

## The Theme of Man-Woman Relationship in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, a trailblazing playwright in Indian English theatre, is renowned for his exploration of complex social issues, including the intricate dynamics of man-woman relationships. This research article delves into Dattani's portrayal of gender relationships, focusing on the themes of love, power, conflict, and societal expectations. By examining key plays such as "Tara," "Bravely Fought the Queen," "Dance Like a Man," and "Where There's a Will," this study highlights how Dattani's nuanced characterizations and dramatic techniques shed light on the evolving dynamics between men and women in contemporary Indian society.

**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani, man-woman relations,

### Introduction

Mahesh Dattani, born in Bangalore in 1958, is a prominent figure in Indian theatre. His plays, written in English, often address pressing social issues such as gender, sexuality, and family dynamics. Dattani's work stands out for its realistic portrayal of the Indian middle class, capturing the nuances of everyday life while delving deep into the psychological and emotional landscapes of his characters.

A recurrent theme in Dattani's plays is the man-woman relationship. His works explore the complexities of these relationships within the context of traditional Indian societal norms and the pressures of modernity. Dattani's plays often depict the struggles for power and autonomy within relationships, the impact of societal expectations on individual desires, and the delicate balance between love and conflict.

### Analysis of Key Plays

#### "Tara"

"Tara," one of Dattani's most acclaimed plays, tells the story of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, who are surgically separated at birth. The play explores themes of gender bias, family dynamics, and the societal expectations placed on women.

The relationship between the twins and their parents, particularly their mother, Bharati, reflects deep-seated gender prejudices. Bharati's favoritism towards Chandan, despite her genuine love for Tara, highlights the societal preference for male children. This bias is poignantly revealed through Bharati's own guilt and emotional turmoil:

"Bharati: It was a tough decision for all of us... But it had to be made. A boy would get the best of everything. A girl, well, a girl could always find a good husband."

Bharati's decision to prioritize Chandan's life over Tara's future is emblematic of the sacrifices and compromises women often make within the family structure, perpetuating gender inequality.

The relationship between Tara and her father, Patel, further underscores the gender dynamics within the family. Patel's detachment and pragmatism contrast with Bharati's emotional involvement, reflecting traditional gender roles where men are seen as providers and women as nurturers. However, Dattani subverts this dynamic by revealing Patel's hidden guilt and vulnerability, suggesting that these roles are not as rigid as they appear:

"Patel: I did what I thought was right. It was a decision we all had to live with."

Through "Tara," Dattani critiques the societal norms that dictate the lives of men and women, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of these expectations.

### ***"Bravely Fought the Queen"***

"Bravely Fought the Queen" examines the lives of two sisters-in-law, Dolly and Alka, who are trapped in loveless and abusive marriages. The play delves into the power dynamics within their relationships, exposing the hypocrisy and moral decay of the urban middle class.

The relationship between Dolly and her husband, Jiten, is marked by abuse and manipulation. Jiten's domineering nature and Dolly's submissiveness reflect the traditional patriarchal setup where men exercise control and women are expected to conform. However, Dattani portrays Dolly not as a passive victim but as a complex character with her own desires and frustrations:

"Dolly: I may not have the strength to fight you, Jiten, but that doesn't mean I don't have the will to survive."

Alka's relationship with her husband, Nitin, is equally troubled but different in its dynamics. Nitin's infidelity and emotional detachment leave Alka feeling isolated and desperate. Her alcoholism and erratic behavior are coping mechanisms for her unfulfilled desires and the lack of emotional support:

"Alka: You think I drink because I am weak? I drink because I want to feel alive."

Dattani's portrayal of these relationships reveals the underlying power struggles and the impact of societal norms on personal lives. He challenges the traditional notions of gender roles and highlights the need for emotional and psychological equality in relationships.

### ***"Dance Like a Man"***

"Dance Like a Man" explores the lives of Jairaj and Ratna, a couple bound by their shared passion for Bharatanatyam dance and their conflicting aspirations. The play delves into the themes of ambition, gender roles, and generational conflict.

The relationship between Jairaj and Ratna is complex and multifaceted. While they share a deep love for dance, their marriage is strained by Ratna's ambition and Jairaj's struggle with his identity as a male dancer in a patriarchal society. Ratna's assertiveness and determination often overshadow Jairaj's more passive nature, reversing traditional gender roles:

"Ratna: I wanted to be the best, Jairaj. And I wanted you to be the best too. But you were too busy trying to be a man."

Jairaj's relationship with his father, Amritlal, further complicates his identity

and aspirations. Amritlal's disapproval of dance as an unmanly pursuit reflects societal prejudices and the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles:

"Amritlal: A man should be a man, Jairaj. Not a dancer."

Through the lens of this family drama, Dattani critiques the rigid gender norms and societal expectations that constrain individual aspirations and relationships.

### ***"Where There's a Will"***

"Where There's a Will" is a satirical play that explores the theme of man-woman relationships through the lens of family dynamics and inheritance. The play revolves around the Mehta family, particularly the patriarch Hasmukh Mehta and his relationships with his wife, Sonal, and daughter-in-law, Kiran.

Hasmukh's controlling nature and his attempts to dominate his family even after his death highlight the power dynamics within patriarchal families. His relationship with Sonal is characterized by his authoritarianism and her submissiveness, reflecting traditional gender roles:

"Hasmukh: I have always been the one in control, Sonal. You wouldn't know what to do without me."

Kiran's entry into the family brings a fresh perspective, challenging Hasmukh's authority and traditional gender norms. Her independence and assertiveness contrast sharply with Sonal's passive acceptance, highlighting the generational shift in attitudes towards gender roles:

"Kiran: I am not afraid of you, Hasmukh. I will not let you control my life."

Through this play, Dattani examines the evolving dynamics of man-woman

relationships within the family, critiquing the patriarchal structures that limit personal freedom and autonomy.

### **Thematic Analysis**

#### **Love and Conflict**

Dattani's portrayal of man-woman relationships often revolves around the themes of love and conflict. His characters navigate complex emotional landscapes, where love is intertwined with power struggles, societal expectations, and personal insecurities.

In "Tara," the love between the twins and their parents is fraught with conflict and guilt. Bharati's love for Tara is overshadowed by her guilt over the decision to prioritize Chandan's life, while Patel's love for his children is expressed through his pragmatic but emotionally distant approach. This complex interplay of love and conflict highlights the emotional toll of societal expectations and gender biases.

In "Bravely Fought the Queen," the love between the couples is marred by abuse, infidelity, and emotional neglect. Dolly and Alka's marriages are battlegrounds where love is overshadowed by power struggles and personal insecurities. Dattani's portrayal of these relationships emphasizes the need for emotional and psychological equality and the destructive impact of societal norms on personal lives.

#### **Power Dynamics**

The theme of power dynamics is central to Dattani's exploration of man-woman relationships. His plays often depict the struggle for control and autonomy within relationships, highlighting the impact of traditional gender roles and societal expectations.

In “Dance Like a Man,” the power dynamics between Jairaj and Ratna are shaped by their conflicting aspirations and societal pressures. Ratna’s ambition and determination often overshadow Jairaj’s more passive nature, reflecting a reversal of traditional gender roles. Jairaj’s struggle with his identity as a male dancer further complicates the power dynamics within their relationship, highlighting the societal prejudices that constrain individual aspirations.

In “Where There’s a Will,” Hasmukh’s attempts to control his family even after his death underscore the power dynamics within patriarchal families. His relationship with Sonal is characterized by his authoritarianism and her submissiveness, reflecting traditional gender roles. Kiran’s assertiveness and independence challenge Hasmukh’s authority, highlighting the generational shift in attitudes towards gender roles and the evolving dynamics of man-woman relationships.

### **Societal Expectations**

Dattani’s plays often critique the societal expectations that shape man-woman relationships. His characters struggle to reconcile their personal desires with the pressures of conforming to traditional gender roles and societal norms.

In “Tara,” the societal preference for male children and the gender biases that shape the twins’ lives are central to the play’s exploration of family dynamics. Bharati’s decision to prioritize Chandan’s life over Tara’s future reflects the deep-seated gender prejudices that dictate the lives of men and women.

In “Dance Like a Man,” the societal expectations placed on Jairaj as a male dancer and Ratna as an ambitious woman

shape their relationship and individual aspirations. Jairaj’s struggle with his identity and Ratna’s determination to succeed in a male-dominated field highlight the societal pressures that constrain individual freedom and autonomy.

In “Where There’s a Will,” the patriarchal structures that limit personal freedom and autonomy within the Mehta family underscore the societal expectations that shape man-woman relationships. Hasmukh’s attempts to control his family and Kiran’s defiance of traditional gender norms highlight the generational shift in attitudes towards gender roles and the evolving dynamics of man-woman relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Mahesh Dattani’s plays offer a nuanced and insightful exploration of man-woman relationships within the context of contemporary Indian society. Through his complex characterizations, innovative use of dramatic techniques, and incisive critique of societal norms, Dattani sheds light on the evolving dynamics of love, power, conflict, and societal expectations.

Whether exploring the emotional turmoil of conjoined twins in “Tara,” the destructive impact of abusive marriages in “Bravely Fought the Queen,” the conflicting aspirations of a dance couple in “Dance Like a Man,” or the power struggles within a patriarchal family in “Where There’s a Will,” Dattani’s plays resonate with universal themes while remaining firmly rooted in the cultural and social milieu of modern India.

As Indian society continues to evolve, Dattani’s exploration of man-woman relationships remains relevant and thought-provoking, offering audiences a deeper

understanding of the complexities of gender dynamics and the quest for personal freedom and autonomy in relationships. His plays challenge conventional wisdom and provide a platform for dialogue and reflection on the changing roles and expectations of men and women in contemporary India.

Through his insightful portrayals and compelling narratives, Mahesh Dattani continues to be a trailblazer in Indian theatre, pushing boundaries and inspiring audiences to confront the realities of gender, power, and love in today's world.

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