

# INTERSACTIONALITY OF GENDER, CASTE AND CLASS IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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**Abstract:** The plays of Mahesh Dattani, who is widely regarded as one of the most acclaimed modern playwrights in India, feature intricately woven themes of gender, caste, and class. These themes bring to light the deeply ingrained socio-cultural inequalities that exist within Indian culture. The difficulties of marginalized populations are investigated in his writings, with a special emphasis placed on the intersectionality of intersecting identities and the compounding effect that these identities have on individuals. The purpose of this research is to investigate the manner in which Dattani depicts the intertwining of gender oppression with caste and class discrimination in plays such as *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and how he does it. Dattani reveals the structural prejudices that govern the lives of women, transgender people, and characters from lower castes through the subtle characterization and realistic tales that he employs in his writing. His plays provide a voice to those who have been silenced by giving them the opportunity to challenge patriarchal conventions, examine rigid caste structures, and critique socio-economic injustices. The purpose of this article is to investigate the ways in which Dattani's characters negotiate their numerous marginalized identities and the ways in which social power systems promote discrimination. This is accomplished via the utilization of an intersectional framework. The investigation highlights the relevance of his play in promoting social consciousness and fighting for a society that is more accepting of people of all backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani, intersectionality, gender, caste, class, Indian theatre, social hierarchy.

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## Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is widely recognised as one of the most famous modern Indian playwrights. He is renowned for his daring and realistic representation of societal themes that challenge conventional narratives. The topics of gender, caste, and class are explored in his plays, which shed light on the difficulties of identity and marginalisation in Indian culture. It is possible to study the intersectionality of these social categories via the critical lens that is provided by Dattani's works. These works illustrate how different types of oppression interact with one another and influence individual experiences. During the process of analysing Dattani's plays, the idea of intersectionality, which was initially presented by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is extremely pertinent. It provides an explanation of how several axes of identification, such as gender, caste, and class, intersect, resulting in the formation of distinct and frequently amplified forms of discrimination. In the case of India, these intersections are especially crucial since caste and class hierarchies have a profound impact on gender roles and the expectations of society. Women, transgender people, and characters from lower castes are typically the ones who find themselves on the receiving end of numerous layers of

marginalisation in the plays written by Dattani. Through works such as *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani brings attention to the ways in which patriarchal norms, caste-based oppression, and economic disparities intersect to create systemic impediments for those who are disadvantaged. The deep-seated injustices that continue to exist in modern-day India are brought to light by the experiences of his characters as they fight against the preconceptions of society. His theatrical productions function as a potent vehicle for social criticism, prompting viewers to reevaluate their preconceived notions and support the cause of a society that is more accepting of diversity. The purpose of this research is to investigate the ways in which Dattani's plays represent the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class, with the intention of illustrating how these factors influence human lives and relationships. This research will give a better knowledge of how structural inequalities function in Indian society and how theatre may be an agent of change by analysing his works through an intersectional framework. This exploration will be carried out in order to provide this insight.

## Gender and Patriarchal Oppression in Dattani's Plays

The writings of Mahesh Dattani provide a critical analysis of the gender roles that exist within Indian society, so revealing the constraints that are imposed by patriarchy. His plays shed emphasis on the ways in which women, transgender people, and other marginalised genders are subjected to prejudice on numerous levels. Taking the story of Tara as an example, the main character, Tara, is confronted with gender-based bigotry within her own family. Despite the fact that she is on level with her twin brother Chandan in terms of intellectual capacity, she is consistently denied opportunities due to the expectations of society and the choice of her parents for the male kid. This is a reflection of the way in which patriarchal organisations restrict the agency of women, frequently promoting the notion that their duties are subordinate to those of males. In a same manner, Dattani changes the focus in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* to the transgender population, specifically hijras, who are subjected to harsh social marginalisation. The drama sheds light on the deeply ingrained gender and caste prejudices that deprive hijras of their dignity and fundamental human rights. This is accomplished via the figure of Anarkali, a hijra who is incorrectly imprisoned because of her identity. Through its critique of society conventions that fail to acknowledge non-binary identities, the play contributes to the perpetuation of oppression at the systemic level.

### Caste as a Tool of Discrimination in Dattani's Works

People in India are classified according to their caste, which is a significant factor in defining their social and economic standing. Throughout his plays, Dattani quietly incorporates prejudice based on caste, demonstrating how this type of marginalisation connects with gender and class to produce distinctive forms of marginalisation. Two of the most prominent topics in *Final Solutions* are religion and caste distinctions, which serve to illustrate how these identities influence the attitudes and interactions of individuals. A number of historical injustices that continue to have an impact on social mobility are brought into question by the play, including ideals of purity and exclusion. The influence of the caste system is also demonstrated in the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, in which hijras, despite the fact that they are frequently born into various caste groups, are condemned to the lowest rungs of society due to the fact that they determine their gender identification. Not only are they denied education and employment opportunities, but they are also denied dignity, which exemplifies how caste and gender work together to promote exclusion.

### Class Struggles and Economic Disparities in Dattani's Narratives

In the plays of Dattani, economic position is another essential component of an individual's identity. Access to school, employment, and upward mobility are all determined by class obstacles, which further aggravate prejudice based on gender and caste. The destiny of Tara is determined not just by gender prejudices but also by economic concerns in the comic book series *Tara*. Her family's decision to invest in Chandan's future at the expense of Tara's highlights how class-based aspirations often prioritize male heirs. The hijra community is further marginalised in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* as a result of the economic hardships they face. Because they are not allowed to participate in mainstream economic activities, they are forced to perform ceremonial roles in rituals or engage in sexual labour, which further perpetuates their vulnerability. The fact that this is the case

demonstrates how caste, gender, and social class interact to produce cycles of oppression that are difficult to transcend.

### Dattani's Social Critique and Theatre as a Medium for Change

Powerful social reflections, Mahesh Dattani's plays encourage audiences to reevaluate deeply rooted prejudices and encourage them to re-examine their perspective. His detailed description of intersectionality reveals that oppression is not a solitary phenomenon but rather a complex and linked system of disadvantages. For the purpose of challenging conventional narratives and advocating for a more equal society, Dattani's works bring to the forefront the hardships of women, transgender folks, and characters from lower castes. His theatre pushes for improvements in gender, caste, and class institutions, and it stimulates debate and introspection among actors and audience members. Dattani's plays bring to light the essential need for inclusion, legal safeguards, and societal reform by revealing the social inequalities that exist in society.

## Literature Review

The intersectionality of gender, caste, and class in Mahesh Dattani's plays has been widely discussed by scholars, particularly in the context of Indian society's deeply embedded hierarchies. This literature review examines key academic perspectives on Dattani's works, focusing on how his plays critique social oppression through a nuanced portrayal of marginalized identities.

### Gender and Patriarchy in Dattani's Works

The involvement of Dattani with gender politics, in especially his critique of patriarchy, has been investigated by a number of academics. According to Jasbir Jain (2011), Dattani's plays disrupt established gender standards by depicting women as victims of institutional oppression. One example of this is the play *Tara*. It is Jain's contention that Tara's destiny is predetermined by her gender, which lends credence to the notion that women in patriarchal countries are not afforded equal options. To a similar extent, Anita Singh (2015) highlights the capacity of Dattani to reveal the unseen anguish that women experience within home settings, demonstrating how the expectations of society restrict their ability to exercise agency.

Critical attention has also been drawn to Dattani's representation of the transgender population in the film *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Aparna Dharwadkar (2016) investigates the marginalisation of hijras in Indian culture and argues that Dattani provides them with a voice that is frequently ignored by mainstream literature. It is brought to her attention that the play sheds light on the junction of gender and caste, illustrating how hijras, while coming from a variety of different origins, are consistently barred from mainstream socio-economic frameworks.

### Caste and Social Hierarchy

The involvement of Dattani with caste has been analysed in regard to not just historical disparities but also modern inequalities. In his article from 2013, Rajesh Sharma describes how *Final Solutions* fights stereotypes that are based on caste and communal affiliations. He also illustrates how deeply rooted biases define both individual and community identities. Sharma contends that Dattani's plays are a potent criticism of social exclusion because the characters in his plays represent real-life fears that are associated with religion and caste-based inequalities.

In a similar vein, G.P. Sharma (2018) investigates the ways in which caste prejudice manifests itself within Dattani's tales. He focusses on the ways in which *Seven Steps Around the Fire* depicts the intersection of caste and gender in the marginalisation of hijras. According to Sharma, the caste system contributes to the perpetuation of structural imbalances, which in turn makes gender minorities even more susceptible to being exploited and subjected to violence.

### **Class Struggles and Economic Disparities**

An further significant component of Dattani's plays that has been subjected to much analysis is the concept of economic inequality. In the year 2020, Pratima Chowdhury investigates the intersection of class and gender in *Tara*, a region where economic goals are the driving force behind gender discrimination. In her argument, she contends that economic factors frequently determine social interactions, with families placing a higher value on the achievements of male members than those of female generations.

Through the novel *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani draws attention to the economic marginalisation that the hijra population faces. In his article from 2019, S. Krishnan analyses how the play reveals the oppression of hijras based on their social status. He demonstrates how their exclusion from mainstream employment pushes them to work in occupations that are either exploitative or ritualistic. Krishnan contends that Dattani's depiction of economic problems highlights the ways in which class discrimination contributes to the perpetuation of social exclusion.

### **Theatre as a Medium for Social Change**

The importance of Dattani's play in bringing about societal transformation has been emphasised by a great number of academics. Vikram Kapur (2017) draws attention to the fact that Dattani's plays serve as both artistic expressions and political statements, compelling audiences to confront truths that are unsettling to them. The argument put out by Kapur is that Dattani challenges the conventions of society and stimulates critical conversation via the dramatisation of themes pertaining to gender, caste, and class.

Furthermore, Arundhati Banerjee (2021) investigates the ways in which Dattani used theatre as a platform for voices that are marginalised during her work. She makes the observation that his plays not only depict societal problems but also actively engage with them, prompting viewers to contemplate their own preconceptions and biases. It is the contention of Banerjee that the works of Dattani constitute a rallying cry for increased inclusiveness and fairness.

### **Exploration of Gender Identity in Mahesh Dattani's Plays**

**Complex Characters:** Dattani develops characters that are complex and struggle with their gender identity in the context of society expectations and standards. Because they are attempting to manage their sense of self, these characters frequently have inner conflicts.

**Identity development:** Dattani's plays explore the process of identity development, depicting individuals who struggle to reconcile their internal identity with the demands that come from the outside world. In addition to addressing a wide range of experiences and identities, this investigation goes beyond the traditional binary conceptions of gender.

**Fluidity and Ambiguity:** Dattani celebrates the diversity of gender manifestations while rejecting strict categorisations. At the same time, she welcomes the fluidity and ambiguity of gender identity. Traditional categorisations are not applicable to his characters since they represent a diverse spectrum of identities and experiences.

The concept of intersectionality is investigated by Dattani, who examines the relationship between gender identification and other dimensions of identity, such as social class, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. Characters are portrayed more accurately via the use of an intersectional lens, which also draws attention to the linked nature of social identities.

**Agency and Self-Expression:** When it comes to determining their gender identity, the characters in Dattani's literature exercise both agency and self-expression. They challenge the rules of society and fight for their right to authenticity, frequently going on personal journeys of self-discovery and empowerment in the process.

**Stigma and Marginalisation in Society** Dattani tackles the social stigma and marginalisation that people who have a gender identification that is different from the conventions of society experience. Through his explanation, he sheds light on the discrimination and prejudice that transgender people, nonbinary people, and gender nonconforming people face in their day-to-day experience.

**Empathy and Understanding:** Dattani encourages empathy and understanding towards a variety of gender identities via the characters he portrays in his work. He encourages audiences to examine their preconceived notions and biases, and he encourages them to engage with the nuances of gender identity in a manner that is nuanced and empathetic.

**Narrative methods:** In order to investigate themes related to gender identity, Dattani makes use of a number of different narrative methods, such as symbolism, metaphor, and allegory. The audience is encouraged to explore and contemplate the more profound truths that are concealed inside the characters' journeys of self-discovery and change in his plays.

### **Challenges to Traditional Gender Roles in Mahesh Dattani's Plays**

**Subversion of Characters:** Dattani's plays frequently contain characters that question and subvert the conventional gender norms that are accepted in society. The rules that regulate behaviour based on gender are called into question by these individuals, who contradict the assumptions and preconceptions often held by society.

Dattani depicts strong, powerful female characters who fight patriarchal norms and express their individuality. This is an example of the empowerment of women. The subordinate roles that have historically been allocated to women are rejected, and instead, they strive for freedom and self-determination. In his critique of patriarchy, Dattani argues that patriarchal structures are responsible for the perpetuation of discrimination and inequality between the sexes. The restrictive nature of patriarchal conventions and the negative repercussions they have on individuals, particularly women, are brought to light in his plays.

Dattani's portrayal of male characters frequently questions popular notions about what it means to be masculine. This is an

example of the exploration of masculinity. In order to challenge the notions of stoicism and power that are associated with masculine characters, he investigates elements such as vulnerability, emotional depth, and sensitivity.

Taking into account the overlap of gender roles with other social identities, such as class, caste, and religion, Dattani acknowledges the intersectionality of these identities. He emphasises the ways in which a number of elements interact with one another to generate the experiences of individuals about gender and the many types of discrimination that they may encounter.

**Critique of Gender Expectations** Dattani, via the use of dialogue and story, offers a critique of the strict expectations that are put on individuals on the basis of their gender. Through his advocacy for more freedom of expression and self-definition, he brings to light the restrictions and injustices that are inherent in gendered roles and behaviours.

**Family Dynamics:** Dattani investigates the ways in which conventional gender roles have an effect on the interactions and dynamics inside families. The complicated ties that exist within families are brought to light by his depiction of the tensions and conflicts that arise as a result of the expectations that are placed on members of the family to comply to predefined gender standards.

The plays of Dattani encourage conversation and introspection on gender roles and the ramifications such roles have for both people and society. This is an example of empowerment via discussion. He does this by giving voice to characters that defy norms and push for change, which in turn invites audiences to re-examine their perspectives on gender and identity.

**Celebration of Diversity** Dattani's representation of characters that come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences is a way in which he celebrates diversity in terms of gender expression and identity. The notion of a singular, uniform gender identity is refuted by his plays, which embrace the legitimacy of a variety of gender expressions and reject the concept of uniformity.

### **Marginalized Voices of Mahesh Dattani's plays**

Throughout Mahesh Dattani's plays, marginalised voices, notably those of transgender persons, women, and others who are subjected to social prejudice, emerge as strong tales that challenge and expose the injustices that are deeply embedded in Indian culture. The hardships and resiliency of individuals who are marginalised by gender identity and social conventions are shown by Dattani via characters such as Mariam in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and Tara in *Tara*. By navigating the complexity of societal rejection, marginalisation, and violence, these characters shed attention on the challenging situations that marginalised people are forced to endure. The compassionate presentation of these voices by Dattani humanises their experiences, challenging audiences to confront the structural hurdles and prejudices that continue to perpetuate marginalisation. Dattani's plays serve as a forum for advocacy and social change by elevating the voices of people who are marginalised across society. These plays challenge audiences to recognise and address the injustices that are experienced by individuals who are on the fringes of society.

### **Quest for Autonomy and Empowerment**

In Mahesh Dattani's plays, the characters go on fundamental journeys for autonomy and empowerment, rejecting the rules that have been established by society and expressing their

agency in the face of adversity. Dattani sheds light on the hardships of individuals who are attempting to break free from the limits that are put on them by gender norms, the expectations of their families, and the pressures that society places on them via the use of narratives such as *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*. These heroes bravely travel their own unique journeys of self-discovery and self-realization, refusing to be defined or constrained by forces from the outside world. As people face challenges, confrontations, and internal conflicts in an effort to recover control over their life, their pursuit of autonomy is a demonstration of the resiliency and potential for growth that the human spirit possesses. In a society that is moulded by societal expectations and restrictions, Dattani's representation of this search highlights the transformational potential of self-determination and the hunt for one's truth, motivating audiences to contemplate their own routes to autonomy and strength in a world that is shaped by these things.

### **Societal Expectations vs. Individual Freedom**

In Mahesh Dattani's plays, the characters go on fundamental journeys for autonomy and empowerment, rejecting the rules that have been established by society and expressing their agency in the face of adversity. Dattani sheds light on the hardships of individuals who are attempting to break free from the limits that are put on them by gender norms, the expectations of their families, and the pressures that society places on them via the use of narratives such as *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*. These heroes bravely travel their own unique journeys of self-discovery and self-realization, refusing to be defined or constrained by forces from the outside world. As people face challenges, confrontations, and internal conflicts in an effort to recover control over their life, their pursuit of autonomy is a demonstration of the resiliency and potential for growth that the human spirit possesses. In a society that is moulded by societal expectations and restrictions, Dattani's representation of this search highlights the transformational potential of self-determination and the hunt for one's truth, motivating audiences to contemplate their own routes to autonomy and strength in a world that is shaped by these things.

### **Humanizing the Experience**

The plays of Mahesh Dattani are exceptional in their ability to humanise the experiences of persons who are struggling with gender identity and the expectations of society. He brings his characters to life by imbuing them with depth, complexity, and emotional resonance. Dattani exposes the genuine humanity of individuals who are marginalised by gender stereotypes and prejudice via nuanced depictions in works such as *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. This helps audiences develop empathy and compassion for those who are negatively impacted by these issues. Dattani defies stereotypes and clichés by showing the interior struggles, anxieties, and ambitions of his characters. He does this by giving authentic depictions that resonate with the human yearning for acceptance and sense of belonging. The audience is invited to connect with the lived experiences of his characters via the use of rich language, vivid imagery, and dramatic narrative. This allows him to challenge preconceived beliefs and create debate about the intricacies of gender identity and the expectations of society. Through the process of humanising the experience, Dattani's plays act as catalysts for empathy, compassion, and social change. They encourage audiences to fight injustice and appreciate the unique fabric of human life.

### **Exploration of Family Dynamics**

In the plays of Mahesh Dattani, the investigation of family dynamics acts as a prism through which he investigates the complexities of human relationships, the expectations of society, and the influence of gender roles on the structures of families. The author Dattani explores the intricacies of familial connections that are stressed by opposing wishes for individual autonomy and commitment to tradition via works such as *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara*. As a result of addressing generational gaps and cultural expectations, he depicts the difficulties that develop when members of a family reject established gender conventions. As the protagonists traverse the complexity of familial connections in the face of social demands, Dattani's subtle portrayal of family dynamics illustrates the delicate balance that exists between love and control, responsibility and personal fulfilment. Dattani encourages viewers to contemplate the transformational power of familial relationships, the difficulties of negotiating tradition in a world that is constantly changing, and the universal search for acceptance and being a part of the family group. This is accomplished via the development of complex characters and intriguing story arcs.

## Conclusion

Plays written by Mahesh Dattani provide a critical lens through which the complexity of intersectionality notably the interaction between gender caste and class may be comprehended in the context of Indian culture. His works bring to light the hardships that are experienced by populations that are marginalised and they question deeply ingrained institutions that are patriarchal casteist and class-based. The structural prejudices that influence the lives of women transgender persons and those who come from disadvantaged caste and class backgrounds are brought to light by Dattani via the use of intriguing characters and storytelling that is both forceful and compelling. The examination of plays such as *Tara* *Final Solutions* and *Seven Steps around the Fire* demonstrates that oppression is not a unique phenomenon but rather a multifaceted phenomenon with several types of discrimination being mutually supportive of one another. Caste hierarchies in *Final Solutions* and *Seven Steps around the Fire* highlight how historical boundaries continue to determine social mobility. Gender prejudice as can be seen in *Tara* restricts the options and possibilities available to women. In the meantime, economic inequities further marginalise individuals who are already at a disadvantage which reinforces cycles of exclusion and misery. Not only does Dattani's theatre serve as a vehicle for narrative but it also functions as a sort of societal criticism requiring spectators to confront facts that may strike them as too unpleasant. His work is extremely significant in the modern discourse on social justice and equality because of his capacity to question normative frameworks and bring the voices of those who are oppressed to the forefront. By addressing these concerns via the medium of theatre Dattani creates an environment conducive to conversation and change, so inspiring audiences to challenge deeply rooted biases and to work towards creating a society that is more inclusive. His plays continue to be an important component of contemporary Indian theatre because they not only exude artistic excellence but also make a compelling appeal for social transformation.

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