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Woman and New Woman in Mahesh Dattani's Plays *Tara* and *Where There's Will*

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani has manoeuvred his plays with unusual themes, numerous technical experimentation, emblazed with the myriads of burning issues, and above all splendid use of a variety of spoken Indian English previously unheard. The present paper has attempted to critically analyze Dattani's plays *Tara* and *Where There's Will*, to discuss the representation of 'woman' and 'New Woman'. This study is an analysis of various women characters in selected plays that are overtly or covertly impacted by the changing status, and empowerment of women across the planet. His women characters are of three types, one that remains silent and marginalised, and second who dares to speak but not as openly as they should but later in their life they get their desire freedom and choice and third types of women are those who never compromise their freedom and self-respect.

Keywords: Woman, New Woman, Patriarchy, marginalisation, silence.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most celebrated contemporary English playwrights of India. He is the only English playwright who won the Sahitya Akademi Award. Mahesh Dattani has crafted his plays with myriads of themes including issues of gender inequality, gender identity, patriarchal order of family and society, women's marginalization, issues related to LGBTQ, communal violence and fundamentalism, social exclusion and inclusion and many more. What distinguishes him from others is his brilliance in the representation of women along with their changing status and issues and his dealing with the taboos of Indian society. His men are quite incomplete without his women. His women undoubtedly fall in the category of a new woman. There are varieties of women characters in his plays. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the concept and meaning of 'women' and 'new women' in the context.

Toril Moi asks "What is a woman?" in a book with the same title (1999) and kickoff the hard-headed discussion of contemporary thinking about woman, sex, gender, and the

body as a signifier of the woman's self. And after the much discussion, the answer to the question of 'what a woman is', is not a unified one, says Moi, and clarifies by elaborating:

The human body is neither sex nor gender, neither nature nor culture. To say that my subjectivity stands in a contingent relationship to my body is to acknowledge that my body will significantly influence both what society—and others—make of me, and the kind of choices I will make in response to the Other's image of me, but it is also to acknowledge that no specific form of subjectivity is ever a necessary consequence of having a particular body. (Moi 114)

The above arguments indicate us to attempt to discuss the subjectivity, social formation of the female body and woman's identity in the Indian context. Due to the Indian traditional societal structures that were full of patriarchal restraints and masculine authoritarian dominance, the majority of the Indian women were treated as the homogenised entity and weren't given individual freedom to express their opinions. Therefore, the women were in majority were remained silent and did not rebel against the patriarchal restraints and subjugation that normalised it as the fate and ultimate aim of women. But, the new generations of women of modern India, who are educated, enlightened and are highly concerned for their 'self' freedom, and rights, do no longer want to be the subject of patriarchy. They have everything in their favour, higher education, spirit, wisdom, opportunities, individual identity and freedom to express or articulate their desire above all, the freedom to choose. Therefore, the new generation of women regardless of various social, political and psychological conditions emerged as 'new woman'. Broadly speaking, the concept of a 'new woman' is one that shears of her "feminine mystique," identity and is aware of herself as a separate individual, she is independent from her traditional, conventional approach, socially-bound role and moral subjugation and constrictions and can live with a strengthened sense of respect as well as individual dignity. Therefore, this new woman is the outgrowth of a new socio-political and economic order where woman discards her "invisibility," emerge out of the metaphoric veil, and profited herself of the opportunity presented by modern education, enfranchisement, and opportunity of employment. She, with her male counterpart, struggles for achievements in the professional job sectors and formal economic fields, deconstructs and reconstructs the figure of a submissive, suppressed, subjugated and self-effacing being. The image that is appearing is of a self-reliant, self-

confident, liberated and blissful individual, sexually uninhibited, full of wisdom intelligent, and assertive. (Bande and Ram 14)

The women presented by Dattani in his plays are different in colours and character than any other contemporary playwrights. His women are in most of the time, not ones who yield completely before patriarchal constructs but sooner or later they rebel. But, some become the part and parcel of those constructions which had curtailed their identity. His plays are firmly rooted in Indian society, more especially middle-class families. He says, “I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background” (Dattani xv). His women are no longer the subject of Sati-Savitri constructs. They are the women who persistently work out to have space within the patriarchal setup of family. His new women are different from the women present by Vijay Tendulkar, GirishKarnad, BadalSircar and others. His women have different reactions on the patriarchy system than Tendulkar’s women who are outright rebellious. His women are even different from Karnad’s women who reside on cultural crossway.

Tara is a stage play in two acts, first performed as *Twinkle Tara* on 23 October 1990. *Tara* centres on the story of emotional separation that develops and matures between two conjoined twins, miraculously of two different sexes, who discovered the reality that their corporeal amputation was beguiled by their own mother and grandfather in order to favour the boy over the girl. There are three woman characters in the play—Bharati, mother of the twins and wife of Patel, Bharati’s daughter Tara and Roopa, the neighbouring girl.

Bharati is a tradition-bound woman; a woman who not only oppressed and restrained by patriarchal constructs but also by minimalist to a weapon of patriarchal practices being fostered, incubated with its customs, traditions and mores. She is the woman who risks her daughter Tara’s best chance of survival for the sake of her son Chandan’s despondent lookout of having two real legs. Bharati despite being an educated woman; she favoured the male-child over female-child. Due to her short-sightedness and indulgence for the son, she does injustice to her daughter and this wrong decision becomes the cause of the death of her, her daughter Tara and destruction of Patel family, otherwise, she and hers both the children would have happily survived and established themselves as an independent ones.

The very first conversation between Patel and Bharati, reveal the fact that Bharati is a woman who still carrying the inherited notion of patriarchy that is reflected in her behaviour

and attitude as a mother where she is more compassionate and concerned for her son than a daughter. On the other hands, the new generation of Tara and Chandan don't bother on these feudal and discriminatory patriarchal frameworks. They believe in equality regardless of gender and age i.e. when Chandan was asked by his father to come to his office to "to get a feel of it," his prompt reply was that "you can take Tara. She'll make a great business woman" (Dattani 328).

It is Bharati's character through which Dattani has subtly portrayed the negative picture of the traditional woman. Customs and tradition pressurise Bharati to go for the implausible which is why later she flings to mend her guilty conscience by expressing more care and love for Tara. She also tries to shrive herself from the guilt by giving one of the kidneys to Tara:

BHARATI. Everything will be all right. Now that I am giving you a part of me. Everything will be all right.

TARA. Do you really want to do that, mummy?

BHARATI. Very much.

TARA. Because you love me so much.

BHARATI. Yes. That's why. Don't worry. (355)

The next woman character is Tara. She is a young high-spirited girl and representing the 'new woman' in the play. Though, she is physically a cripple and a victim of social prejudices but, psychologically, she is brave, intelligent, sharp-minded, and knows how to use people and situation. She is a woman who is no longer a subject of patriarchal subjugation. She knows when to say no and what is right and what is wrong. Once she says to her brother Chandan that "it bothers me to hear you preaching to me what's wrong and what isn't" (Dattani 371). She never accepts an order and is always ready to fight for her identity, even against women; she has all the quality of an emerging new woman. Even she hardly accepts her father's advice or order and asks "who decides what's good for us to hear and what isn't" (Dattani 374)?

Tara can be compared to Henrik Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* which provided a model of the new woman by saying "no" to the male power structure and Tara also does the same. Many scholars argued that one of the significant objectives of women's liberation movements "have been to free women from the cultural demand for self-effacement and to establish their right to full human development" (Paris 39). Nora who transforms herself from

a self-effacing, child-woman into an assertive individual personality when she realises that the male-dominated society has been unjust to her “self”. Nora tells Torvald, “You and father have done me a great wrong. You have prevented me from becoming a real person” and she leaves her home and no longer content to be the “doll baby”, the “helpless” woman living “by performing tricks” (Bande and Ram 15). Tara also does somewhat like Nora but in a stronger individual impulse.

She doesn't bother her father or brother's order and advice to not to go to the hospital to see her mother but she leaves the house to go there instead of going for her physiotherapy. She never fears to take the risk for what she thinks is right to her. She is very firm to her purpose. She has decided what she would do in her future before her brother. Tara wants to serve humanity, the people who are suffering, the same way as mother Teresa did. She says: There are thousands of poor ill people on the streets who could be provided care, cure and attention, and she thinks she knows what she would make of herself. She would be a carer for those sick and needy people. She would surely spend her remain life as feeding and provide clothing to those... serving naked millions about them everyone is talking. May be she can begin an institution that would do all those. Or she could join Mother Teresa and devote herself to a great cause (Dattani 370).

Tara truly represents the new women generation, who have come out of the shadow and shackles of the old tradition. They do not give importance to physical beauty but new women give value to wisdom and confidence that enable them to live their life meaningfully with self-respect. It is this change, which forces Tara to reply furiously when Roopa mocks her of her legs:

ROOPA. How dare you! You one-legged thing!

TARA. I'd sooner be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged than be an imbecile like you. (Dattani 369)

The third and last woman is young Roopa. She is a simpleton, her talks, rather, is more freakish and volatile and filled only with leisure and triviality. She is quite insignificant. She kept on flattering and buttering everybody for her gain and pleasure. She is basically created to give a humorous touch to the play.

Where There's a Will (1988) is a play on an individual's liberation and patriarchy dominance. Mahesh Dattani unmasks the evils of patriarchal traits of individuals and society

like Ibsen and Shaw. Dattani himself described it as “the exorcism of patriarchal code”. This play is all about Hasmukh Mehta, the top garment tycoon of the town, and his family which includes his wife Sonal, son Ajit, daughter-in-law Preeti and his mistress Kiran Jhaveri and a short description of Minal, Sonal's sister who remains only in conversations, but never comes in action. Hasmukh is a living monument of patriarchal dominance that he practices on his family members by curbing their freedom through his will. This play reflects the excesses of patriarchal constraints that are subverted after it goes to a particular limit. There are three women characters in the play—Kiran Jhaveri, Sonal, and Preeti.

Kiran is the executive in Hasmukh Mehta's company and his mistress as well. She lives in the company's flat in a posh location. But, soon after Hasmukh's death, she comes to his house to live with his family according to his will. She has a better understanding of life. She not only is intelligent and knowledgeable but also conscious about human values, individual freedom and is courageous enough to speak what is right without bothering its consequences. She is experienced enough to read people's pretence and falsehood. She is a very shrewd and hard-headed marketing executive. She truly is the new women in the play. When Preeti asks her what if they don't allow her to stay with them, Kiran retorts strongly:

KIRAN (*studies Preeti*). You are forcing me to say this. I never intended saying it outright, but now I have to make it clear to you. As the trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, I have the right to make statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust... Which mean that you won't ever get a single rupee earned by your father-in-law. Now will you refuse to let me stay here?

PREETI. Welcome home. (Dattani 494)

She is a well maintain woman who looks anywhere thirty to forty years. Kiran believes that the perception and thoughts must not be imposed on by anyone to anybody but let the individuals have nurtured their way of thinking without any others' outer impressions. Whatever she has achieved is a result of the constant struggle which she has faced in her life. She fulfils her duty honestly. While talking to Sonal, she unfolds the real self of her life, her husband and also the truth about Mehta that she learnt her lessons by being very close to life. She learnt her lesson by watching her mother tolerating her father whenever he returned home every day with a bottle of wine. As she watched him beating her up and calling her names! She learnt what life was at the time when her mother pretended she was merry before

her and her brothers, so that they wouldn't hate their father. And she learnt when she distanced her mother away from her father, so that in return he would be silent for those three hours when he returned home, and before he fell asleep, too much drunk to harm them anymore on the dining table. She used to serve him those drinks, waiting for that moment eagerly when he would become quite unconscious and would speak a prayer that thank God he was too drunk to charge himself on us! Her father, your husband Mr. Mehta—they were very weak men showing pseudo strength. (Dattani 508)

She has become a trusted woman because she is undoubtedly a new woman working hard as an executive and wins confidence to become the trustee of properties. She has a brain and beauty. This new woman, Kiran finds herself at a strange crossroad where modernity and tradition not only pull her in opposite and contradictory directions of life but also generating various conflict at interpersonal, intra-psychic, professional and humanistic levels (Bande and Ram 14). Sonal has learnt a lot from Kiran due to her wisdom and knowledge. Thanking Kiran, Sonal says to her, “You know, you are a very intelligent woman... You have made many things clear to me. I am glad you are living with us. I hope you'll stay with us forever” (Dattani 511). This is what the new women suppose to strive—transformation in thinking and transition in tradition and customs by their wisdom and knowledge.

According to Hasmukh, the only person who has the guts, the shrewdness and required spirit to run supreme industry is Kiran. She is a quite commanding and courting, courageous and diplomatic lady. It is only Kiran who understands Hasmukh better than anybody in his family. In one of her conversations with Sonal, she says, “Hasmukh Mehta was living life in his father's shadow” (Dattani 509) which she doesn't like. She is a believer in individual freedom and choice. She is a self-confident lady who knows exactly how to live in a male-dominated society. Kiran being pitied over Mehta says that he was depended on her for everything. He used to think that he was the sole decision maker. But in reality it was she. He wanted to her to run his life. Like his father had done with his. After a pause she continues that Hasmukh did not in reality want a mistress, but he wanted a father. He found in her a woman who could father him! She laughs and Hasmukh felt agitation by her laughter. She then uttered that men, in reality never grow up! (Dattani 510)

Sonal, the wife of Hasmukh Mehta is quieter, subservient and is dependent on her husband. She is a traditional woman who has imbibed all tradition patriarchal traits. She has no independent opinion of her own. She has inherited the traits to obey how to execute every

orders and instructions of husband. At one place her husband Hasmukh calls her “mud”. It is Kiran, who clears the thinking of Sonal about her husband and Sonal later realized her mistakes and ignorance in which she was living and just following what her sister Minal used to advise her. She is a kind of woman who comes under the transition only when she met and talked to Kiran, who is certainly in all ways representing the ‘new women’. After getting lessons from Kiran, Sonal realizes:

I have always lived in my sister's shadow. It was always Minal who decided what we should wear, what games we should play. She even decides which maharaj is suitable for our family. Even at my husband's funeral, she sat beside me and told me when to cry... But everything is going to be different now. (Dattani 511)

Sonal is somewhat a parasitic and unobtrusive woman character lacking self-confidence. She is most of the time is dominated by the others. She constantly depends on her Husband and more likely on the aid and advice of her sister Minal in each decision she makes of her life. Her character is crafted to give a comical and humorous relief in the play. The most unfortunate fold of her life is that most of the characters, most of the time blame her in either way in the play. Just after Kiran abided in her home, she soon becomes a good friend to her. Sonal learnt so many things about her husband Hasmukh and life in general and from Kiran. Therefore, she told Kiran that she knew very little about her husband. If she had understood him when he was with me, she would have surely died happily (Dattani 510).

Great changes took abode in her behaviour, attitude, and nature and in her perception at the end of the play. She completely transforms her attitude regarding her husband, her sister Minal and others in the play. The play ends by presenting Sonal as a complete transformed woman, who denies any sort of help from her sister:

SONAL. What is she saying?

KIRAN (*to Sonal*). Your sister just said some of the rudest things to me.

SONAL. Oh, did she? Give the phone. (*On the phone.*) Hello? Yes, Minal, this is Sonal! ... No. Maharaj hasn't come back... No, I don't need another maharaj, not from you at least! ... I just don't, that's all... Well, as for I am concerned, you can go jump into a bottomless pit! (Slams the phone down and turns towards Kiran.) (Dattani 516)

Preeti, like Sonal, is also a counterfoil to her husband Ajit. She is not a tradition-bound woman. Preeti is a very calculative lady in her action and is assertive in nature. Hasmukh, her father-in-law describes her as “pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake” (Dattani 456). She is a quite scheming and selfish lady. Her character is rebellious one; as soon as after the reading the Hasmukh’s will, she begins to behave differently. She subverts all the familial norms set by the male authorities of the house. When her husband orders, she replies, “I will not take orders from you. I’m your wife, not your mistress” (Dattani)! She is undoubtedly a new woman who doesn’t believe in male supremacy and doesn’t fear to protest what she wants to protest:

AJIT. Why did you want to protest? What did he do to you?

PREETI. ... He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother. But I didn’t let him do that to me. (Dattani 501)

The play *Where There’s a Will* shows the transition of women’s status and plight. It shows although male ego is still the root cause of evils to women in society, yet women have started growing their consciousness for individual freedom and self-respect by crossing the tradition patriarchal boundaries.

The woman and new woman both are the part and parcel of Dattani’s characterization and portrayal of a woman in his play. He often throws light on themes where women can be shown as a not mere victim but he lays them to a transformation from victimhood to new womanhood where they can no longer allow new victim like them. Dattani says about his characterization:

...I have a lot to say and am probably not saying it well enough. But my characters have a lot to say too, and they seem to doing rather well at having their say... Every time audiences (critics too!) have applauded, laughed, cried or simply offered their silences in response to some moment in the play, I am completely aware that it is my character that has done the work for me. (xi)

These two plays display a complex inter-relationship of a middle-class family and its various darker shades and also of contest and collusion between indigenous patriarchal norms and the growing conflict due to fast-changing woman consciousness. Dattani, in these plays mainly reflects on the issues of gender discrimination, mostly in the context of man-woman

relationship and conflicts and evils of patriarch hegemony along with a bunch of many issues and problems like father and son, issues of and between husband and wife relationship, issues related to capitalism and its productions of evils in the post-colonial and postmodern purview (Parmar 50). His plays revolve around the interplay of human emotion of hatred, individual freedom, intolerance, guilt, crime, subjugation and rebellions against authority.

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