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Suppressed Women and New Women in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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Abstract

“Though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control and the physical situation of becoming a mother is disciplined by males. This glorious motherhood imposed on women conditions her entire life” (Rich 45). Generally womanhood is crowned in two ways that is as motherhood and wife-hood but men look at this crown not as a boon but as a curse. Mostly women are the suffers in the hands of custom which says that women are inferior to men or subordinate to men in terms of father, brother, husband and son. Women are treated as pawns in the hands of men and they consider women to be an inanimate object and name the object as subordinate. Women express their sufferings and feelings through their mourning that could not be heard by others. Sufferings of women are almost similar in all literature. They are categorized as subordinate, submissive, inferior, lesser, lower and minor to the authority.

Keywords

Mahesh Dattani, Suppressed Women, New Women.

Many writers raised their voices against the suppression of women through their writings like Virginia Woolf. She in her work *A Room of One's Own* enumerated the opinions of men about women. Pope declares that women lack reason; Napoleon says that women can hardly be educated; Samuel Butler adds that wiser men never reveal what they think of women; but Dr. Johnson says that men know that women are over-match for them. For many years women served as looking glasses for men who have the power and magic to reflect the figure of man twice than his actual size. The men survive as masters of the world only because of this 'illusion' bestowed on him by women.

J.S Mill in his work *Subjection of Women* begins his argument by saying that people who maintain the opinion that men can command and women must obey or that men alone are fit for governance and women are unfit, must prove their opinion with evidence. Mill recalls the early times where both men and women were employed as slaves by their masters. Mill wonders how an intellectual like Aristotle spoke of free natures and slave natures among people and regard women as an inferior being.

Simone de Beauvoir in her work *Women as Other* says that society defines woman not in herself but in relation to him, she is not an autonomous being. Man can think of himself without woman but she can't think of herself without man. She is simply what man decrees. Thus she is called 'the sex' which means that the male look at female as a sexual being. For him she is sex- absolute sex. He is the subject, he is the absolute- she is 'other'.

Mahesh Dattani is a voice of the voiceless lot such as women, transgenders, and gays. Dattani supports them and shows their sufferings, inner and external problems through his plays. John McRae has rightly regarded him as 'the voice of India now' as his plays mostly deal with the problems of the

women. Dattani is famous all over the world, because of his concern for women. The characters in his plays like Sonal in *Where There is Will*, Tara and Bharati in *Tara* suffer in the hands of male society. All these women raise their voice for identity and fight for their freedom. Spivak in her work 'Can the Subaltern speak?' describes women as 'doubly marginalized' and 'doubly affected':

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject the track of sexual difference is doubly affected...It is rather, that, both as subject of colonialist historiography and subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominate, if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the female as female is more deeply in shadow."

(Spivak 28)

Suppressed Women in Dattani's Plays

Sonal is the only woman character in the play *Where There is a Will*, who is suppressed and dominated throughout the play by her husband and her sister. Sonal is weak, submissive and mostly spends her time in cleaning the home and kitchen. Hasmukh keeps on finding fault with his wife and accuses her for some or other reasons. He considers Sonal's company as futile, "When I was 21styr old, a greatest tragedy took place in my life...I got married to my wife Sonal" (WTW, ACT I 34). Actually Sonal depends on her sister for everthing, who considers her as a pawn in her hands and decides what she must wear, what game she must play to attract her husband. Like Laura of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Herbert of W.S Maugham's *The Kite*. Minal's over-possessive nature snatches Sonal's liberty and she has almost become handicapped for rest of her life as she says "Even at my husband's funeral...she sat beside me and told me when to cry" (WTW ACT II 45).

Hasmukh hates his wife to the core, whereas Sonal considers her husband as a living-being even after his death. She seems to be very conscious about his food so that it should not affect his health and even gives him tablets and tonics to control his blood pressure and heart disease. Whereas he never

understands her love and keeps on taunting and torturing her. He does not allow his wife to do what she exactly wants to do. Although he needs his wife to take care of him and cook for him but to gratify his carnal desires he goes to a young modern lady, who indeed is his employee. He consider sonal only as a faithful dog – in his monologue he speaks out his mind. “Then I should be very happy man. I’ve got a loving wife who has been faithful to me like any dog would be” (WTW ACT II 23).

Sonal has learnt how to follow the instructions of her husband and execute his orders without giving it a second thought. In spite of being unfaithful to his wife, Hasmukh’s abuses her. On the contrary, Hasmukh is quite happy in his extra-marital relationship. She never refuses to have physical relationship with him, but it is he who is not satisfied with her.

Enjoyed sex, Twenty Five years of marriage and I haven’t enjoyed sex with her. So what does a man do? I started eating out well, I had the money. I could afford to eat in fancy places. Afford that too. Those expensive ladies of the night in the five star hotels/ something between a wife and a pick-up, Yes. A mistress! I didn’t take me”. (WTW ACT III 14)

The helplessness of a girl child in Indian society is depicted in the play *Tara*. Dattani has shown it clearly that whenever the choice comes between male and female, it is the male who is chosen and women play second fiddle to men. Tara too is neglected by her father as Patel asked Chandan to go with him to his office, but he didn’t want Tara to go there, though Chandan is unwilling to go without Tara. This sort of partiality takes place between the two children many times which traumatize Tara’s mind and soul to a great extent. The fact that Patel does not ask Tara to go to his office damages Tara’s psyche. She tells Roopa sarcastically, “The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go for hunting while the women looked after the caves.” (*Tara* ACT II 34). Patel has plans for Chandan’s education but not for Tara. He wanted to send his son abroad for education. He has even arranged with his brother for Chandan’s admission to a good university in England and hoped that Chandan would get a

scholarship. Patel does all sort of arrangements so that he can become a successful man in life.

Patel takes meticulous care of Chandan's future, even though he knows that Chandan would not have to worry about his bread and butter, because Chandan's grandfather has bequeathed his property to Chandan and nothing for Tara just because she is a girl child. All these things brings tears in the eyes of Tara as she says to Chadan that her father likes him, but hates her though Chandan tries to erase such a notion from her mind and after sometime she says to Patel, "I am going to hate you anyway"(Tara ACT III 23). This kind of thinking has become a wedge between the father and daughter. The attitude of Patel distresses his wife, Bharati. While talking to Chandan she says," I wish your father would pay more attention towards Tara.... He is more worried about your career then hers... It's time Tara decides what she wants to be. Women have to do that as well these days. She must have a career" (Tara ACT II 56).

It is only Tara's mother who showers love on her which gives her some sort of solace and a zest for leading her life. Dattani perfectly portrays the traditional mother figure who plans for her future when she realizes that her husband his not interested in shaping her future.

It's all right while she is young. It's all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you- but not her! Oh! The pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh! God! (Tara ACT II 32).

Anita Myles rightly observes, "The age does not matter but the gender of the child does, more or so when she is physically handicapped."(58). Bharati loves her daughter not only because she is her mother but also because Tara has none else to support her in the world of gender discrimination.

Bharati's love for Tara is quite sizeable. It is due to the compulsion to make up the wrong that she has done to Tara when she was barely a child. To overcome her guilt she tries to be over-protective of her daughter. Therefore she cares to

give her love in full measure to her daughter. Bharati loves her daughter and Patel loves his son. It is that love, which causes a rift between husband and wife. Bharati threatens Patel that she would divulge some secret of his to the children. Patel becomes furious. He slaps her to bring her under his control. This shows that how he ignores Tara and suppress Bharati just because they are female and lives under his shadow.

Soon Tara's life becomes futile when she comes to know that her mother and grandfather committed the cruelest act on her. They conspired with doctor Thakkar to give her leg to Chandan against medical ethics though it was almost certain that the implant would not work. According to the scan, major part of the blood supply is provided by the girl. Therefore the chances for the girl to retain the leg is better, yet it was decided to risk it. It is the most horrible cruelty perpetuated on Tara for being a girl. It really astonishes Tara and she says ironically, "And she called me her star." (*Tara* ACT III) thinking that her mother's love is merely a pretention which it is not and for her it seems that her parents are selfish and can go to any extent to fulfill their desire.

New Women in Dattani's plays

There was a time when rule of men over women was accepted everywhere as just and even women made no complaint about it. But now everything is topsy-turvy. Many women now have understood their value and have started protesting against the harassment and abuses. Dattani has openly stated that 'new' women developed their skills and jumped into the battlefield of life fighting against all sort of social constraints, emotional ties, religious boundaries and cultural clutches. She is not only equal to men but one step ahead of them.

As compared to suppressed women modern women has achieved a lot but in reality they still have to go a long way. Although they faced lots of trials and tribulations they overcome those obstacles and started raising their voice for their space, share and identity openly against the patriarchal society. Today's women have realized their capabilities and have started to question the injustices done to them. They have also learnt to decide on their own without anyone's guidance. They want to have full control over their destiny. They simply do what

they want to do and enjoy life to the fullest. For them nothing is important than their own self.

Women have set a perfect example that they can achieve reach their destination without crutches. Although the progress may be slow but it is definitely sustainable. Dattani in his plays with vigour portrays 'New Women' which includes both positive and negative characters such as Kiran and Preeti in *Where There is a Will*, Ratna in *Dance Like a Man*.

Women of modern times are becoming more and more outspoken and are willing to express their inclination openly. In *Where There is a Will*, Preeti is a modern woman with negative thoughts who dreams of emancipation through economic liberty to lead a life according to her own desire. She also hates her father-in-law and mother-in-law who stand as a barrier to her plan of getting the properties registered on her name. She is very selfish and shrewd as she ignores her elders and she even goes to an extent to kill her own father-in-law just to fulfill her materialistic lust. When she comes to know that all the property has been bequeathed to Hasmukh Mehta's mistress Kiran, she becomes exasperate and shouts:

The whole world is saying, "Hasmukh didn't have faith in his own family. He didn't get along with his wife. His son is a spend-thrift. His daughter-in-law is a scheming little witch. That's why he left all his wealth in the hands of an outsider. We have got to them that.... influenced by this woman. (WTW ACT I 34)

Preeti is so mean that she married Ajit just because he is the only son for his father and that too he belongs to elite society. Though she is charming and graceful, she is sly as a snake that always has an eye on Hasmukh's money. Whenever a dispute takes place between the father and son, preeti comes to solve it not with a positive attitude but with some ulterior motive. One day Ajit has quite a big quarrel with his father and takes the car and moves out, forgetting that the car belongs to his father. It is his wife who controls him and his anger as she knows that ignoring or frustrating her father-in-law is dangerous because

he has the financial control over their lives and he will deprive them of it at any time. This shows that Preeti is clever and shrewd.

Kiran is yet another 'new women' in the play with positive thoughts. She is the mistress of Hasmukh who is an educated, smart, shrewd, calculating, worldly wise and a sharp businessman of Hasmukh's company. She has a personality of attracting men quickly. That's why Hasmukh too fell for her and named her the trustee of his property even before his death. But Kiran being of good natured woman, enters his house with the intention to settle things amicably and live with them. But everyone looks at her as an enemy spew venom on her. At that moment, Kiran retaliates with strong words:

I think I must clear some misunderstanding you may have about my authority. I am only the trustee of his wealth. Not the owner. I get a fixed salary for my job. Everything belongs to three of you. Ajit will have to attend the office as usual. Mrs Mehta, you shall get the regular allowance to run the house. And Preeti, you too will get an allowance- when you become a mother. When your child is 21yr the trust will automatically dissolve. (WTW ACT I 45)

All the family members remain dumbstruck by listening to Hasmukh's will and allows Kiran to enter as they don't have any other option. She daily teaches the family members something new both at home and office. She is quite intelligent and physically attractive like any other modern women, who groom their inner self and outer self as well. She outwardly blackmails the family members by informing them that:

"As the trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, I have the right to make a statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust namely you all, are not complying with the rules set down by the deceased, the holding of the trust will be divided between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder which means that you won't even get a single rupee earned by your father-in-law."(WTW ACTII 50)

But in reality she from her bottom of heart wants to give the property to them but only if they are ready to bring some changes in their character as per the conditions of her boss Hasmukh Mehta.

In the play *Dance Like a Man*, Ratna plays the role of a new woman who boldly speaks to her husband when he fails to co-operate and fulfill the dreams. Jairaj and Ratna were good friends and stayed in the same 'mohalla'. Jairaj has a very big dance hall in his house. In her childhood, Lata enjoyed watching her parents practicing dance in the hall. After marriage there is a wild gulf between the husband and wife. They appear to be happy to the world, but have fallen apart from each other having conspicuous differences between their stature, habits, views, intentions and intelligence.

RATNA: You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours.

JAIRAJ: Ratna! don't.....

RATNA: You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house.....

JAIRAJ: For forty years you've been holding that against..... (DLM ACT I 21)

Through the whole of the play, they are found commenting upon each other's weaknesses and every discussion between them quickly deteriorates into an angry argument. In the first phase of their life that is the period before they leave their house, everything goes on smoothly. They show consideration for each other's wishes and feelings and seem to be supportive to each other. To take an example, in the first act of the play, Ratna is able to oppose the views of her father-in-law on the issue of her weekly visits to Chennai Amma, a 'devadasi' (temple prostitute), only because she knows in her heart of hearts that her husband has no objection to this step of hers, as she explains to her father-in-law "My husband knows where I go and I have his permission" (DLM 43).

The relationship between the couple undergoes a drastic change just after Jairaj's return to his ancestral abode. Ratna loses her faith in Jairaj and she is

no longer proud of her husband. Ratna's passion for dance makes her to go to an extent of betraying her husband when she assures her father-in-law of trying her level best to help him grow up. At that time it is realized that Ratna is an ambitious lady. Dance is her only dream and passion, she marries Jairaj for the only reason that he will allow her to dance.

Ratna is a woman of many devices. She is a partly devoted wife, loving mother, and defiant daughter-in-law. She is dominating and hateful. Ratna is very ambitious lady who who could go to any extent to fulfill her dreams and desires. It is clear from the conversation between Ratna and Jairaj that Ratna destroyed Jairaj's dancing career only for her success in her dancing career. Ratna never accepts that she is responsible for the cause of diminishing Jairaj's dancing career. She calls him a mediocre dancer and says that he himself has destroyed his career by not accepting invitations to dance alone. Jairaj expresses his anger on his wife in following terms:

JAIRAJ: I want you to give me back my self-esteem!

RATNA: When did I ever take it?

JAIRAJ: Bit by bit. You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow. And when you called me names in front of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. And you call me disgusting (DLM ACT II 69).

He blames Ratna for his failure as a dancer and becomes jealous of her as she has earned more name and fame than he has. The play also throws some light on the tragic death of their baby, left to the care of an ayah. Many a time, Jairaj and Ratna would come late at night and the baby was taken care of by the ayah at such nights. Being busy with dance, they couldn't take proper care of the baby. Their excessive involvement in dance becomes an indirect cause of the

death of the baby, Shankar. Further, he considers his wife to be the only person responsible for the death of their son, Shankar.

JAIRAJ: No matter how clever an actress you are, you can't convince me that you are playing the part of devoted mother very well. You wouldn't even know where to start.

RATNA: I can start by ending this sick talk with you and feeding the baby. If you have nothing else to say, good night. (DLM ACT II 72)

But towards the end of the play, Jairaj is hopeful about his compatibility with Ratna at least in heaven suggesting that the adjustment and compromise in conjugal life is essential for the sustenance of a husband-wife relationship like theirs on this earth.

According to Dattani, each and every woman should be liberated. He paints both the suppressed and new women in his plays to educate women that they should be iron-willed, shrewd and independent. Dattani wants the 21st century Indian women to walk not on par with men but one step ahead of them to prove that they are not weak and subservient anymore in all walks of life.

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