



## Challenging Patriarchal Structures: Feminist Themes in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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### Abstract

This paper examines how Mahesh Dattani, one of India's foremost contemporary playwrights, incorporates feminist themes in his dramatic works to challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal structures in Indian society. Through close textual analysis of key plays including *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Final Solutions*, this study reveals how Dattani creates complex female characters who navigate and resist societal constraints. The analysis demonstrates that Dattani's dramatic work destabilizes traditional gender roles, interrogates the mechanisms of female oppression, and creates spaces for female agency within restrictive social frameworks. This paper argues that while Dattani's plays do not present utopian feminist resolutions, they effectively expose the contradictions and injustices of patriarchal systems, inviting audiences to critically engage with gender politics in contemporary India. Dattani's unique contribution lies in his ability to integrate feminist perspectives with other intersecting concerns including class, sexuality, religion, and family dynamics, creating a multidimensional critique of power structures that oppress women in the Indian context.

**Keywords:**- Mahesh Dattani, Indian feminist drama, Patriarchal resistance, Gender performance, Intersectional feminism

### Introduction

Mahesh Dattani stands as a significant voice in contemporary Indian English drama, recognized for his unflinching exploration of taboo subjects and marginalized identities. Born in 1958, Dattani became the first English-language playwright to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's highest literary honor, in 1998. His plays are distinguished by their engagement with complex social issues, including gender discrimination, homosexuality, communal tensions, and child sexual abuse—subjects often relegated to the periphery of mainstream Indian theater. Dattani's dramatic work is remarkable for its nuanced portrayal of women's experiences within patriarchal structures, making feminist themes a central aspect of his artistic vision.

This paper examines how Dattani's plays challenge patriarchal ideologies through feminist perspectives, analyzing how his female characters navigate, resist, and sometimes succumb to oppressive gender norms. The central research question guiding this analysis is:

How does Mahesh Dattani's dramatic work engage with and challenge patriarchal structures in Indian society through feminist perspectives? By examining key plays including *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Final Solutions*, this study seeks to demonstrate how Dattani's theatrical works function as sites of feminist resistance and critique.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding how contemporary Indian drama addresses gender inequalities and how theatrical performance can serve as a vehicle for feminist discourse. While substantial scholarship exists on Dattani's treatment of sexuality and family dynamics, this paper aims to provide a focused analysis of the feminist dimensions of his work, particularly examining how his plays expose the mechanisms through which patriarchal power operates and is contested in specific cultural contexts.

## Theoretical Grounding

This analysis is positioned within feminist literary criticism, which examines how literary texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge patriarchal ideologies and gender hierarchies. Drawing from postcolonial feminist theory, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, this paper recognizes the importance of analyzing gender oppression within specific cultural and historical contexts, avoiding universalizing Western feminist frameworks when examining Indian texts.

The theoretical approach is also informed by Judith Butler's conception of gender as performative, understanding gender not as an essential identity but as a set of repeated acts within a regulatory framework that creates the illusion of a stable gender identity. This perspective is particularly relevant to analyzing Dattani's plays, which often highlight the performative nature of gender roles within Indian society.

Additionally, the paper draws on the concept of intersectionality, originated by Kimberlé Crenshaw and developed by feminist scholars, to examine how gender oppression in Dattani's plays intersects with other axes of power including class, religion, sexuality, and family structures. This intersectional lens helps illuminate the complex power dynamics at work in Dattani's dramatic worlds.

## Analysis

### Critiquing Gender Bias in *Tara*: The Female Body as Contested Territory

*Tara* (1990) represents one of Dattani's most explicit engagements with gender discrimination through its portrayal of conjoined twins Tara and Chandan, who are surgically separated in a way that privileges the male child at the expense of the female. The play foregrounds how patriarchal values permeate medical, familial, and social institutions, creating a comprehensive system of female subjugation.

The central moral transgression in the play—the decision to give the third leg to Chandan rather than Tara, despite the knowledge that it had greater chances of survival with Tara—functions as a powerful metaphor for how patriarchal systems sacrifice female potential for male advancement. As Dr. Thakkar explains to the adult Chandan (now Dan): "The chances were higher for the leg to survive on the girl... Your grandfather and your mother had other plans" (Dattani 349). This medical decision, made by Tara's maternal grandfather with her mother's complicity, represents the internalization of patriarchal values even by women who themselves become agents of female oppression.

The play's feminist perspective is evident in how it traces the consequences of this decision through Tara's foreshortened life and Chandan's guilt-ridden existence. By showing how both twins are ultimately destroyed by this act of gender-based discrimination, Dattani suggests that patriarchal systems damage not only women but also the men who benefit from

them. As Chandan/Dan reflects: "A pair of twins—Nature's freak, you may say. One of them a little more freakish than the other... But it was a wrong decision. A decision which would affect their lives more than the surgery" (Dattani 323).

The character of Mrs. Patel, Tara's mother, embodies the complexities of female complicity in patriarchal structures. While she is protective of Tara and frequently confronts her husband about his preferential treatment of Chandan, she is ultimately revealed to have participated in the decision that privileged her son over her daughter. Through this characterization, Dattani illustrates how women can simultaneously resist and reinforce patriarchal values, highlighting the insidious ways in which gender bias is perpetuated even by those who are its victims.

### **Challenging Gender Performance in *Dance Like a Man***

In *Dance Like a Man* (1989), Dattani examines how rigid gender norms constrain both men and women through the story of Jairaj and Ratna, a married couple who aspire to become Bharatanatyam dancers. The play challenges traditional gender roles by portraying a man who pursues a dance form traditionally performed by women, while simultaneously exposing how patriarchal structures ultimately limit both male and female artistic expression.

Amritlal, Jairaj's father, represents traditional patriarchal authority and its enforcement of gender norms. He considers dance inappropriate for men, stating: "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (Dattani 409). This statement encapsulates how patriarchal systems devalue activities associated with femininity while considering male domains as universally valuable. By contrasting Amritlal's rigid views with Jairaj's passion for dance, Dattani challenges the naturalization of gender roles and exposes their constructed nature.

The character of Ratna presents a complex portrayal of female agency within restrictive frameworks. While she initially supports Jairaj's dancing against his father's wishes, she later compromises with patriarchal authority to advance her own career, eventually participating in the sabotage of her husband's artistic development. When Jairaj confronts her about drugging him to impair his dancing abilities, she defends herself by appealing to survival: "I had to survive. Please understand, Jairaj. I had to survive—in his house" (Dattani 437). Through this characterization, Dattani illustrates how women negotiate, compromise, and sometimes betray other marginalized individuals to secure their position within oppressive systems.

The play's feminist perspective is evident in its refusal to present women as either purely victims or purely oppressors. Instead, characters like Ratna navigate complex power structures, making morally ambiguous choices in response to their limited options. As Ratna tells Jairaj: "Do you know what it was like for me? Living in this house? With your constant brooding? [...] You think only you have problems? Sacrificed your career? What about mine? Who killed that?" (Dattani 436). This nuanced portrayal acknowledges the systemic nature of gender oppression while recognizing women's capacity for strategic resistance and complicity.

### **Domestic Spaces as Sites of Oppression in *Bravely Fought the Queen***

In *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), Dattani examines how patriarchal dominance operates within domestic spaces, portraying three women—Dolly, Alka, and Lalitha—whose lives are constrained by marriage and family structures. The play employs a fragmented narrative structure that mirrors the fractured identities of women living under patriarchal control, revealing how domestic violence, emotional manipulation, and economic dependence function as mechanisms of female subjugation.

Dolly's character represents the physically abused wife whose pregnancy was terminated after her husband Jiten pushed her down the stairs, resulting in her giving birth to a physically disabled daughter. Her continued endurance of this marriage illustrates the

economic and social pressures that trap women in abusive relationships. As she tells her sister-in-law Alka: "I know what it is like to be hit by him. You don't" (Dattani 271). Through Dolly's story, Dattani exposes domestic violence as a tool of patriarchal control rather than an individual pathology.

Alka's alcoholism functions as a response to her discovery that her brother Praful arranged her marriage to Nitin to hide Nitin's homosexuality. Her addiction represents a form of escape from a marriage built on deception and the use of women as pawns in male homosocial relationships. When she confronts Nitin about his relationship with Praful, saying, "My brother gave you to me as a gift! Wrapped in cellophane with a pink ribbon!" (Dattani 290), she articulates how women are objectified and exchanged within patriarchal systems.

Lalitha initially appears to have more agency as a working woman, but her employment at the advertising agency owned by her husband Sridhar and brother-in-law Jiten ultimately reinforces her subordinate position. Her involvement in creating advertisements that objectify women highlights how female complicity in sexist representations perpetuates gender oppression. As she critiques their latest ad campaign, saying, "Why does she have to be in a wet sari?" (Dattani 244), Dattani draws attention to how media representations normalize the male gaze and female objectification.

The play's feminist perspective is evident in its exploration of female solidarity as a potential, if limited, form of resistance. Despite their conflicts, the three women occasionally ally against male dominance, as when Lalitha defends Dolly against Jiten's accusation that she caused their daughter's disability: "It wasn't her fault. [...] Why don't you ask her what happened?" (Dattani 293). Through these moments of solidarity, the play suggests that women's recognition of their shared oppression can form the basis for collective resistance.

### **Religious Identity and Gender in Final Solutions**

While primarily focused on Hindu-Muslim communal tensions, *Final Solutions* (1993) also examines how religious conflicts impact women differently than men, incorporating a feminist perspective into its analysis of communal violence. Through characters like Hardika/Daksha, Aruna, and Smita, the play explores how women's experiences of religious identity are mediated by their position within patriarchal family structures.

The character of Hardika (known as Daksha in the flashback scenes) illustrates how women's religious prejudices are often shaped by personal experiences of loss and betrayal. Her antagonism toward Muslims stems from childhood experiences during Partition and her sense that her Muslim friend Zarine betrayed their friendship. Through Hardika's narrative, Dattani suggests that women's religious identities are not abstract ideological commitments but are embedded in concrete relational experiences, often reflecting their limited mobility and confinement to domestic spaces.

Aruna's character represents orthodox Hindu womanhood, defined by strict adherence to religious rituals and purity norms. Her resistance to allowing the Muslim men Bobby and Javed into her home is articulated through the language of pollution: "They will pollute the house! They will pollute us!" (Dattani 188). This preoccupation with purity reflects how religious fundamentalism often places the burden of maintaining community boundaries on women's bodies and behaviors, restricting female autonomy in the name of religious tradition.

In contrast, Smita represents a younger generation's resistance to both religious orthodoxy and gender norms. She questions her mother's rituals, challenges her father's political activities, and defends the Muslim men, asserting her moral autonomy against family and community pressures. When she confronts her parents about their hypocrisy, saying, "You taught me to see human beings as human beings—and not to see them as Hindus or Muslims. Did you expect that kind of talk to remain within these walls?" (Dattani 197), she asserts a feminist ethic that prioritizes human connection over religious divisions.

The play's feminist perspective is evident in its recognition that women's voices are often silenced in public discussions of communal conflict, despite their distinct experiences of religious violence. By centering women's narratives about religious identity, Dattani challenges the masculinist discourse of communal politics, suggesting that women's perspectives might offer alternative approaches to religious coexistence.

## Interpretation

Dattani's treatment of feminist themes reflects what might be termed a critical feminist consciousness rather than an explicit feminist agenda. His plays do not present simple narratives of female empowerment or straightforward indictments of male dominance. Instead, they explore the complex ways in which patriarchal structures operate through institutions, relationships, and internalized norms, affecting both women and men.

Several distinctive features characterize Dattani's feminist approach. First, his plays consistently highlight the intersectionality of gender oppression, showing how women's experiences are shaped by multiple factors including class, religion, sexuality, and family position. In *Tara*, gender discrimination intersects with medical ethics and disability; in *Dance Like a Man*, gender norms are entangled with questions of artistic tradition and generational conflict; in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, women's oppression is linked to homophobia and economic dependence; and in *Final Solutions*, gender constraints intersect with religious communalism.

Second, Dattani's plays avoid portraying women as passive victims, instead depicting them as complex moral agents who negotiate, resist, and sometimes reinforce patriarchal structures. Characters like Ratna in *Dance Like a Man* and Dolly in *Bravely Fought the Queen* make difficult choices within constrained circumstances, illustrating what feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak might call "strategic essentialism"—the tactical use of traditional gender roles for survival and advancement.

Third, Dattani's feminist perspective is notable for its inclusion of male experiences, examining how patriarchal structures also damage men who fail to conform to masculine ideals. Characters like Jairaj in *Dance Like a Man* and Chandan in *Tara* illustrate how rigid gender norms ultimately harm both women and men, suggesting that feminism addresses not just women's liberation but the broader human damage caused by gender hierarchies.

Finally, Dattani's plays consistently employ spatial metaphors to represent gender constraints, using the physical spaces of homes, performance venues, and community boundaries to materialize abstract power structures. This spatial representation makes visible the often invisible constraints of patriarchal systems, allowing audiences to literally see the boundaries that restrict female autonomy.

## Implications

The feminist dimensions of Dattani's work have several significant implications for understanding both contemporary Indian theater and the role of dramatic art in social critique. First, by integrating feminist perspectives with other social concerns, Dattani demonstrates how gender analysis can enhance understanding of diverse social issues, from communal conflict to family dynamics. This integrated approach suggests that feminist critique is not a specialized interest but a fundamental perspective for comprehensive social analysis.

Second, Dattani's plays illustrate how theatrical performance can make visible the normally invisible operations of gender norms. Through physical embodiment, spatial arrangements, and the externalization of internal conflicts, theater offers unique resources for feminist critique that complement theoretical analysis. The embodied nature of theatrical performance proves particularly appropriate for examining how gender norms are inscribed on and performed through human bodies.

Third, Dattani's work challenges simplistic divisions between Western and Indian feminisms, demonstrating how feminist critique can be culturally specific while addressing universal concerns about power and justice. His plays engage with distinctly Indian institutions, traditions, and social arrangements while employing analytical approaches that resonate with global feminist discourse, offering a model of culturally grounded yet theoretically sophisticated feminist practice.

Finally, by presenting complex moral dilemmas rather than simplistic political messages, Dattani's plays engage audiences in active ethical reflection rather than passive consumption of predetermined conclusions. This approach respects the audience's capacity for critical thinking and moral reasoning, suggesting that effective feminist art should stimulate dialogue rather than dictate positions.

## Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's plays offer a rich site for examining how feminist themes can be integrated into dramatic art that addresses multiple social concerns. Through his nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics in plays like *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Final Solutions*, Dattani challenges patriarchal structures while acknowledging the complex ways in which both women and men navigate gender constraints. His work demonstrates that effective feminist drama need not be explicitly polemical but can instead invite audiences to recognize and question the often invisible operations of gender norms.

The distinctive contribution of Dattani's feminist perspective lies in its intersectional approach, its recognition of female agency within oppressive systems, its inclusion of male experiences of gender constraints, and its use of theatrical space to materialize abstract power structures. These features create a feminist consciousness that is critical yet empathetic, politically engaged yet artistically sophisticated.

Future research might productively explore how Dattani's treatment of feminist themes has evolved in his more recent works, how his plays have been received by different audience demographics, and how his feminist approaches compare with those of other contemporary Indian playwrights. Additionally, performance analyses examining how different productions have interpreted the gender dynamics in Dattani's scripts could provide valuable insights into how textual feminist themes translate into embodied theatrical experiences.

In an Indian theatrical landscape often dominated by either traditional gender representations or explicitly political feminist theater, Dattani's work occupies a valuable middle ground, using the resources of mainstream theater to raise critical questions about gender norms. His plays demonstrate that feminist drama can be simultaneously accessible and challenging, entertaining and thought-provoking, culturally specific and universally relevant.

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