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PREPONDERANCE OF PATRIARCHY IN THE WORK OF MAHESH DATTANI

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ABSTRACT

The gender inequality is not just a conventional thought but a scientific reality, hence males dominate. Patriarchy is the outcome of male dominance in the long run. The rule of male gender snuffs away the possibility of unbiased equality for the rest, and Indian society has been quite inflexible towards doling out equal rights to female and neuter gender, transgenders, and those defying gender roles as laid down by convention. Dattani's plays spotlight the reality of modern Indian society where social bias and gender roles assigned to individuals subscribing to socially accepted norms regarding gender, and those deviated from these narrow parameters are shunned by the patriarchal order of the society. Such a social system looks at a male as having higher potential, thus bestowing them with greater privileges, while female is usually underestimated, and even their actual potential is ignored. In this research paper, I aim to discuss the issue of patriarchy undertaken by Dattani in his plays.

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy in India is synonymous with social suppression of women and denial of economic independence, and even victimisation at the behest of authority. This seems to be an indelible legacy of patriarchal society. Most of Mahesh Dattani's plays appear to have a firm footing in his observations on the Indian middle-class families. The conflict created by gender imbalance in society acquires prominence in his work. He has focussed on the plight of women by way of gender discrimination and male dominance ascribed to patriarchal nature of society. Hence, his plays show up to be revolting, sometimes even outrageous. He committed himself to the dramatisation of the problems and issues modern urban Indian society is beleaguered.

Content: Mahesh Dattani takes up the issue of patriarchy, with a definite purpose of waking up the society to issue that remain ignored for long. Patriarchal orientation of society allows men to avoid the overwhelming presence of women in their lives, yet some women can live through it with forbearance. Some women bear suffocation throughout their lives in silence. *Where There is a Will* is first full-length play dealing with the nitty-gritties of Gujarati middle-class, through what all a family undergoes when the patriarch's

will becomes the most dominating force in the household after his death. This play is a drawing room comedy in which the male head of the family with a typical patriarchal mindset tries to control his family after his death through his will. Hasmukh Mehta's character bears the mentality of a money minded patriarch who badly needs a son to continue expansion of his property and family. He is an autocratic and obstinate person who hardly listens to anyone else, and even forces restrictions on other family members compelling them to follow him, allowing no freedom to anyone. The play highlights the plight of women in a patriarchal set-up where women are treated as objects of pleasure by men, and are totally dependent on their husbands for survival. The significance of marriage is communicated to the audience by Mehta through this dialogue:

HASMUKH. "Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? . . . No. No, I think the important reason any one should marry at all is to get a son. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name!" (*Where There's Will* 474-475)

Dattani's *Where There's a Will* makes a perfect example. Although, Hasmukh, the patriarch tries to exercise his control over all his family members, through the mechanism of the will, but learns, much to his dismay that is a long battle to hold the fort of patriarchy is lost. Hasmukh's wife, Sonal Mehta remains a mute sufferer throughout her life as patriarchy prevails. On the other hand, Kiran Jhaveri and

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Preeti raise their heads in defiance, not submitting to patriarchal authority, defending their liberty zealously. Though, Dattani has highlighted patriarchal dominance, the narrative of this play proves that adhering strictly to it is futile. The financial and physical security that comes with male dominance usually supports women, be they daughters, daughters-in-law, wives or mistresses. Men too drew lots from them. Not just fathers, but also sons. Ironically, Hasmukh fails to understand that domination leaves no room for affinity. The play ends on a highly imaginative note. Kiran, Sonal, and Preeti who used to be antagonists, decide unanimously to stay together. Watching the developments after his demise, Hasmukh's invisible spirit is dismayed upon seeing that his 'domineering patriarchy' is losing ground to Kiran's 'subtle matriarchy,' which prompts his spirit to quite the house and live in the tamarind tree. Incidentally, the family members unanimously decide to do away with the tree. This gives an opportunity for realisation to Hasmukh's soul.

Women have become conscious of their rights and responsibilities with the rising standards and accessibility of education. This has made them more conscious of their accomplishments and efficiency. This way, they are creating a better profile of the fair sex in the patriarchal society. So, they take up active stance in situations where patriarchal injustice encroaches upon their right to equality, and other rights. In *Where There is a Will*, Kiran and Preeti present very good examples of how women are evolving. Finally, Sonal becomes efficient enough to step ahead to curb patriarchal attitude. This is how this play, having satirical approach towards inflexible patriarchal social code ends.

In *Tara*, a baby girl suffers terribly due to a definite preference for male child in our society, which incidentally springs from the same roots, i.e. patriarchy. A demonic face of patriarchy appears under the spotlights of this play when Bharti and her father hatch a plan to get two of the three legs of their Siamese twins to the male infant and leave the baby girl with one. The play reveals how women are meted with currently in the name of society, especially devilish patriarchal pattern. Even a woman's identity is viewed by others in terms of her relationship with men. Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* takes us into an upper-middle class family of Patels where the status of woman is considered to be inferior to that of men and are treated with bias, inequality and prejudice. The socio-cultural belief systems and economic background are responsible for such injustice against the female offspring in our society, hence, we can say that the thought that governs our society killed Tara. Denied to live up to her potential, she got crushed under the weight of male dominance and patriarchy.

Mahesh Dattani also exposes the long-term impact of predominant patriarchy that nurtures gender bias in favour of males. The twins' father, Patel bears a biased attitude towards women, especially their upbringing, including education. He nurtures an ambition to send his son Chandan to England for higher education, but is not at all enthusiastic about extending similar support to Tara. His sentiments appear crystallised in his sharing with Bharti, "Chandan is going to study further and he will go abroad for his higher studies" (*Tara* 352). Whereas, better education could have replaced her lost leg, helping Tara stand on her feet. But,

Patel's patriarchal attitude towards girls prevent her access to better opportunities in life. It's shameful, yet it is a well-known truth that even Indian scriptures and history instigate the barbaric implications of male domination with even the mother accepting the idea that having male child is a privilege, and female, liability. Thus, *Tara* represents in fact and even the unborn fetuses of female gender who bear the brunt of patriarchal society since ages and continues to suffer from the attitude that forms the premise of snuffing off life from baby girls soon after they start breathing in the world of male domination, another form of patriarchy. The girl child is not even safe in her mother's womb now, from where she can be eliminated, thanks to modern technology!

The content of *Tara* clearly points to gender inequality and discrimination that flourishes in the soil of patriarchy and is a manifestation of a female's strife for expression in patriarchal environment of an Indian family. Rules laid down by patriarchal set-up are supposed to be followed by women till date, and women have to prove themselves. Subjugation and suppression of women due to patriarchal social set up is depicted in *Tara* in which Chandan receives better treatment than Tara. The bias for Chandan is a dramatic representation of the politics of patriarchy. But the conventional concept is being challenged, not only socially, but also institutionally as the state is now taking initiatives for eradicating this gender bias.

In *Seven Steps around the Fire*, Kamla's murder by Mr. Sharma's men also proves that patriarchal society does not accept a *hijra* in a marital alliance, as much as it scorns at a homosexual man like Subbu seeking conjugal bliss in anything beyond the socially accepted man-woman relationship. As a patriarch, Mr Sharma, and other male characters of the play uphold the behaviour acceptable under the patriarchal social code and hence despise his son's marriage with Kamla, a *hijra*. Marriage with the bride chosen by his father was not acceptable to Subbu, and his stance was taken as a rebellion against Mr Sharma's patriarchal dominion. As a typical patriarch, he dictates what is good or bad for his son. That is why, when Kamla appears as an obstacle in the conventional marriage of Mr. Sharma's son Subbu to a girl of his father's choice, his partner is eliminated at his father's behest. This marks the exaltation of patriarchal intent, as instead of having consideration for the feelings of his son, Mr. Sharma seems to be worried only about having progeny from the girl who marries his son.

In *Dance Like a Man*, he has contrived dance as philosophical analogue of life, in which Amritlal is projected as a flagbearer of patriarchy, who expects his son and daughter-in-law to be at his command because they don't earn enough and sustain on his support. Both are passionate about dancing, but Amritlal believes that dancing is neither respectable for a male, nor a sustainable career in itself. He wants his son to 'dance like a man,' i.e. conduct his life in more manly ways. He was not happy supporting Jairaj for dance which is a woman's domain by convention. Jairaj's wife, Ratna fully surrenders to her father-in-law's patriarchal whims and even acts in connivance, resorting to even unfair ways to keep her husband off dance as her aim was self-actualisation, and nothing short of it and could not even think any further, even when she has to ignore her husband's aspirations.

Amritlal Parekh is the patriarch in the story of *Dance Like a Man*. A social reformer and a freedom fighter, he is a die-hard nationalist subscribing to the conventional thought that goes well with the cultural framework of the play. Though Amritlal claims to be a reformer, he hardly has any regard for gender equality or individual freedom and behaves as highly authoritarian patriarch, having no acceptance for anything that is considered a deviation from what is socially deemed 'normal.' Patriarchy dictates that boys and men must measure up to the levels of masculinity expected by society to enjoy acceptance in family and society at large. A vital question is raised in the play, 'Can a man adopt classical *Bharatnatyam*, a dance traditionally associated with *devdasis*, as a profession?' The play offers varied perspectives towards dance in a patriarchal setting. It also offers opportunity to understand how women realise their dream in the patriarchal realm. Dattani has presented a male in the female bastion of dance, to create contrast with the position of females in patriarchal setting. On the other hand, Jairaj fails to grab the success of his dream in the patriarchal world. It seems that Jairaj is the other, the 'second sex' in this part of the world. Jairaj seems to lack masculinity because in a man's world, he is tortured, oppressed and forced. It is clearly expressed that when man enters in the space assigned to woman, he becomes a sort of moral delinquent, a trespasser in socio-cultural context.

The edifice of the play is constructed around patriarchal notions for professions considered to be the traditional domain of women and ponders on the plight of passion driven men who yearn to make a mark for themselves in these areas. Patriarchy creates and nurtures an environment whereby males are coaxed to follow masculine behaviour acceptable in society, thus confirming to convention. Gender stereotypes are manifested as 'appropriate' behaviour, laid out by patriarchal design:

JAIRAJ. I strongly recommend it. It keeps you from crying. Look at me. I never cry.
 RATNA. That is because you are a... man! (*Dance Like a Man* 437)

Cultural discrimination against woman has been extensively covered in this play by Dattani, as it dwells upon subjugation and depreciation of women in patriarchal society. Amritlal, like other patriarchs expects his son Jairaj to play the role of a man 'properly,' to 'dance' like a man, and earn a decent livelihood through a career suitable for men prescribed by the social order. Patriarchy takes on another form in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, wherein Dolly and Alka are expected to take care of their bed-ridden mother-in-law in order to keep their husbands in good humour. The two otherwise live a life of solitude, idling away their time in personal beauty-care, while waiting for their indifferent and unresponsive husbands, who hardly ever bother about their needs-physical or emotional. Violence against woman in patriarchal society is the key issue in Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*, which also projects it as old as human civilisation. Almost all the female characters in the play are victims of gender violence. *Bravely Fought the Queen*, is a story of three young women, who suffer from gender discrimination, and that too of totally different nature leading to unfulfilled lives. Irked and vexed, they portray the misery many a woman in Indian society live through. A peep into the lives of Baa, Dolly, Alka, and Lalitha reveals that gender related

maladies affect women in all times and socio-cultural spaces. These Dattani characters neither suffer in silence like typical Indian women nor do they put up resistance against patriarchy. Barring a few primitive societies, most of the human society is patriarchal, and women are nowhere spared the domination. Our society lists forbearance, warmth and male dependences as highly desirable traits in a woman. Habitual consumption of alcohol for a woman, is a deviation from the gender norms and expectations, but they are part of social design and liable to change. That's why perhaps, in Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Alka resorts to using alcohol as a weapon against patriarchy, to prove that she, a woman, can also drink like men, which, as a part of gender stereotype, confirms to male character. Dolly, Alka's sister, voices her protest against the patriarchal system, but her fortitude lies in tolerating the battering of a callous and unsympathetic husband, enduring the life of humiliation and reproach, attending to the needs of a drunken sister and a spastic daughter. In an act of fearlessness, she exposes Jiten before Lalitha, and, makes him realise how his ill treatment affected Daksha for life. The play redefines resistance put up by woman in terms of their fight against patriarchal oppressions. Even the title *Bravely Fought the Queen* is indicative of the successful revolt by Rani Laxmi Bai against oppressive forces. Belonging to middle class, these women rise against oppression armed with nothing but their will.

Alka's husband was homosexual, and Lalitha's husband ignored her. These women suffer silently at the hands of the men in their life. This is indicative of their helplessness in dealing with patriarchy, yielding to male dominance. Finally, the three end-up submitting to the whims of the men in their lives. It is a domestic tragedy about women bearing the crushing weight of patriarchy piled upon them. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dolly defends her sister Alka who suffers at the hands of her husband yet resists his oppression when she wants. Baa, on the other hand is a patriarch by attitude, despite being a woman. Once victimised herself, she resorts to despotism of patriarchal kind. In *Uma and The Fairy Queen*, Uma's husband Suresh Rao illustrates the patriarchal thought. He views Uma's skills in solving murder cases as a threat, whereas Uma intends to help her husband. Independent minded Uma accepts her childlessness in a positive manner, and even questions the needs for motherhood, "whether I will be happy being one or not," (448) and involves more into her academics supporting her husband in his work. He, on the other hand subscribes to conventional thought, and believes that motherhood is the best reason for a woman's fulfilment and much like fatherhood lift-up a man's spirits, a thought that also is rooted in patriarchy.

Dattani's another play *Uma and the Fairy Queen* also attracts attention towards the women in orthodox and liberal societies across the world. *Uma and the Fairy Queen* offers clear insights into the pathetic condition of women, especially the ones who don't measure up to the expectations of society, or rather don't fit within the 'cage with invisible bars' that society is for women, and more so the childless. The playwright showcases Uma Rao, the wife of Suresh Rao, as a representative character of Hindu culture. Characters of Sohaila and Nila Malik are cut as wives of Aman Malik representing Islamic culture, and these modern women are juxtaposed with the character of Titania, wife of Oberon, an archetype from the ancient culture mentioned Shakespearean

play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Despite variance in their spatial, temporal and theological set-up, the female characters exhibit pretty much the same stature and mental make-up, and even undergo similar gender discrimination in society, often within the home and family. Patriarchy prepares sons for privileges, because they are considered to be the providers, protectors and procreators for the family. In *Clearing the Rubble*, Fatima, the mother forces Mumtaz, the daughter to do household chores- "Wash the vessels, buy vegetables fetch the water, light the firewood" (73). She robs-off her daughter's childhood, driven by the desire to help her son, to have a better, honourable life. This means that there is no social existence for a woman beyond the limiting boundaries of marriage and motherhood. Fatima ensures that Salim goes to school even against her husband's will. She has a solid reason- "I did not want him to be a cobbler like his father"(74). Though none of the characters of this play is positioned as a patriarch, yet the lead female harbours a desire to perpetuate patriarchy through her son into the future, because the very belief on which patriarchy rests, offers a viewpoint from where either sex can evaluate an experience, but the women's rights are sacrificed at the altar of patriarchal norms.

Patriarchal forces put a heavy burden on the lives of Alpesh and Lata in Dattani's *Do the Needful*, a play that focuses on the spaces shared by women and the gay in the society. Patriarchal orientation of the family is promoted and any other challenge or change is discouraged. Lata longs to have a life with Salim while Alpesh is yearning for Trilok. Anguish and suffering of the gay and the woman, whose nature is not in tune with the established pattern of behaviour of our patriarchal society, are vividly portrayed in the play. In the end, the marriage between Alpesh and Lata is solemnized, though it remains formal arrangement honouring cumbersome patriarchal social order. Patriarchal society forbids women to ask questions. In *Thirty Days of September*, recurring sexual abuse of both Shanta and Mala by Vinay, is not just a massive blot on the very fabric of Indian society, woven out of threads of ethics and morality, but also features male predominance over female sex. Although characters of Shanta and Mala stand out as oppressed, silhouetted against the firmament of male dominance, it does not offer any rays of hope against marginalisation of women in patriarchal society. Now that more protective laws are in force for women in India, however, the path from the time of the crime committed to the time that the case gets justice in the courts is a long and torturous one, and not many are able to tread the painfully arduous path. Though it is none of her faults, but the result of the discrimination she faces being born a woman, and the incest that was inflicted upon her since an utterly tender age played havoc upon her.

In *Thirty Days of September*, Mala accepts responsibility for her sufferings, as she accepts her dread for raising her voice against exploitation and deception. Later, supportive counselling helped Mala tackle hurtful aspects of patriarchy in a more effective way, prompting her to think—"I wish he was here now, so I could see his face when I tell him I have nothing to hide. Because I know it wasn't my fault. . . Now, I know now" (56). Even her mother Shanta's condition reflects how patriarchy-driven power relations belittles a woman's individuality. *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, dwells upon social ostracisation and victimisation that *hijras* go

through in predominantly patriarchal society that considers every deviation from the heteronormative order as an abnormality only to be scomed. Being a sexual minority, they are more vulnerable than women, and even the rights enjoyed by women are denied to them. Giving voice to the marginalised, the plot of *Seven Steps around the Fire* targets the biased attitude of the heterosexuals and patriarchal society, exposing an invisible issue. Yet, the fact remains that patriarchy still puts women below men in social hierarchy. Through his plays, Mahesh Dattani shares a number of cases wherein women in India have suffered at the hands of male dominance and have faced marginalisation in patriarchy dominated social environment, despite having strong influence and adequate control over social relationships. The playwright has also highlighted the tendency and trend of domination of subordinates by others who hold higher positions as a sort of 'female patriarchy.'

Traditions line the path that Dattani's women follow. They may walk in tow and bear the weight of male domination, but when belittled too much and for too long, they shake away the slumber and rise up against patriarchal domination. Psychologists studying human behaviour have documented that man's inner conflicts and oppressive tendencies have their roots in his innate desire to force his own ideas on others. Throughout the play, Dattani uses his compelling narrative to assert his irrefutable belief in his thought that the person's talent and identity are compromised under the pressure of patriarchy and might of money, most of the times, if not always. Patriarchy may be inherently oppressive. The female characters of Dattani's plays also display this spirit: struggle to carve out an environment of their own where they can cut independent especially as part of their efforts to free themselves from the clutches and bindings of patriarchy. The physical, psychological, sexual and economic suppression that women go through as they try to put up resistance against patriarchal forces is seen in plays like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Tara* or *Thirty Days of September*.

Conclusion

Ascribing patriarchal nature of society for the subordination of woman, Dattani seems to suggest that subservience of woman will continue as long as patriarchy forms the plinth of the structure called family. The purpose is sacred; to enlighten audience's mind about the suffering of an individual with a view to create better understanding and sensitise them about the rigid framework and codes, and for the scheming nature of the society. Thus, Mahesh Dattani's merit as a dramatist lies in expressing concurrent social reality through a creative mix of thought-provoking subject matter, dialogues and actions. In the plays of Dattani emphasis lays on exposing the contorted feelings of those who are all out to defend themselves against the battles waged by fate and society together. To sum up, we can say that the plays of Mahesh Dattani are based on issues that are inevitable elements of human society since pre-historic times and still exist as contemporary social reality of modern man. Creating such characters that breach the norms of gender stereotypes, Dattani conveys without fail that both men and women can evade socially and culturally designated gender roles, which can be reframed, or they can be completely done away with.

Dattani reiterates through his plays that the need of the hour for our society is to look beyond male dominance as a gender specific thought process and inspire the society to look beyond stereotypical gender roles in order to abolish a social system based on narrow notions of gender and religion, and place value on the potential of an individual's thought and action appropriately. The content of Mahesh Dattani plays thus effectively helps infuse the idea that giving due importance to both masculine and feminine aspects inherent to an individual, and society in general, we are able to explore the possibilities of greater happiness, success, and fulfilment. It conveys that patriarchy is worse than any physical disability or disease.

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