a subject having social relevance in their literary work and treat it effectively, it becomes a matter of public discourse, and loses its taboo status soon gaining acceptance and approval into mainstream news and social media. It is the queer that included transgenders and cross-dressers were earlier allowed entry into the entertainment world but their emotions and intellect were totally ignored. This situation was challenged by Dattani's work and it definitely helped to nurture the thought process that led to the appointment of a transgender judge in the state of Assam or election of another as a city mayor helped in breaking the stereotypes and also paved way for increased acceptance of such communities into the mainstream society. Activism has already resulted in bringing about change in the status of such matters to natural, ethical and even legitimate. And, it can be safely stated that human society is fast moving towards dissolution of gender identities and will also keep losing its prejudices against the sexually renegade bringing down gender barriers to the extent that such matters will eventually lose all the attention it presently attracts. With stone-age of gender identity and sexual repression coming to an end, and, as far as gender barriers are concerned, mankind can look forward to a borderless world.

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