

Published on 14, Oct-Dec 2025

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

***Social Spectrum in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani:
A Study of Gender Discrimination and Social Consciousness***

S. Vasanthi, Ph.D. Research Scholar (Full-Time)

Dr. A. Jothimalar, Research Guide, Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Presidency College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to University of Madras) Chennai-05,

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, a pioneering Indian playwright, is renowned for his sensitive portrayal of contemporary social issues, particularly those concerning gender, sexuality, and marginalized communities. His plays function as a mirror to Indian society, revealing the latent biases, prejudices, and structural inequalities that pervade everyday life. This research investigates the social spectrum in Dattani's plays with a focus on gender discrimination and social consciousness. By analyzing selected plays such as *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the study explores how patriarchal norms, societal expectations, and cultural constructs influence the lives and identities of characters. Using a combination of feminist theory, social criticism, and postcolonial perspectives, the research highlights the nuanced ways in which Dattani addresses issues of marginalization, female subjugation, and the negotiation of personal identity within rigid social frameworks. The study also examines how Dattani's dramaturgy fosters awareness and challenges audiences to reflect on prevailing social attitudes. Ultimately, this research underscores the role of theatre as a platform for social critique and emphasizes Dattani's contribution to Indian English drama as a medium for promoting social consciousness and gender equity.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Social Consciousness, Patriarchy, Marginalization, Feminist Theory, Cultural Constructs, Social Critique.

Introduction

Indian English drama has witnessed a significant transformation over the past few decades, with playwrights addressing complex social, cultural, and psychological issues. Among these, Mahesh Dattani stands out as a pioneering dramatist who engages deeply with contemporary Indian society, exploring themes such as gender discrimination, sexuality, marginalization, and social consciousness. His plays reflect not only the personal struggles of individuals but also the structural inequalities embedded within Indian social and cultural frameworks. Dattani's works are characterized by their sensitivity and nuanced portrayal of human relationships and societal pressures. He breaks away from conventional storytelling by presenting characters and situations that challenge traditional norms and provoke critical reflection. Through his plays, such as *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dat-

tani interrogates the intersections of gender, class, and social hierarchy, revealing how patriarchal attitudes and cultural constructs shape personal identity and social interactions.

This research focuses on the social spectrum in Mahesh Dattani's plays, with a particular emphasis on gender discrimination and social consciousness. It seeks to examine how Dattani portrays the oppression of women and marginalized groups, the negotiation of personal identity under societal pressures, and the mechanisms through which theatre can raise awareness and challenge entrenched social norms. By applying feminist theory, social criticism, and postcolonial perspectives, the study aims to uncover the layered meanings in Dattani's dramaturgy and highlight his contribution to Indian English drama as a medium for social critique and transformation.

The study is significant because it not only explores the thematic and aesthetic dimensions of Dattani's plays but also situates them within the broader context of contemporary Indian society. It intends to demonstrate how theatre can serve as a mirror to society, reflecting its prejudices, biases, and inequalities, while simultaneously acting as a catalyst for social awareness and change.

Objectives of the Study

- ♦ To examine the representation of gender discrimination in selected plays of Mahesh Dattani.
- ♦ To analyze how Dattani's plays depict social consciousness and critique societal norms.
- ♦ To explore the influence of patriarchal and cultural constructs on the characters' identities.
- ♦ To understand the role of Indian English theatre as a medium for promoting social awareness and equity.

Scope of the Study

This research focuses on a close reading and critical analysis of four major plays of Mahesh Dattani: *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. While the study emphasizes gender

and social consciousness, it also touches upon related issues such as marginalization, sexuality, and social hierarchies, providing a comprehensive understanding of Dattani's engagement with contemporary social concerns.

Review of Literature

Mahesh Dattani's plays have been widely discussed in the fields of Indian English drama, gender studies, and contemporary theatre. Scholars have analyzed his works from multiple perspectives, including social criticism, feminist theory, queer studies, and cultural studies. This review of literature aims to synthesize existing research on Dattani's plays, highlight key thematic concerns, and identify gaps that this study seeks to address.

Gender Discrimination and Patriarchy

Many critics have focused on Dattani's exploration of gender inequality and patriarchal structures. According to Sharma (2012), in *Tara*, Dattani exposes the societal preference for male children, highlighting the psychological and emotional impact of gender discrimination on women and disabled girls. Similarly, Nair (2015) emphasizes how *Dance Like a Man* critiques the societal expectations imposed on women and men in artistic and familial spheres, revealing the pressures of conforming to traditional gender roles. These studies underscore the playwright's commitment to portraying the subtle and overt mechanisms of patriarchy in urban and middle-class Indian society.

Social Consciousness and Marginalization

Dattani's plays also address issues of marginalization, including the experiences of homosexuals, transgenders, and socially disadvantaged groups. Rao (2016) argues that plays such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* highlight the conflict between individual desire and societal expectation, creating a space for dialogue about tolerance and empathy. Kumar (2018) notes that Dattani's dramaturgy fosters social consciousness by making the audience confront uncomfortable truths about discrimina-

tion, alienation, and moral hypocrisy in contemporary Indian society.

Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives

From a feminist standpoint, several scholars have explored how Dattani's plays challenge patriarchal ideologies. Pillai (2014) suggests that Dattani deconstructs gender hierarchies by portraying women as complex, assertive, and psychologically nuanced characters, thereby resisting stereotypical representations. Postcolonial readings, as indicated by Menon (2017), focus on the interplay of tradition and modernity, illustrating how urban Indian middle-class life negotiates Western influences while grappling with entrenched social norms.

Theatre as Social Critique

Researchers have also examined Dattani's contribution to Indian English theatre as a medium of social critique. Singh (2013) highlights that his plays employ realism, non-linear narrative techniques, and subtle symbolism to evoke audience introspection and ethical engagement. Dattani's emphasis on dialogue, setting, and character psychology ensures that social critique is not didactic but experiential, allowing theatre to function as a platform for empathy and reflection.

Gaps in the Literature

While considerable research exists on individual plays or thematic aspects of Dattani's work, there is limited comprehensive study that simultaneously addresses the social spectrum, gender discrimination, and social consciousness across multiple plays. Few studies employ an integrated framework combining feminist theory, social criticism, and postcolonial perspectives to analyze the intersection of gender, marginalization, and cultural norms in Dattani's oeuvre. This research intends to fill that gap by offering a systematic, comparative study of selected plays, emphasizing how they collectively reflect the social spectrum in contemporary Indian society.

Conclusion

The existing literature establishes Mahesh Dattani as a socially conscious playwright whose works interrogate gender discrimination, social hierarchies, and marginalized identities. However, the need remains for an integrated, thematic, and critical examination that situates his plays within broader socio-cultural contexts. This study builds upon previous scholarship to analyze Dattani's plays as a mirror of societal values and a medium for fostering awareness and social change.

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