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Trying to Re-examine Mahesh Dattani as a Whistleblower to Gender Stereotype and Peripheralization of Marginalized Voices in His Selected Plays

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's plays give a special place to the underprivileged, marginalized, oppressed voices of our cast ridden, phallogocentric society vis-à-vis Dattani's earnest attempt to break gender stereotypes where phallus is in the centre and women are pushed at the periphery deserves our kudos because with a true impartial journalist's eye Dattani has vividly portrayed the various agathokakological entities of human life through the artistic representation of his characters. Dattani is a true mascot of democracy, India's pluralistic identity and his aversion to authoritarianism, orthodoxy gives him a special place in literary world. In a society where unequal power structure hails women, minority voices, marginalized people do not even get access to the resources and the pathetic condition of the marginalized underdogs is inversely proportional to the extremely rich lifestyle of a selected number of people who belong to the centre of a power structure. In this paper I will unveil in which way Dattani's plays try to de-stereotype the prevailing notion of gender stereotype and in which way he has portrayed the subjugated, oppressed, marginalized position of women, hijras, minority voices with reference to his *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Thirty Days in September* (2001), and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999).

Keywords: Gender Stereotype, Marginalization, Agathokakological, Democracy, Pluralistic Identity.

As there are hyena-man and panther-men, I shall be a Jew-man

A kaffir-man

A Hindu-from-Calcutta-man

a man from-Harlem-who-does-not-vote

—*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (Césaire in McLeod81)

They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and not even reported in the newspapers.

—*Seven Steps Around the Fire* (Dattani 282)

Every time I menstruate, I thank God I am a woman

—*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (Dattani 66)

India's foremost dramatist and director Mahesh Dattani (1958) deserves our kudos because his works claim a place for marginalized, degraded, peripheralized people and simultaneously his works also highlight gender injustice, subjugation of women in our phallogocentric society and of course, Dattani's earnest attempt to give voice to the voiceless and to bring the invisible into our mainstream narrative shows his passionate commitment to democracy and social justice, his intense repugnance to authoritarianism and fundamentalism, and his exuberant celebration of India's pluralistic culture. As Kaustav Chakraborty in his Preface to *De-Stereotyping Indian Body and Desire* (2013) observes:

De-Stereotyping the conventional perspectives is crucial for the identity which suffer the common internal colonialism of the state, where, either they are pushed at the periphery as the 'non-normative' Other of the 'mainstream' or, are compelled to give up their intrinsic nonconformity and become nationalized as being programmed into useful citizens of the state. In the mode of de-stereotyping, the individual/human body, social body and the entire body of knowledge become interchangeable, while permitting us to fluctuate from the center to the margins, to crumble down the relation between signifier and signified ... (ix)

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) stressed upon how a woman is tagged as "Other" (xxii) in our patriarchal society while Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) showcases how women are inessentialized in patriarchy and how power structure operates which seeks its pleasure only in shifting women to the margin. In this article I would like to show how Dattani has tried to take a dig at the strong patriarchal bastion through the portrayal of marginalized people, homosexuals, hijras, unequal power structure, stereotyped notion of gender identity, problematization of

relationship etc. with reference to his *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Thirty Days in September* (2001), and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999).

In Nitesh Tiwari's *Dangal* (2016) patriarchal society mocked and taunted at Geeta and Babita's short hair cut because in a traditional age-old patriarchal Indian society boys generally grow short hair while girls grow their hair long and when Mahavir Singh tried to break this conventionality by cutting his daughters' hair short though his daughters vehemently rejected his proposal at the beginning because they themselves have internalised patriarchal power structure. In *Dance Like a Man* (1989) authoritarian and age-old watchdog of patriarchy Amritlal mocked at Guruji's sporting of long hair and his way of walking as these appeared to him as abnormal, effeminized in a patriarchal heterosexual power structure:

AMRITLAL. I have never seen a man with long hair.

JAIRAJ. All sadhus have long hair.

AMRITLAL. I don't mean them. I meant normal men. (Dattani 39)

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) argued that "Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expression" that are said to be its results." (24-25) Thus, sex is biological and gender is social.

Amritlal appears to me as a poster boy of masculine hegemony, conservatism, prudish mentality, "compulsory heterosexuality," (a term Butler borrowed from Adrianna Rich) and a worshipper of "phallogocentrism" (Derrida's term for the masculine power at the origin of the Law). His palilalia which concentrates upon his son Jairaj's growing up as a man also hints at his inner psyche which is constantly grooming a fear psychosis that if Jairaj fails to grow up like a man and if he fails to shape himself according to the patriarchal norms and conditions he will be castrated, effeminized, and will be tagged as Other by the society which is phallogocentric and believes in the politics of masculine hegemony:

AMRITLAL. ... Grow up, Jairaj. (Dattani 45)

In Amritlal's Utopia dance is forbidden and he believes that boys should be holding phallic cricket bats and should not be wasting their time in dancing which is womanly. Jairaj himself is adult but he struggles to find his own identity as a dancer which is obviously not stereotypical in his conscience, under the surveilling patriarchal monopoly of Amritlal. Jairaj's liberal identity which promotes and encourages dance, rights and justice for the marginalized temple dancers is in a constant battle with Amritlal's fundamentalism which stereotypes dance as

effeminized and temple dancers as prostitutes. In an unequal power structure phallus is in the centre and women are pushed at the periphery. Amritlal's quintessential patriarchal ethos proudly claims:

AMRITLAL. A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive.
But a man in a woman's world is pathetic. (Dattani 50)

It reminds me of Clara Reeve's thought provoking two lines from *An Argument in Favour of the Natural Equality of Both the Sexes* (1756):

For what in man is most respected,
In woman's form shall be rejected. (Reeve in Carter and McRae 226)

In *Dance Like a Man* (1989) Chenni amma belongs to "[n]on hegemonic groups or classes." (Gramsci xiv) In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) Spivak (1942) highlighted the subaltern existence of women and to Spivak subaltern women are doubly oppressed in colonial/postcolonial situation: "...the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the female as female is more deeply in shadow." (271) Together with the postcolonial feminist thinkers Chandra Talpade Mohanty,(1955) Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, (1950) Nawal El Saadawi (1931) and Kumari Jayawardena (1931), Spivak's critical thought has challenged the assumption that all women are homogenized, and to Spivak differences in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture should also be taken into consideration. (Morton 71-72) Amritlal is conscious of his elitist and hegemonic social status which marginalises and pushes subaltern woman like Chenni amma at the periphery. Dattani with his sensitive heart of an artist shows a class struggle where autocratic and patriarchal Amritlal belongs to the category of "haves" while Chenni amma belongs to "have nots" (Marx in Wen 74) category. As Gyanendra Pandey (1949) in his *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2001) and Kancha Ilaiah (1952) in his *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996) have argued that India is invariably an upper caste Hindu India where the voices of Dalits, Adivasis, and minorities are excluded from our mainstream grand narratives. Chenni amma's dying, subjugated, and lower caste maternal body highlights the loopholes of the Mother India mythology as a bourgeois ideological construct. (Morton 40) For Amritlal, Ratna's dance practise at Chenni amma's courtyard is spoiling his status and he does not know actually how to convey one's gratitude towards artists who are beyond caste, creed, and religion. Amritlal fought against the British colonial rule and after independence he played the role of a reformer by trying to eradicate dowry, untouchability or by

building ashrams for temple dancers or by giving them education but when he stops his daughter-in-law Ratna from visiting Chennai amma out of his pathological hatred for this downtrodden, marginalised woman exposes him as a neo-colonial and a hypocrite who fought not for our country's freedom but for preserving power in his hands after independence:

JAIRAJ. Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn't fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands. (Dattani 37)

Instead of being a man Jairaj never tries to command his authority over Ratna and he not even blames Ratna for her carelessness and insincerity which inevitably led to Shankar's untimely death. Jairaj is victim of both his wife and father's psychological manipulation. In the beginning of the play we see that Lata is telling Viswas that her parents would not care for his hereditary lineage but what matters most is whether Viswas would allow Lata to dance or not after their marriage. Why as an independent human being Lata is depending upon his would-be husband's diktat of whether or not he would allow her to dance? Has Lata herself been structured/internalised in the patriarchal power politics where generally husbands are in the commanding positions and wives are pushed at the receiving ends? As a student of literature I cannot lightly take Viswas's seemingly funny overture at Lata: "Hmm. And what if I whisk you away to Dubai and sell you to a Sheikh?" (Dattani 4). It actually has a deep political angle and it symbolically metaphorises women's body as an object of commodity fetishism or hints at the illegal trafficking of women as sex objects. In orthodox patriarchal household women are generally believed as experts in kitchens or in domestic works and this very stereotypical notion about women casts the limitations of women's capabilities in patriarchy:

VISWAS. When my mother comes here, she'll want to watch you make coffee. Be prepared. (Dattani 12)

Viswas's mother will judge Lata only on the basis of whether she can make a cup of coffee or not. Viswas's *sanskari* mother who herself has been internalised in patriarchy will also look at Lata's legs to know whether these are tanned or not because sarees not miniskirts are found admirable in patriarchy and any woman found violating this dress code will be called not a *sanskari*. It is noteworthy that Lata shined as an excellent Bharatnatyam dancer and became a celebrity overnight in an unequal phallogocentric society and her marvellous and artistic representation of adavus throws a challenge to the age-old patriarchy which believes that shining

and progress are unequivocally engaged with men only because they are at the centre of power. Lata's success inspires thousands of other Lata's who are the victims of rigid patriarchy and gives them the encouragement that if a woman tries her level best after negating stereotype she will obviously hail success and a woman is no less than a man. In *Dance Like a Man* (1989) it is shocking that Ratna is rejecting Jairaj's maleness openly:

RATNA. You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours. (Dattani 21)

Ratna's definition of Maleness suggests a man's own decision making power and obviously his capability to stand on his two feet but according to Ratna, Jairaj fails to tick these boxes of Maleness as defined by her. Throughout the play it seems that Jairaj is always in the back foot whenever a time of a big face off comes between him and Ratna. Biswas was quite right in his assumption:

VISWAS. Your mother must be dominating the poor man! (Dattani 8)

Dattani has tried to subvert or deconstruct the prevailing notion of gender stereotypes. His *Tara* (1990) portrays how Tara was deprived of the third leg because it was favoured to Chandan. Tara and Chandan were born as Siamese twins but under the influence of Bharati's autocratic father figure and the shocking silence of her husband even the medical officer Dr. Thakkar had hatched the conspiracy and by the virtue of his surgery Chandan was awarded the third leg though it got its blood circulated from Tara's body only because Chandan is a male child. Tara's crippled body reminds me of the physically deformed and emotionally challenged Laura of *The Glass Menagerie*. (1944) Both Tara and Laura's physical deformity symbolically unveils the subjugated and marginalized status of women in patriarchy. Bharati's muteness to the barbaric injustice practised upon Tara is reminiscent of Anurag Kashyap's *Mukkabaaz* (2017) where the character of a mute girl played by Zoya Hussain symbolically posits the view that women are mute creatures in patriarchy. After the separation of the third leg tension was aggravated in the Patel household and I think that it was *peripeteia* for the Patels because peace was disrupted after Tara's untimely death and even Chandan was not properly fit after surgery leading him to leave India for England to expiate and Bharati became insane. Patel family's witch-hunt for peace which they had expected would be showering upon them after favouring Chandan actually faced a big jolt only leaving the household in jittery. The patriarchal *hubris*

although it got its gratification after instrumentalizing Bharati in its sinister campaign against Tara only for favouring Chandan led to the moment of our *anagnorisis* that how women are stereotyped, oppressed, subjugated, and crushed under the fatal mill of patriarchy.

The decision to deprive Tara of the third leg obviously was a *hamartia* because it violated Tara's natural and legal share of the leg only culminating an atmosphere of guilt and resentment in the mind of Chandan and Bharati. Chandan's so called expiation for his crippled sister appears as a big jolt to the sensitive readers when Tara was showcased as a commodity and not as an individual in his play: "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy." (Dattani 380) Dattani's holistic search for identity is indomitable and his plays do not chew the cud but they are evergreen and they gain their consciousness through de-stereotyping our gender identity or through the portrayals of the marginalised voices. Bias against a girl child is a common matter in India obviously with certain exceptions and ingrained patriarchy often forces mothers to abort their girl child hinting at the age-old, truncated, moth-eaten patriarchal notion of gender stereotype where boys are in the centre. Unfortunately instead of mutually helping and supporting, women often seek pleasure in strategizing cynical plot against each other. Here Roopa teases Tara on her physical deformity or in *Dance Like a Man* (1989) Ratna sounds like a typical Machiavellian when she declares that she wants to see Lata reaching the zenith of her success by hook or by crook and for that she is even ready to be sweet to her opponent camp:

RATNA. Even if it means being sweet to that bitch Chandra Kala. (Dattani 33)

Bravely Fought the Queen (1991) at its outset portrays that Indian women's identity depends upon their husbands' identity in a traditional patriarchal society and it is like a Catch-22 situation for a woman to liberate herself from these shackles of patriarchy. Here Jiten and Nitin dominate their wives Dolly and Alka. Dattani's strategic use of bonsai actually points out the dwarfed status of women in patriarchy where women are shaped, regulated, and controlled by our phallogocentric society and any deviation or violation of this role is seen as abnormal and asymmetrical. Alka was dominated by her brother Praful before marriage and after marriage she is dominated by her husband Nitin. Nitin is a homosexual who has married the sister of his partner in homosexuality, Praful. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* (1976) theorized sexuality as situated within structures and discourse of power. He provided a further approach to the so-called natural marginalization of queer sexuality by arguing that certain forms of sexuality were

constructed as unnatural and evil and its practitioners placed under state surveillance. (Foucault in Nayar 185) As Pramod K. Nayar in his *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* observes:

Butler proposes, via a reading of Freud, that the taboo against heterosexual incest is preceded by another taboo—against homosexuality. Gender identity, she states, is built on this prohibition against homosexuality. It is the loss of the same-sex object of desire that creates a melancholic heterosexual identity. Butler thus argues that feminine and masculine dispositions are the result of an internalization of assimilation of loss. This loss and prohibited desire is inscribed (Butler's term is 'incorporated') on the body, ... (190)

Nitin's homosexuality challenges the unified, monolithic heterosexual normativity of our society and Dattani here tries to celebrate this deviant form of sexuality which is seen as perverted desire in our heterosexual society though Dattani is equally conscious of Alka's troubled and tortured psyche and mental state due to Nitin's homosexual identity which did not give sufficient time to Alka leaving her sexual desires unfulfilled because Nitin liked to give much more time to his homosexual partners. Lalitha and Dolly despite their deep nuances of class consciousness as Lalitha belongs to working class while Dolly represents capitalist class, both are marginalised and subjugated as women in our patriarchal hierarchy. The title of the play is inspired by the lines of a poem by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan which begins, "*khoob ladi mardani woh to Jhansi ki raani*" (The Queen of Jhansi fought like a brave man). Nitin gets his sadistic pleasure only in beating and kicking his wife Dolly while Dolly's boredom resulted in building up a sexual fantasy with Kanhaiya, a 19 year old fictitious character. Capitalist Trivedi brothers' current advertisement programme called Re va Tee which focused on women's undergarments portrayed women as mere sex objects while the possessive nature of the nagging mother Baa for her son Nitin most probably attracted him to orchestrate Oedipus pull towards her. Nitin is like another Paul of Lawrence's (1885-1930) *Sons and Lovers* (1913) in the sense that Baa and Mrs. Morel both had experienced unhappy marriage which only resulted in Mrs. Morel's desire for Paul and Paul failed in his love for Miriam and here Nitin is also a failed husband because of Baa's possessiveness for him which prevented to cement any chemistry of emotional bonding with Alka leading only to Alka's tragic death. Alka's dance in the rain symbolises her earnest desire of liberation from the shackles of patriarchy and like the brave Queen of Jhansi she symbolically protested against patriarchal oppression in her dance even after

knowing that she would fail. Baa inflicts her trauma and suffering upon her daughter-in-laws because she herself is a victim of torture and subjugation by patriarchy.

Thirty Days in September (2001) shows how Shanta, guided by patriarchal principles remains mum at the sexual abuse of her little daughter Mala. Mala was sexually harassed for the first time by her own maternal uncle Man when she was a child of seven years old. Man did not regret for committing such a heinous crime upon Mala. Here, Man appears to be protector turned predator. He previously had also seduced his own sister Shanta during her childhood days and later he is continuing this incestuous relationship with his own niece. Shanta and Mala were economically dependent upon Man and capitalizing this weakness he continued to rape Mala for several times. After entering the Lacanian Symbolic stage when Mala could understand because of the virtue of the process of socialisation what blow actually went upon her during her childhood days, also wonders why her mother Shanta remained always silent whenever Man used to seduce her. Mala's past traumatic experiences led her to psychoneurotic position though later under the supervision of medical counselling sessions and obviously by Deepak's encouragement and company Mala turned into a bold and confident woman. Women who are the victims of sexual harassment are often trolled on social media and sometimes the victims failing to cope up with the violent taunts and abuses from the patriarchal society which never questions the rapist and always finds its sadistic pleasure in mocking the victims, commit suicide. Here Mala is not ashamed of her and according to her seducers like Man should be ashamed of themselves: "I do not hesitate to use my real name now. Let people know. There's nothing to hide. Not for me. After all, it is he who must hide." (Dattani 8) Sophia Phoca in a chapter entitled as "Feminism and Gender" observes: "The male gaze is constructed according to structures of control inscribed by sadistic voyeurism and/or fetishistic scopophilia (looking as a source of pleasure)." (47) Here, Man's male gaze and his paedophilic disorder looked at Mala only as a source of carnal pleasure.

Man is trying to inflict upon Mala and Shanta a kind of Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic by terrorising, threatening, seducing and emotionally blackmailing them. Only a Me Too Movement with a hashtag preceded by it cannot reduce the alarming rates of crimes committed upon women until or unless our society does not start seeing women as capable as men or it does not start questioning rapists like Man instead of questioning the victims.

Dattani's characterization of hijras in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) actually portrays the abominable, marginalized, and unwanted status of hijras who are the most populous third sex in India. The story spins around the death mystery of a beautiful hijra called Kamla. Dattani by portraying these hijras who live in the slums and skirts and earn their livelihood by begging, dancing, singing or by clapping loudly has tried to place an alternative historical narrative in our mainstream narrative. Dattani has outlined the struggles, hardships, and marginalized situation of these queer minority voices. They often entertain people in buses or in trains but their own life is full of pathos and dismay. We curse them for using slangs and filthy languages but we remain totally unconscious of our darker sides which are filthier than those slangs. In this play the minister's son Subbu secretly married Kamla and he used to bring hijras for sexual pleasure to his bed. Hijras are often blamed, excommunicated, used as scapegoats and seen as unlucky by our so-called civilized society. They are referred to as 'it', not as 'she'. The SP, Suresh thinks that hijras are liars, dogs, scoundrels, evils and what not. Here Uma Rao embracing a very strong family background plunges into the dirty slums of hijras in order to research on their lifestyles, poverty, and struggles. Mrs. Rao deserves our kudos because she carries love and affection for hijras and she refers to them as 'she', not as 'it'. She is trying to bring these invisible minority voices into the spotlight of our mainstream narrative. When she proposes the idea of a 'sisterhood' of eunuchs, Suresh howls with laughter: "They are castrated degenerate man..." (Dattani 238) Heterosexual power structure pushes marginalized voices at the periphery and Dattani has challenged this Self/Other, Centre/Margin, Master/Slave dichotomy in this play: "We cannot speak...when we want to speak nobody listens..." (Dattani 259)

Raveena Joseph in her 8 June, 2016, *The Hindu*, article, "On a muggy night in Chennai..." observed: "Dattani's plays, that dealt with burning urban issues, including child abuse, social stereotyping, religious intolerance and gender inequality, soon created a stir in the world of theatre." (Joseph) Dattani has tried to execute a surgical strike upon various maladies of our society either by de-stereotyping our gender stereotype or by portraying the dehumanised, stigmatised, marginalized status of invisible minority voices or the subjugated and oppressed condition of women in our patriarchal society where Taras (stars) are not allowed to twinkle. Jairaj's dance in a woman's attire or Kuchipudi is a celebration of transvestism or the divine dance of Shiva and Parvati or the birth of the Siamese twins embolden the idea of the composite

androgynous form called Ardhanarishvara or the vivid representation of marginalized voices — all celebrate the idea that like a deconstructing archangel Dattani is trying to break today's construction, e.g. phallocentric monopoly, gender stereotype and the peripheralization of marginalized voices.

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