

## **Transgressing Gender Boundaries: A Critique of**

### **Mahesh Dattani's Selected Plays**

#### **A Summary**

The purpose of this project is to explore the concept of gender, specifically its boundaries, and study the transgression of these boundaries in the selected plays of Mahesh Dattani, a prolific and versatile Indian playwright. The present study examines how the works of Mahesh Dattani present transgression of the stipulated boundaries of gender in the Indian context.

The requirement for the comprehension of gender and its boundaries appeared in the nineteenth century after questions were raised on the 'doctrine of separate spheres'. What followed and enveloped the world was the argument regarding the disparity between the dichotomies of gender, and it generated fresh perspectives about the stipulated 'boundaries' of gender. Human existence is as much about resisting, altering and denying provenances of gender as reinforcing, authenticating and normalizing gendered practices. These processes were carefully analyzed in the nineteenth century by the feminist critics. Gender' received stimulus through the feminist struggle, and that brought forth the 'gender debate' in politics, literature and related disciplines. What began as a social movement became one of the most expanding areas of argument, social theorization and research. It was realized that the ways in which gender segregation is produced and practised varies in different cultures, and it is subject to socio-cultural re-definition, individual interpretation and expression. It led to deliberation over the 'boundaries' of gender based upon biological and cultural differences. Masculine Studies and Queer Studies joined hands with the Feminist criticism to formulate novel means to understand and dissolve gender boundaries. It also led to investigation of ascribed boundaries for a specific gender, and examination of its representation through literature. The complex mechanisms of how gender is reproduced and established, how power classifications are arranged in accordance with gender divisions within societies, and how the limits prescribed for the two constituents of gender turn into limitations were explored.

The perimeters stipulated for the dichotomies of gender formulate perceptible gender boundaries and implementation of these boundaries is considered essential for apposite social establishment. Gender boundaries are charged with multiplicity of meaning as they are devised (or adopted) to hold in place the conception of specific socio-cultural forms of being men and women. They appear as an established feature of social institutions as they are natural consequences of various social associations, and a means to rationalize one of the most elementary divisions of society. In all theoretical foundations and formulations, gender is classified in a hierarchical order and borders are drawn between the two indices of gender. Each culture allocates a binary division to gender and based on the structure of binary opposition, the 'male' and the 'female' are allotted diametrically different gender roles. Gender roles are systematically important in all institutions and cultures, especially family, as they decide the social behavior and character of an individual. Universally, there are specific differences between masculine and feminine roles and much more than biological differences, it is this gender-role socialization that classifies an individual as feminine or masculine, and finally as 'man' and 'woman'. Masculine and feminine biases bring into focus the aspect, form and change in identities, and these differences pre-determine gender boundaries.

The gender boundaries (or limitations of gender role-performance) are primarily predetermined and maintained by family and society; however, religious and philosophical literary canons of a nation also play a key role in allocating gender boundaries. Examination of the distinction between the 'male' and the 'female' in history of culture reflects that men and women are openly defined in a hierarchical order, where the 'male' holds a more privileged position than the female in the social ladder because the functions performed by 'him' are composite and superior to 'hers'. The prejudiced 'gendered' pattern of gender boundaries (that is passed from one generation to another) was questioned in the twentieth century. The feminist movement, Masculine Studies and Queer movement primarily aimed at seeking alteration in the then existing biased male-female equation in the society and gender boundaries based on subordination and domination were carefully explored.

In the infinitely evolving world of today, traditions and norms of civilizations are also undergoing major reformations. Global evolution demands parity between the dichotomies of gender which has led to transgression of traditional gender boundaries.

Transgressing gender margins implies non-conformity of the dictated hierarchical order. It subjects all individuals to equal norms of performance and criticism. When the 'male' and the 'female' cross these prearranged gender boundaries ascribed according to mores of culture, it leads to transformation in identities at personal and societal level. This revolution is the harbinger of reorganization of social norms that demands congruence in social roles and subverts stipulated boundaries. This process of liberation involves disobeying of encoded roles and role-behaviour for the 'male' and the 'female'. It leads to the deconstruction of primeval images and stereotypes available for the male and the female. It also initiates the reconstruction of fresh identities with respect to globally surfacing demands of role-performance. This process involves transgressing gender boundaries; the 'male' can seep into the female world and the 'female' is allowed presence within the male periphery of authority and supremacy. Transgression of gender boundaries gives each individual the freedom to be her or his most natural self as boundaries are themselves contested zones, and are co-inhabited by people of different orientations. Gender boundaries are being transgressed by men and women around the world and this can be evaluated in terms of changes that have occurred in the role-play among men and women in the contemporary times. For an individual's appropriate performance he or she wins acceptance and approval from the world, otherwise they run into the powerful force of disapproval, criticism and sometimes outright rejection.

The normative model of Indian femininity and masculinity has displayed a remarkable consistency and ubiquity, however, intervening processes such as socio-economic changes and education have significantly charged the modern men and women to act as deviants and transgress gender boundaries. The demands of social egalitarianism propagate the idea of overstepping the limits of gender. The multiplicity of social difference has been demystified, women have become equally productive for national economies, and men have shed their inhibitions regarding pushing perambulators. The past half century has seen enormous changes in the society and has epitomized the limitless possibilities of change in the way gender boundaries are reproduced, reinterpreted and represented.

Transgressing gender boundaries, moving away from stipulated 'lines' that restrict augmentation and freedom of role-performance of an individual is the emerging trend of the evolving society. Both the 'male' and the female' today share professional space

together, patriarchal standards are being confronted to equalize responsibilities at home and both share liberty of sexual expression. The family sociologies now witness power sharing within the family, and the wearing away of traditional division of labour has made it difficult to sustain patriarchal power as a custom. Homosexuality and asexuality, which were traditionally considered social aberrations are now being recognized as inherent part of our society, and are being represented through literature. These in themselves are progressive trends that suggest the changing connotation of gender and its boundaries, and lay the foundation of a new social order.

The contemporary Indian scenario is most carefully reflected in the narratives of Sahitya Akademi Award winner Indian dramatist **Mahesh Dattani**. The critical revision and re-classification of gender boundaries, their manifestation and representation through life are all sewn together by this master craftsman. He comprehends the state of altering gender relations, explores their social space, and passionately presents the changed meaning of their existence. Gender has always been a core issue in his plays, overtly or covertly. The process of transgression of gender behaviour can be estimated through his work. The experimental work of playwright Mahesh Dattani redefines gender as it disobeys traditional social norms and aims to reveal decayed patterns of seeking, performing and managing difference between the two indices of gender. Through his plays, Dattani confronts the practices involved in formulating social constructions and liberates his characters from the limitations of gender constructs. The changing gender relations of the society, the man-in-the woman, the woman-in-the man, homosexuality and bisexuality, all find representation in Dattani's writing abundantly. He brings forth issues and themes that illustrate a deeper understanding of 'gender transgression' as he calls for disruptions of gender expectations. His plays attempt to capture the role of gender; as a constraint on the ways in which people perform actions, as a barrier to free participation and as a plethora of creative expressions through which cultural and social practices are worked out. His work defies the idealized, religious and mythological depictions of the 'male' and the 'female' and their relationships with each other.

To examine how Dattani unveils the complexities pertaining to gender transgressions in varied milieu, the present study observes eight plays from two volumes- *Collected Plays I* and *II* namely, *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Bravely Fought*

*the Queen, Do the Needful* and *Tara*. **Chapter One** titled 'Reconstruction of the Female' deals with four plays; *Where There's a Will, Dance Like a Man, Thirty Days in September* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The purpose of this chapter is to understand the changing gender equation for the 'female' and to explore how Dattani represents the Indian concept of feminism. Indian civilization has generated, accepted and valued the cult of *Shakti* (female power). However, ironically through most of its recorded history, an overwhelming proportion of women have remained powerless victims, unthinking collaborators or mute witnesses to numerous inhuman practices perpetrated against them. These contrasting images of women appear inherent in the multilayered Indian society that is split by inequalities and diversity. It is believed that in the twenty first century women are more liberated and are on an equal footing with men. Dattani uses his theatre to present the actuality and describes the struggle involved.

*Where There's a Will* dethrones the myths associated with femininity and re-orders the dynamics of the urban Indian family. It projects the awakening in women and their realization of self worth which leads to a revolution within the family. The play is an attempt to establish that a matriarchal arrangement can be as socially and commercially successful as the patriarchal one. It also discusses female sorority as a constructive institution. *Dance Like a Man* explores the character of an Indian woman who is considered deviant because she is ambitious. The play brings forth the rebellious side of the female, though it never hints at a 'daggers drawn' situation to generate parity within the family. *Bravely Fought the Queen* charts the emotional, financial and social mechanics in the life of women in an urban Indian family. The play blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality, deception and hypocrisy, and explores the issues of varying gender relations in the contemporary urban scenario. It definitely positions women in a space where they can (even if momentarily) speak for themselves and look for measures to re-establish their identities. This work painfully reflects upon the idea of cataloging bravery as masculine, even when it is exhibited by a female. *Thirty Days in September* focuses on child abuse and incest. However, this particular work presents women not as silent victims, but as individuals who learn to challenge the tradition of silence accorded to the female. The play asserts that social institutions meant to protect the female can also turn into pernicious establishments.

Through the plays selected for scrutiny, it is established that the definition of gender boundaries for Indian women vacillates between conventional and modern expectations. Dattani's characters make an effort to represent the flesh and soul of Indian women, by reproducing her actuality. His plays lift the veil of refinement and civility from the urban scenario to expose the power structures in society that still relegate women. Dattani exhibits a truthful 'feminist' stance by providing each female in his plays, a space for self-expression where she challenges social constructions and institutions that fail to safeguard her interests. He ably portrays the cultural and social milieu that plays a fundamental role in limiting the horizons of the 'female'. His plays illustrate how the evolving 'feminine' role is pushing the gender envelope to claim egalitarianism. By filling up the lacuna between text and reality, Dattani has brought forth the coherent and reasoned reflections of the 'reconstructed' female.

**Chapter two** of the study titled 'Deconstruction of the Male' examines the construct of 'male'. The gender boundaries associated with the 'male' in the Indian context is explored through three plays- *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Tara*. This chapter highlights the limitations of gender socialization, and brings to focus the victimization and struggle of the male who transgresses gender boundaries. How his plays deconstruct the myth that Indian standards of masculinity are dominant and invariable, is also investigated. Written in the nineties, Dattani's plays present the 'just another guy' who is disturbed by rigid gender constructions.

*Dance Like a Man* illustrates that it is extremely difficult for a man to prove his masculinity, according to the standards set by the society. If his choice of profession is in conflict with the Indian idea of masculinity then, social disagreement is inevitable. It demonstrates that gender-role deviants do not befit a society. The play challenges the process of categorization of role and behaviour, and presents the contrast between evolving standards of masculinity. *Tara* reconfirms the faith that parental influence shapes masculinity, and unyielding mechanisms are employed for execution of traditional masculine behaviour. The play investigates how the cultural establishment of a society favors the male and how this disparity of superior nature acts as a handicap for the male. The male is a preferred child in the Indian society, and the protagonist of the play loathes his preference over his twin sister. The fact that masculine ideals and standards have changed with the passage of time, and vary in various social contexts is finely deliberated

upon through *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The play affirms that not all men exercise the same level of power or authority over women, uniformly. It draws a comparison between two contrasting approaches of masculinity, and sets the traditional hegemonic masculinity against the non-conformist progressive approach.

In this chapter, masculine expression; conventional and counter-conventional, represented in the work of Dattani, is explored. How the construction of masculinity in India is a difficult and challenging phenomenon is also scrutinized. Through selected plays, the study probes the tribulations in the life of Indian 'male' who dares to speak against the existing patriarchal arrangement and associated stereotypes of gender. Mahesh Dattani's plays and themes are definitely meant 'to discover new ways of being men' and bear the 'sensitivity and commitment' to help the male into a 'manhood' that is based on ideals of impartiality. He deconstructs the space acquired by the rigid conformist 'male' and tries to re-investigate abusive patriarchy and related variants.

**Chapter three** of the project titled 'Constructing the Marginalities' explores how gender boundaries are constructed on the basis of sexual-role performance, and how homosexuals and eunuchs are marginalized by the mainstream society because of their non-normative sexual disposition. For this purpose, three plays are selected- *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The chapter carefully analyzes the representation of homosexuality or asexuality in Dattani's plays. His treatment and perspective in delineating these ideas is also observed in the chapter. It also discusses how Dattani's work has been a landmark in this direction.

*Do the Needful* is set around the issues of gender and alternate sexuality and portrays the inability of homosexuals and women to speak out. The play illustrates the complexities in the life of homosexuals and also deals with their subjectivities. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* raises serious issues that remain imperceptible. The play reveals the tension between non-conformists and traditionalists, bringing out the issues of the homosexuals, without sensationalizing their problems. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* highlights the life of eunuchs in India, and challenges the idea of their isolation forced by the conformist mainstream. These plays attempt to bring forward the reality of the lives of homosexuals and eunuchs, throw light on their origin, and give a horrid picture of their marginalization by the conventional society.

This chapter explores how Dattani tries to cope with stereotypes of gender behaviour and advocates a life of dignity for the homosexuals and eunuchs in India. Mahesh Dattani's theatre makes an effort to break the barriers between the two artificially 'created' worlds. The disappearing boundary lines remind us of the modern world in which one no longer exists in isolation, where understanding and appreciating differences becomes an integral part of life. Though for homosexuals and eunuchs, concealment and openness co-exist in the same lives, they do not choose to move out of social establishments. Dattani illustrates measures to describe how they can be amalgamated within the larger society.

The **last chapter** of this study concludes the observations made in the research. Dattani's theatre moves away from theories that conceive biological difference as basis of social stratification and is a step towards greater understanding of gender as a variable social construct. His drama, which is convincing in all aspects, studies multifaceted masculinities in conjunction with multifaceted femininities to organize a better social order. Major structural changes have seeped into our society and the repercussions can be seen in the family- the most fundamental institution which constructs gender. These visible changes are well represented through Dattani's theatre as he highlights issues and themes which would not be ordinarily seen as 'belonging' to the mainstream theatre stage such as wife-mistress sisterhood, a male Bharatnatyam dancer, conjoined Siamese twins, tortured eunuchs, homosexuality and incest. Mahesh Dattani presents a slice of life as he explores gender-centric themes that are shoved under the carpet. He constructs gender realities that remain latent and when they surface, tension becomes inevitable. His scripts establish that the 'male' and the 'female' all fall victims to the constructions of gender and each individual disobeys these definite constructs to redefine a singular identity. The act of transgressing the etched-in-stone traditions is present in all his masterpieces. His women demand an equal share of power and social space, his men cry for the removal of forced patriarchal pressure, and homosexuals and eunuchs crave for recognition and approval. Dattani calls for a greater understanding of gender that moves beyond basic twofold discussions of masculinity and femininity and presents contradiction to gendered identities.

With respect to the performance of gender roles, Dattani constructs images that refute conventional understanding of being 'male' and 'female' and his characterization



subverts conformist arrangements to endorse novel forms of gender associations. Dattani imparts distinct individuality to his characters that dethrone ascribed social and behavioural attributes. Conventional masculine and feminine constructs carry an immense amount of social and emotional baggage and they disguise far more than they divulge. Conservatively regarded as a set of binary opposites, they constitute colossal connotations and experiences and are finely demonstrated by Dattani through his artwork. Dattani illustrates the itinerary of evolution of the 'male' and the 'female' from gender-puppets pulled by the strings of conformist and hierarchical gender constructs (that limit their identity within social frameworks) to individuals that defy limitations and categorizations and establish their identities assertively.

Endorsing equality, Dattani's dynamic theatre affirms that gender is plural, relational as well as situational and hints at androgynous schooling of gender behaviour as a probable solution to decipher numerous gender dilemmas. Androgyny proposes dissolution of gender boundaries, establishment of convivial human relationships and leads to the genesis of the spirit of reconciliation between the two indices of gender and intra-gender. Dattani advocates androgynous behaviour and imparts a full range of experiences and behavioural characteristics to all characters. Dattani explores the syzygy of human beings as his characters contravene gender regulations and allow their mind (instead of society) to control their actions. Dattani's work upholds a spectrum in which human beings choose their positions irrespective of propriety or custom and implies termination of rigid boundaries that assign specific attributes, capacities and interests to the 'male' and the 'female'. Challenging the boundaries of gender, perception and stage, his theater presents itself as a model of contemporary world, which is open to modification and evolution. His theatre stands for realism, deconstruction of passive values and restoration of constructive ethics. This fountainhead of creativity propels us into a new era, where we must construct tools to cope with conformist constructions and amass strength to seize novel opportunities. Dattani's craft proposes that it is possible to have uniformity between the dichotomy of gender and societies that practise it, as social practices produce values and structures. Dattani cautiously mirrors gendered mannerisms on stage so that we (the audience and readers) may decipher the labyrinthine structure of gender boundaries and find our way out of the gender maze.

His theatre crosses all boundaries of conventions and gives a platform to re-evaluate our gendered methods of gender training and ponder over its ultimate repercussions. Men and women, on his stage (and paper) act as valiant warriors struggling to make the margins of gender disappear. In the world ruled by hierarchical divisions based on anatomy, the 'male' and the 'female' in Dattani's exhibition stretch their limits of social performance and demand novel social constructions. Detached from propaganda theatre, Mahesh Dattani explores life and livelihood in their raw form. This playwright proposes ideas that demand deliberation, forbearance and deep percipience. His craft scrutinizes conformist perceptions and generates new perspectives which further open windows for newer areas of imagination and exploration. Dattani suggests a possibility that the transgression of gender boundaries might lead to reconstruction of the society which recognizes and appreciates multiplicity. It shall construct a new stage for *naveen-abhinaya*.