Strong Women and Weak Men in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

Atul Goswami
Research Scholar, Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner.

Abstract: Mahesh Dattani’s plays have varied content and appeal. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition and cultural constructions of gender. More than the theme of the play itself, what makes his plays highly enjoyable is his characterization. His women characters remain marginalized, almost invisible, but when they are suddenly plucked into action, they accept the challenge for what it is worth. His male characters on the other hand seem strong and in control but soon they realize that their perception of their manly strength was false. The present paper is an attempt to show how Dattani, in his plays has given his female characters the strength to deal with the challenges thrust upon them by the patriarchal society.

Key words- Feminism, Gender, Stereotype, Patriarchy.

The movement of feminism can be traced in the following stages-1) the acceptance of socially lower status of women 2) The desire to struggle against all forces, religious, social etc. that are used as the tools of oppression 3) To encourage women to break the barriers of silence and 4) To discover the inner world of female consciousness. However, the women characters in Mahesh Dattani’s plays are not only conventional but also beyond the periphery of the sentimental quest of feminism. Though the women characters are subjugated and suffer under the patriarchal setup yet they succeed in preserving their identity and self-respect. They have all the necessary characteristics of femininity but simultaneously they sustain their independent identity and protest against the irrational myths and conventions of society. His male characters seem strong on the outside but as the story progresses it is made clear that they are not as strong as they seem.

Regarding his own perception of gender identity in society, Dattani admits: “…..he seems to be fighting for my feminine self. And since I have the male self, which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It’s subsumed yes! it is marginalized, but it fights back.” (Katayal)

Kiran Jahveri, the epitome of the Dattani woman makes her appearance in the very first play that he wrote, Where There’s a Will. Smart, shrewd, calculating and worldly wise, Kiran embodies qualities that Dattani staunchly holds as positive and strong, and necessary for a woman. Like most woman who play gendered roles, Kiran is a victim too, but one who refuses to stay victimized. She becomes part of Hasmukh’s life with her eyes wide open, and aware of the benefits that she will derive from the relationship. Angst is a part of her existence too, as she reveals to Ajit, “I got a husband, my husband got his booze, and your father got…. well, you know.” (491) (Kuthari, 31)

Hasmukh Mehata, the main protagonist, tries to control his family even after his death through the mechanics of his will. When he returns as a ghost after his death, he finds that his will has worked too well, and he finds that his attempt has failed miserably. He escapes (like many of Dattani’s ‘powerful’ men do) to hand himself from the tamarind tree; but he does not any rest over there as the family decides that the tree will be chopped off the next day.

In Dance Like a Man, Dattani through the character of Jairaj, shows the struggle of an artist, who struggles to find his creativity within a society, he is forced to inhabit. Jairaj, by choosing dance as his profession, wants to demolish the stereotype that dance is only for women. It is generally believed that women are at the receiving end of the oppressive patriarchal society. The play shows that even men are subject to this tyrannical structure. When the play reaches towards the conclusion, it is revealed that at the receiving end of the politics of gender is not Ratna so much is Jairaj. He is kept on a leash by his father, his wife deliberately overshadows him in all their dance performances together. His father and his wife make a pact to achieve their own selfish ends, thereby perpetuating the old stereotypes and feeling satisfied by reinforcing their own sense of security at his expense. Jairaj is the figure whose predicament occupies centre stage, but his position is defined in opposition to his wife, Ratna.

She is a ‘southie’ married to a ‘gujju’. Ratna demonstrates her dominance in various ways, overtly and covertly, throughout the text. Ratna, for
instance, takes it for granted that the beverage served in the home will be coffee, and breakfast, either dosas or idlis. Not only does Ratna operate in so-called ‘typical’ female ways by throwing tantrums, being unreasonable, constantly launching into a litany of her personal failures and woes, but she also completely dominates her husband and daughter. (Multani 29)

In his famous play Tara, Mr Patel, the native of Gujarat, is married to Bharati, a Kannadiga. After this marriage, Mr Patel was forced to leave his parental home because this relationship was not accepted by his parents. The insecurity of the separation from parents and subsequently the birth of Siamese twins, Mr Patel finds himself isolated and to show himself strong becomes aggressive and violent. Bharati, along with her influential, rich father manages the surgery with the hidden motive of her preference to have a male child. Later on she realizes her mistake and gathers courage to assert herself for the sake of Tara. As this surgical operation was against the advice of the doctor, Tara, the girl is crippled and the boy Chandan also loses the leg after a few days. Tara in spite of being a victim of social apathy, grows as a more contained, rational and sensitive person.

Compared to Tara, Chandan is overly dependent, feels unworthy and desperately needs approval. Tara is more secure in dealing with separation issues. Her judicial approach is towards rejecting error. She overcomes the crippling experiences of life and resurrects herself not physically but by sheer force of spirit. If being complete is defined in terms of clearness and sufficiency of characteristics, she has all of them. (Khan, Debating Incompleteness in Mahesh Dattani’s Tara).

The play Bravely Fought the Queen shows the condition of women in conventional society. The whole play is divided in three acts; the act one is called ‘Woman’, the act two is defined as ‘Man’ and the act third is called ‘Free for All’. The play highlights the circumstance of a woman fighting against all the odds that the forces of patriarchy have piled up against her. The play centres on the Trivedi family with Baa, her two sons Jiten and Nitin and their wives Dolly and Alka. Jiten exercises control over the family both as elder son and brother. Dolly and Alka are sisters. Nitin has been shown as corrupt and fails to get any sympathy as he believes and enacts his perversities both in his profession and with other women. The braggart and wife-beater Jiten has been presented by Dattani as a pathetic escapist and a weakling who literally runs away from the scene of confrontation in tears. He presents the darkest face of patriarchy- intolerance, hatred, dominance-passions all fuelled by inner insecurities and complexes of guilt and fear.

In the structure of the play Bravely Fought the Queen women do create their own spaces to assert their voices against the injustice done to them while as men use escapism as a mean to avoid unpleasant situation. Dolly, who earlier appears, as a tortured character, emerges as a strong and confident woman to identify her oppressor and to fight against injustice. She supports drunken Alka, reveals the painful truth about Dhaksha and exposes the horrors of her brother Praful….Both Alka and Dolly turn out to be confident, breaking of their barriers and sharing the common space or the centric force with their male counterparts. (Agarwal 58)

A study of Dattani’s women characters show that they have been represented essentially as human beings who are endowed with basic urges and impulses. They possess the human qualities of love and compassion but at the same time they also have the capacity to fight back and defend their ‘identity’ and the ‘basic self’. His women characters in spite of being marginalized, possess a will of their own to resist the forces hazardous to their survival.

Works Cited