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Gender Politics in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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The term Gender refers to the social and cultural aspects of sexual difference. According to Robert. J. Stoller “Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are “Male” and “Female”, the corresponding terms for gender are “masculine” and “feminine; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex .”¹ The Gender role, which an individual plays, is almost consciously or unconsciously acquired. One acts according to standards of one’s culture in a manly or womanly way and only little of his or her behavior is innate and natural. As Simon de Beauvoir puts it “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman... It is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine.”² (as quoted by M.H.Abrams). By social and cultural constructs of the patriarchal society, a man is expected to be active, dominating, adventurous, rational and creative and a woman is considered to be passive, acquiescing, timid, emotional and conventional. The feminists challenge these culturally constructed gender roles and stereotyping. Feminism, a culture specific phenomenon emerged first in the west and benefited the societies there by making the woman equal and democratic. However the objectives of feminism are universal and are applicable to India too.

The term ‘politics’ is defined by Kate Millet in her book Sexual Politics as “power structured relationship arrangements whereby one group of person is controlled by another.”³ She also insists on developing a more sensible unbiased and psychology and philosophy of power relationship. It is mandatory to define the theory of politics based on races, castes, classes and sexes, since there are certain groups, which have been unrecognized and suppressed for centuries. According to Kate Millet

“Ideal politics might simply be conceived of as the arrangement of human life on agreeable and rational principles from whence the entire notion of power over others should be banished, one must confess that this is not what constitutes the political as we know it, and it is to this that we must address ourselves”⁴

The status of women in Indian society has been an ambivalent one. Indian customs, traditions has very meticulously built a chunk of myths, which portray women as vulnerable and weak at the same time dangerous and inferior. Most of these myths hide the everyday reality and try to shove women into permanent dependent role. In the Indian scenario woman is worshiped as Bharat Matha (Mother India) and Goddess. Women were venerated and deified as Gods. Padmini Sengupta⁵ says it is not easy to distinguish the cult

of the goddesses from those of women of India. Indian women's lives, their behavior, beliefs and customs has been interpreted in terms of the Goddess lore of India.

In the Atharva Veda Mother Earth is said to be sustained by virtuous qualities and she bears the herbs on which men prosper. On her bosom rest the oceans and rivers and she is invoked to grant men prosperity. Lakshmi is worshiped as the goddess of fortune and harvest. The Vedic river Goddess Saraswathi, becomes in the Puranas, a Shakti, an all-pervading power – the Great mother. As Gayatri she is invoked daily and becomes the mother of four Vedas. The river Ganga is worshipped as a mother goddess. All devout Hindus earnestly believe that their souls will be saved if they spend the last few hours of their lives by Ganga. Uma, the wife of Shiva, is depicted in the Hindu myths as the ideal wife. Perhaps, this myth served as pattern for the ideal husband- wife relationship. The husband and wife partnership is further embodied in Rama and Sita and other sacred stories. Sita, the incarnation of Lakshmi, when she descends to earth, becomes the embodiment of all womanly virtue- obedience and modest service to husband and children.

Even though woman is always eulogized as being tender-hearted and passive in the Indian Mythology, Goddess is often being portrayed as being aggressive and takes on the aspect of evil to destroy the evil itself. Goddess Kali, with a garland of skulls around her neck, a black face and a bloodstained tongue is described as hideous and fearsome. Durga Devi, is the Goddess who vanquished the buffalo demon, Mahisha. Both the Goddesses descended on the earth to cleanse it of the evil. The Goddess is considered as the other half of the God and God himself is half man and half woman. According to the Hindus, the energy of the God is personified as his wife Shakti.

Som Benegal comments,

“Indian epics have always had the most profound effect on the lives, attitudes, ethos, morals and aspirations of the Indian people, because they were conceived as the repository for faith, instruction and inspiration. They are totally woven into the lives of the Indians.”⁶

The stories of women in the epics Mahabharata and Ramyaana and Puranas are filled with the womanly chastity, sacrifice, love, devotion and service to God and man. The protagonists of these epics were stereotypically portrayed as virtuous, chaste, and gentle with indomitable courage and capacity to suffer. Sita, Savitri and Draupadi have been the embodiment of womanhood on which Indian women modeled their lives. Sita, for the love of her husband underwent the ordeal by fire to prove her chastity. Savitri with courage and perseverance followed Yama, the God of death to the valley of death and reclaimed her husband. Mahabharata, narrates the trials and troubles of Draupadi, the great pandava queen. R.P. Sharma comments,

“...As all the principal texts of Hindu orthodoxy are written by men, it is not surprising that they lay down guidelines, precepts, laws and rituals which are male centred...The entire corpus of Hindu literature should be seen as a careful stockpiling of strategies to convert woman into a machine which can be used or abused at the pleasure of the male and without any regard to her working capacity.”⁷

Indian woman typecast as Mother Earth is forced to assume the role of the perpetually giving, and forgiving mother who never demands anything and is willing to suffer anything for her family. Great Epics Ramayana and Mahabharatha and religious Puranas aid these representations. In Manu's code, the woman's right entirely depends on her husband and she is not considered equal to a man in her own right. Such texts naturalize the oppression of women through its stereotypical representations. Sometimes woman is worshipped as Goddess, embodiment of Goodness, love and dedication. In certain occasions she is feared as Kali, Durga and an embodiment of evil.

Woman for Simon de Beauvoir becomes mythicised, the subject of male dreams and idealizations. Cultures all over the world, whether east or west, have forced certain attributes on women, to satisfy the masculine need and expectation. Beauvoir writes "the categories in which man think of the world are established from their point of view, as absolute... A mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence"⁸.

Thus the woman becomes associated with life, fragility, purity, beauty, and goodness on certain occasions. On other occasion she is temptress/ seductress, corrupter, sexual object of male's desire, a procreating device and so on. Beauvoir argues that such representations enable man to bestow woman with his fears as well as his desires, his loves and his hatreds. And that is why Juliet Mitchell in her work, Woman's Estate rightly defines Gender as a "Socially conditioned fantasy". (as quoted by Promod.K.Nayar)

Mahesh Dattani's plays are mostly centered on the marginalized. He wants to bring the people in the periphery to the center stage. All his plays question the accepted norms, politically generated attitudes, Gender identities and social stereotyping. Quite objectively Dattani portrays marginalized people's struggle for acceptance in the society. He says "Thematically I talk about the areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand 'this' space. They live on the fringes of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe space for themselves as they can".⁹ Individual versus society and Gender identity are the two recurring themes in Dattani's works. Most of the protagonists in his play look upon the society oppressor. The characters – Woman, Gay, transsexuals, lesbians – wage war against the oppressive society and try to define their own identity "what makes a man a man? I ask myself what I have got and what I am and what I'm not..." (111) sings Sharad in the play On a Muggy Night in Mumbai. It is the first play in Indian theatre to openly discuss gay themes of love, fidelity and betrayal. Dattani quite boldly presents the homosexuals need to assert their need in society.

Ed in On Muggy night in Mumbai "wants to be a real man" (Dattani,99). Dattani shows the conflict between the heterosexuals and Gays through his settings. On the one the level, there is an air conditioned elevated high class flat, where Kamallesh gives a party for his four gay friends and on the ground level is the traditional, hindu wedding which symbolize the traditional society.

In his play Where There's a will, Dattani deals with common assumptions about female and male roles in the personal life and society. In this play women are shown as stronger

and willful than men. Men are scorned by women as “Weak men with false strength”, (508). Kiran derides Hasmukh, who had tried to live his life through his son, Ajit.

“KIRAN: He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was – He wanted me to run his life. Like his father had (pause). Hasmukh didn’t really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him! (Laughs. Hasmukh cringes at her laughter) Men never really grow up!” (510)

Hasmukh, tries to control his family even after his death through his “will”. As a ghost he becomes the narrator of the story in the second scene. He enjoys the discomfiture of his son, wife and daughter in law. However at the end the women exorcise the ghost. Most of his plays are centered around the women characters; there by he is categorized as avante garde feminist by Gauri Shankar Jha¹¹. Infact his play Bravely Fought the Queen has four women in its central plot. The very title is telling. It is reflective of Rani Lakshmi Bai’s fight against British. Even though it was a losing battle she never gave up. Dattani’s women are neither weak and innocent nor content to be bound by the shackles of the society. They break free from the stifling institution and fight to assert their individual identity. In this play the women quite boldly enact their sexual fantasies. In Final solutions, Dattani exposes the fake liberalism and prejudices of the society. And another theme is the mother-daughter relationship. Smita, frustrated with her mother’s advice and prescription breaks down finally and asserts her freedom of thought and action. She pleads:

“Smita: Don’t please, mummy, don’t try so hard! You are breaking me. Ever since I was small, you have been at me to go to the temple, make garlands, listen to you reading from the Gita. I love you, mummy, that’s why I did that. I listened to you and I obeyed you. I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother. Maybe I should have told you earlier, but I’m telling you now, I can’t bear it! Please don’t burden me any more!. I can’t take it! (213)

In Do the Needful, Alpesh a gay and Lata who is in love with a muslim guy manage to fool the society by doing the necessary marriage. After their marriage they continue to meet their lovers, under the protective cover of a traditional married couple. Again this play also reveals how society is biased against gays and inter-caste marriages. In Seven steps around the fire, Dattani explores the ancient history of the ostracized Hijra community. Uma Rao, a woman protagonist takes the center stage. Her research turns into a quest for truth. Even though she hails from a high-class influential background. She is unable to bring to light the murderer. The conversation in the opening highlights the deprived state of hijras.

“Munuswamy: you may see the hijra now if you wish, madam

Uma: Will she talk to me?

Munusway: (Chuckling) she! Off course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn’t.” (7)

The use of pronoun ‘it’ shows how such people were not even recognized as human beings. They are relegated to position of inanimate objects and animals.

Dattani, through his play tries to present the hidden realities in India. He wants to reflect the Indian society in his play. Theatre for Dattani should be ahead of its time, and should project the changing times. And he strongly feels that if things aren’t changing that should also be reflected in theatre. He addresses untouched issues with adept frankness and

honesty. It is the sincerity in his voice, which is commendable. Even though his plays are not dogmatic they do have a message. He accepts that he is more of a craftsman than a social activist. And his play, a true reflection of the contemporary Indian society portrays the human condition. The following quotation from his play Final solution shows where Dattani's concern lies.

“You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world!”

(Dattani, 224-225)

Most of Dattani's characters question their own identity, and thereby become or feel isolated from the society. And quite indirectly Dattani questions the society that formulates and conditions an individual's perception. Alyque Padmasee questions earnestly, “Can we shake of our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever locked...Are there any final solutions”.¹² Dattani does not give any final solution for the social problems he discusses. But he pokes the audiences to confront the issues so that the audience may at least become conscious of it. Mahesh Dattani's plays reflect the social reality of the contemporary Indian society. He portrays very clearly the complexities that surround the socially sanctioned gender roles. He tries to prove that Biology is not destiny. He attempts to deconstruct the social constructs. Through his plays he quite ruthlessly exposes the politics of gender.

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