CHAPTER FIVE

VOICING THE SILENCE: ARTICULATING THE INARTICULATE
IN FINAL SOLUTIONS (1993) AND WHERE DID I LEAVE MY
PURDAH? (2012)
The preceding chapters highlight Mahesh Dattani’s portrayal of patriarchal hegemony as it operates in marriage, family and society and stunts the growth and freedom of women. The various forms of women oppression at these three levels have been dealt by the playwright to convey his vision for the emancipation of women as has been the concern of feminists like Beauvoir who suggest that, “If woman seems to be the inessential [being] which never becomes the essential...it is because she herself fails to bring about this change” (The Second Sex 10). This chapter moves into the thematic realms of Partition Literature which established Dattani as a literary genius of twenty first century with the production of his magnum opus Final Solutions which is the first Indian English drama to be awarded the coveted Sahitya Akademy.

Most of the writers have explored the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during and after the Partition which constitutes the thematic corpus of Partition Literature. Nevertheless, Dattani deals with the theme of partition in an innovative manner in both the plays analysed in this chapter which are Final Solutions (1998) and Where did I leave my purdah? (2012). While trying to unravel the tangled skein of relationship between religious communities, between women and their men, between women and their families across the two new nations formed after partition, Dattani perceives women at the intersection of these forces rather than at the periphery. Rather than portraying women as pathetic and pitiable creatures the dramatist highlights his women protagonist as powerful, vocal and resourceful.

Partition as an event of catastrophic consequence, retains its ascendancy even today, despite two wars on the borders and wave after wave of communal violence. It marks itself a watershed in people’s consciousness as well as in the lives of those who were uprooted and had to find themselves again elsewhere. Both the plays are written against the historical background of the partition of India which is an important aspect interwoven with the tormenting narrative of man-woman relationship. Commenting on the unhappy conjunction that made it intricate for men and women to articulate, critics Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin remark:

For both men and women the trauma of Partition violence was difficult to articulate and this often made for a hesitant, disjointed
or sometimes even “wordless” telling.
*(Borders and Boundaries 55)*

*Final Solutions* is a reminiscence of the events that took place at independence and partition along with their effects which have lingered in collective memory. The play has a powerful contemporary relevance as it reverberates an issue of significant contemporary importance which erupts like a volcano in Indian society. One of the ugliest aftermaths of partition has been communal hatred which forms the background of the two plays. Commenting on Dattani’s creative genius to deal with the issue of repercussions of partition from a feminist perspective, Alyque Padamsee in “A Note on the play” writes:

As I see it, This is a play about transferred resentment. About looking for a scapegoat to hit out at when we feel let down, humiliated. Taking out your anger on your wife, children or servants is an old Indian custom…But this is, above all, a play about a family with its simmering under currents… (CP 161)

The play probes into the “under currents” and religious prejudices by examining the attitudes of three generations of a middle-class Gujrati business family. Hardika, the grandmother, is unable to recover the hoary incident of her father’s murder during the partition mayhem and the discrimination she met with by her in-laws. Her son, Ramnik Gandhi, is disturbed by the fact that his fortunes were based on a shop of Zarine’s father, which was burnt down by his kinsmen. Hardika's daughter-in-law, Aruna, lives by the firm code of the Hindu Sanskars and the granddaughter, Smita, proves to be a liberal minded person. The pulls and counter-pulls of the family are revealed when two Muslim boys, Babban and Javed, seek shelter in their house on being chased by a baying Hindu mob. After a nightlong exchange of judgments and retorts between the characters, tolerance and forgetfulness emerge as the only promising solution of the crisis. Ramnik carries with him the weight of the guilt of his father's black deeds, transferring some of the resentment to his mother, his wife and his daughter.
Mahesh Dattani through this play highlights the predicament of women in such a milieu which ultimately deprives a woman her freedom to pursue her studies, choose a career and to choose her partner in life. It articulates the story of Baa, who represents the women of the 1940s, when women had no voice to assert their rights. Baa is the silent sufferer, the upholder of traditional values and ethics, a strict observer and carrier of social taboos, an epitome of tolerance and patience, an exemplar to their successors, a being with no space for herself, a woman without an identity and a worshipper of her counterpart.

The playwright through the words of Daksha has articulated the longing of a newly married girl of fifteen for self will in the beginning of the play. Daksha is married to Hari before fifteen and she came to her new house at her fifteenth birthday after ten months of her marriage. She writes, “Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages” (CP 165). The words of Daksha reflects her condition of limited autonomy and through the reading of her diary, it is perceived that she wanted to be a singer like voice queen Noor Jehan. She further writes:

All my dreams have been shattered…I can never be a singer, like Noor Jehan. Hari’s family is against my singing film songs. (CP 166)

Her dreams were shattered as her in-laws heard her humming a love song to Hari one night and they told Hari not to allow her to sing film songs. She can no more sing and is married to Hari at such a young age denies her existence of freedom so much that Daksha’s being is merged into that of Hari’s. She is rechristened as the newly born Hardika. Commenting on woman’s concrete condition that is consistently linked to any given type of patriarchal law, Simone de Beauvoir aptly avers:

It is the male who opens up the future towards which she also transcends; in reality, women have never pitted female values against male ones; it is men wanting to maintain masculine prerogatives who invented this division: they wanted to create a feminine domain — a rule of life, of
immanence—only to lock women in it. (The Second Sex 77)

Hari strips Daksha off all her rights and desires and her permanence of the patrilocal residence attests to the basic asymmetrical relationship between the two sexes which is a characteristic of human society. Daksha is annexed to her husband, she owns nothing and she isn’t raised to the dignity of a person. Her description of her husband’s routine expresses her anguish at the conduct of an Indian archetypal husband who looks at his wife as a status symbol and an object to be kept in the house:

... he will come home, demand his food, criticize it before eating it, answer me in grunts and groans and chew tambacoo paan, sit on the big chair in the courtyard with his feet up and stare into space. (CP197)

As reflected, the individuality of Daksha is subsumed in her role as a wife. Dattani here highlights how the subordination of woman to man which has continued since ages by socialization and traditional beliefs is gradually moving towards a new phase where women is attempting to articulate her oppression although it is on a piece of paper. Daksha’s inadequacy to show her resentment towards her husband and her agony shows the stronghold of patriarchal ideology. However, she unburdens her feeling and anger at her being treated as an object of sexual pleasure:

He beckoned me to lie beside him on the bed. And I did. And my cheeks went red again. Not with shame but with anger at myself. (CP 216)

Daksha’s anger is her resentment against internalizing the norms and values of patriarchy which cast women as weak, nurturing and submissive. The process of molding of women’s psyche to sacrifice her identity, mind and body is a cultural programming which is never realized by a woman as Betty Friedan writes in The Feminine Mystique:

A women who is herself only a sexual object, lives finally in a world of objects
unable to touch in others the individual identity she lacks herself…(373)

By portraying complete transformation of Daksha’s character Dattani conveys his vision for infusing assertion and strength in women. Daksha is Hardika’s memory and the experiences of her life has taught Hardika to articulate her fears and beliefs. Hardika’s overreaction at the appearance of Javed and Bobby brings back the pain created in her head and heart forty years back. It is through her memory that Dattani points to the circuitous course of hatred. Daksha’s diary is the major mean of connecting the past with the present. The diary on the one hand reveals that what has happened during partition with the common folk and on the other hand unveils the conversion of a secularist like Daksha into a fundamentalist Hardika by the compulsion of her orthodox husband and in-laws. Daksha, a speechless victim of patriarchal setup has been given voice by the dramatist in the form of a diary.

The diary as a device in the play represents the two dissimilar phases of the same character, separated by forty years and is finely merged signifying that the narratives of hatred have not changed much. Criss-crossing a whole gamut of memories, Hardika said:

After forty years…I opened my diary again. And I wrote. A dozen pages before. A dozen pages now. A young girl’s childish scribble. An old woman’s shaky scrawl. Yes, things have not changed that much. (CP 167)

These words of Hardika reflect that the fragments of memory, shards of a past and bitter remembrances are all still strung together in her life. The age difference between Daksha and Hardika emerges so bleak that the thought of “things have not changed that much” shamefully become relevant. Commenting on the recalling of traumatic experience and reliving of time past by women sufferers of partition, Bertaux and Kohli aptly writes:

Every day time and life-time overlap and each woman’s story reveals how she has arranged her present within the specific
Daksha’s telling breaks off sometime but the story resumes again. She writes, “Like last year, in August, a most terrible thing happened to our country. We… gained independence” (CP 166). Independence is “terrible” for her as it came with the death of her father and is “meaningless” because it has no significance for her as she has to sacrifice her dreams for the sake of her in-laws. She feels “the things have not changed that much” in the present also as the drumbeat grows louder and the Chorus slowly wears the Hindu masks. The words uttered by Chorus show the continuity of disharmony and hatred between the two communities even after forty years of independence. The Chorus with Hindu masks burst out with angry words:

Chorus 1. The procession has passed through these lanes every year, for Forty years!

Chorus 2, 3. How dare they?

Chorus 1, 2, 3. For forty years our chariot has moved through their mohallas.

Chorus 4, 5. What did they? Why did they today?

Chorus 1. How dare they?

Chorus 2, 3. They broke our rath. They broke our chariot. And felled our Gods!

Chorus 1, 2, 3. This is our land! How dare they?

Chorus 1. It is in their blood!

Chorus 2, 3. It is in their blood to destroy!

Chorus 4. Why should they?

Chorus 5. It could have been an accident.
Chorus 2. The stone that hit our God was no accident!

Chorus 3. The knife that slit the poojari’s stomach was no accident! (CP 168)

The opening of the play in a volatile situation in the small town of Amargaon where Ramnik Gandhi lives emphasizes Dattani’s view that the family as a smaller unit is the reflection of the whole society. The only detailed set in the Gandhi’s family is the kitchen and the pooja room which is noteworthy because through food habits, praying habits and taboos, the lines that separate us from each other are drawn. In times of religious turmoil, even normal object specify a meaning and become a symbol of a religious identity. The identity of Bobby and Javed is revealed through a handkerchief knotted over their head in lieu of a cap. The playwright’s use of innovative theatrical technique of putting and changing masks on the face of the Mob/Chorus to make the frequent change of identity looks natural. When the Chorus puts on Hindu-Muslim masks, the split within the communities is hinted at and when the Chorus whisper or shout along with a character, its function is to articulate the inner feelings of that particular character.

Mahesh Dattani commonly takes his subjects from within the convoluted dynamics of the family. His women character struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness, under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desire. Daksha/Hardika narrates the riots in which her father was killed and her mother took refuge from the flying stones in the pooja room. Her faith in God represented by the idol of Krishna was suddenly gone never to return. Simultaneously, a stone thrown by the mob smashed all her gramophone records which represented her desire to become a singer was also smashed that night.

Religion is the prime mover in the play and Hardika’s position as a Hindu woman is frequently reiterated. Daksha/Hardika’s religious and gender position is sternly maintained and her limit as a female is demarcated by the men of her household. Hari gets infuriated when she questions him about his reluctance in offering a job to her friend’s father. She expresses the anger of Hari in her words:
The reason why Hari was looking at me so strangely was because I just asked him why we couldn't give Zarine’s father a loan or something to start his business again…Then why did he come to our mill. I questioned Hari. This is when for the first time Hari became angry with me. I never expected him to. He shouted so loudly, he sounded just like Wagh. And he called me names. Names that are too shameful to mention to you. My cheeks went red. (CP 215-16)

Hardika’s spirit is dampened by Hari’s violent attitude towards her as her innocence has been ruled by men since childhood evolving her into a submissive wife. Commenting on the condition of a wife in the marriage Sylvia Walby aptly opines:

In a society, where marriage is held in such high esteem, where there is a commonly held notion that romantic love overcomes all problems, where single parenthood is generally stigmatized, and where a woman is encouraged to be emotionally as well as materially dependent on her husband, it is not surprising that it is difficult for women to escape violent relationships. (Patriarchy at Work 65)

Dattani’s vehemently questions the structure and foundation of religion and his women protagonists: Smita and Daksha are his mouth piece in the play. Both Smita and Daksha confront the prevailing influence of religion and create a new aspect of womanhood to give a new dimension to female autonomy. Daksha’s courage to visit the house of Zarine despite her family’s objection and Smita’s audacity to question religion and her mother’s religious beliefs reflect dramatist’s faith in the potential of women. Smita’s volley of questions to her mother highlight her will to come out of the retrogressive age-old beliefs and practices which she finds extremely suffocating:

How can you expect me to be proud of something which stifles everything else around it? It stifles me! Yes! Maybe I am prejudiced because I do not belong. But not belonging makes things so clear. I can see so clearly how wrong you are. You accuse me
of running away from my religion. Maybe I am ...embarrassed, mummy. Yes. Maybe I shouldn't be. What if I did what you do? Praying and fasting and... purifying myself all day.(CP 211)

Smita, therefore, creates a new category of Dattani’s women protagonist, the one who not only shakes the edifice of patriarchy but also possesses courage and intelligence to question religion which divides humanity rather than acting as a uniting force. She defies and tries to understand traditions in her own context. Her entire family is aghast and her father, Ramnik despite of his veneer of a liberal image gets uncomfortable to know that his daughter is acquainted with the two muslim boys, Bobby and Javed. The reaction of her parents shows the engrained bias of one community towards other which treats any such kind of relationship as morally questionable:

Aruna. You...you know them?

Smita. I know who they are.

Ramnik. Why didn't you tell us?

Smita. I was too confused.

Hardika. Where did you meet them? In college?

Smita. Well — yes.

Ramnik. What does that mean?

Aruna. Stop her studies! From now on, she can stay at home!

Ramnik. Where did you meet them?

Smita. I...told you.

Hardika. But they are not from here. What were they doing in your college?

Bobby. It's all right. Let me tell you...

Smita. (angrily) No! (CP 188-89)
Smita’s mother Aruna represents the orthodoxy associated with religion and her behaviour according to her daughter is a burden to the spirit of humanity and compassion. Smita wishes to restore the right spirit of true faith and her revolt against the monotonous and irrational arguments of her own mother conveys her will to create new space not only for herself but for society as well:

I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother. May be, I should have told you earlier, but I am telling you now, I can’t bear it! Please don’t burden me anymore, I can’t take it. (CP 213)

Hence, Dattani exhibits the woman protagonist as the one who creates a new identity for herself and is determined to get freedom from prejudices of society. Smita’s determination to attain freedom by defying retrogressive rules of society echoes the words of Betty Friedan:

Rules per se generally mean nothing to these women it is only when they approve of the rules and can see and approve of the purpose behind them and they will obey them. They are strong, purposeful and do live by rules, but these rules are autonomous and personally arrived. (The Feminine Mystique 440)

The water splashing scene in the end of the play is Dattani’s powerful depiction of Smita’s attempt to dismantle fake myths and religious taboos. To everyone’s dismay, she encourages Javed to fill God’s water in order to convince everyone that his touch to pot of water will not bring any curse upon her family. Despite the communal and familial strain and pressure, there is the water splashing scene which is the main essence of the play. Smita sudden splash of water on Javed, Bobby and herself and her words, “Wake up! Wake up! It's morning. (Splashes more water) There! There!”(CP 218) signifies a new beginning. This conveys Dattani’s vision for a new beginning in society which can only be heralded if we free ourselves from the barriers of religion and prejudices of gender.
Through the portrayal of Smita’s father as a man of liberal outlook, Dattani shows the class of society which has witnessed the horrifying reality of partition riots. That is why Ramnik Gandhi shows his forbearance and compassion for Javed and Bobby. The dark history of religious intolerance and violence is hoped to be altered in the present by characters like Ramnik. He wants to seek freedom from his guilt and confesses the frenzy of his community which keeps pricking his conscience when he tells his mother:

It’s their shop. It’s the same burnt — up shop we bought from them, at half its value. (Pause.) And we burnt it. Your husband. My father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred, because we wanted a shop. Also they learnt that…those people were planning to start a mill like our own. (CP 226)

Smita supports her father’s approach and joins him in his liberalist attitude. Her progressive outlook makes her to look at the narrow mindedness of people regarding religion from a fresh perspective. She propagates that one can sustain one’s individual freedom and self identity through personal vision. In the final scene, Bobby conquers his fury and becomes indifferent to the resentment of the mob and panic stricken reactions of Aruna. He proceeds towards the temple, picks up the image of Krishna and comes as a challenge to the fundamentalism of both Javed and Aruna, representing the two distinctive cults. The words of Bobby when he is holding the idol of Lord Krishna in his hand reveal dramatist’s view point too:

See Javed! He doesn’t humiliate you. He doesn’t cringes from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me. And he welcomes it! I told him who is sacred to them, but I don’t commit sacrilege. (To Aruna) You can bath him day and night, you can splash holy water on him but can not remove my touch from his farms. You can not remove my smell with sandal paste and Altars and fragrant flowers because it belongs and tolerates and respects what other human beings believe — That is the strongest fragrance in the world. (CP 225)
The young Smita represents the dynamism of new generation and she behaves like the instrument of solution in the play. She is neither rebellious nor apprehensive. She tolerates Javed and Bobby without any fear and doubt. She is confident that religion is a matter of personal faith and the conflict emerges out of prejudices. The solution lies in the recognition of similarities and not in identification of differences and discrimination. She exhorts:

We would never have spoken about what makes us so different from each other. We should have gone on living our lives with our petty similarities. (CP 211)

Dattani through his female characters has tried to accentuate the prejudice which is reflected in the anger of Hardika and the tolerance which is reflected in the love of Smita. Smita creates a new category of womanhood and its autonomy, one who defies and tries to understand traditions in her own context. The playwright makes her a cult figure that fights against taboos, social and family restrictions and constraints laid by patriarchy. She refuses to accept a category, of being a woman that her mother wants her to fit into but creates a new identity for herself that expresses freedom. Smita is not brainwashed by her mother's religious notions and is broadminded who willing befriend people from other communities even in a volatile situation. She is also aware that her father could use her to isolate her mother and she brusquely tells her father, “How easy it would have been for us to join forces and make her feel she was wrong” (CP 213). She understands that this would be a patriarchal victory for her father. However, neither the bitter marital experiences of her grandmother, nor the submissiveness of her mother dishearten her. She expresses her optimistic approach through her words, “I think one can create one's own freedom wherever one may be” (CP 220). Commenting on self-expression as a necessary concomitant of one’s freedom, Germaine Greer aptly opines:

The essence of pleasure is spontaneity. In these cases spontaneity means rejecting the norm, the standard that one must live up to and establishing a self-regulating principle. (The Female Eunuch 336)
As discussed earlier, Dattani presents the gendered nature of partition with a fresh perspective by moving beyond the bitter reality of women destitution and mass widowhood and highlighting the emergence of women of forthright views and progressive outlook in his partition plays. In the second play under analysis in this chapter *Where did I leave my purdah?* Dattani conveys his vision through his women protagonist who exhibit exemplary resilience despite confronting the turmoil of partition. The play highlights Dattani’s attempt to explore how every society ascribes meaning to women’s bodies; in effect, women’s body becomes a space of control. Women bodies are constructed as a contested space over which different ethnic, political and religious groups fight to acquire this symbolic territory.

The episodes of violence against women during communal riots brings to the surface, overtly the form of sexual violence that serves as a marker of the place that women’s sexuality occupies in manmade patriarchal array of gender relations. Commenting on the use of women bodies as the preferred sites for the hieroglyphics of power during partition, Menon and Bhasin aptly aver:

> The most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by “dishonouring” their women. (41)

The humiliation and dishonor which women were subjected to during partition has been depicted in the life of an octogenarian former muslim film star Nazia Sahiba who is forced to recollect her glorious days of historical theatre in the pre partition days. However, with her determination and courage she revives her faded theatre in 1950s despite her husband’s betrayal and society’s denial of her talent. The play is a poignant depiction of a series of tribulations which Nazia faces during partition be it the trauma of being gang raped by men of other community in front of her husband; giving birth to a child who is born out of this heinous act or witnessing the cold blooded killing of her sister. After experiencing the pain of all these incidents Nazia’s character undergoes a
complete transformation which is not that of lamenting at the past but looking towards the future.

Dattani alludes to the myth of Shakuntala to exhibit how Nazia revolts against the patriarchal image of women in India. Shakuntala epitomizes patriarchal subjugation of women who is beautiful and is destined to submit herself to male hegemony where she is used, abused and reduced. Nazia in her pre partition career as a film star rejoiced at performing the role of charming and sacrificing Shakuntala. Nevertheless, her encounter with the savagery and barbarism during partition evolves her into a rebellious woman who openly rebels against the established mores of patriarchal setup despite all her social criticism.

When the play begins, Nazia has been portrayed as a frail, wrinkled woman in her eighties. Though she is aware of her fall from grace yet she remains a go-getter. She abandons a film shooting when the director of the film, Sanjay wants to restrict her to a single line. When she came to know that Sanjay has not made any changes according to her, she reads out the mail to Vinay, the assistant that she had sent:

Here is the mail I sent him. Dear Sanjay, about the family scene. I am the matriarch. I feel I need to deliver that punch...Times have changed and you need to recap. (WDILMP 4)

These words uttered by Nazia reverberate the yearning of women to change and subvert the power structures that deny them space by transforming themselves into power generating and transmitting communities. Sanjay isn’t willing to change the script for Nazia so she becomes angry and leaves the roles. She acquires a defiant attitude towards him and succeeds in breaking the constraints binding her. She expresses:

This is it. There is always a time in your life that the truth strikes you. (a moment of realization for her) Why didn’t I see it? What am I doing here? I don’t belong here (taking off her wig) No more grandma roles
for me. I’m going back to the theatre! Dancing! That’s it. I am leaving. (WDILMP 4)

Commenting on the recognition of the self as the starting point for women’s liberation, Greer avers, “She could begin not by changing the world, but by reassessing herself” (The Feminine Mystique 4). Nazia frees herself from the saree that she was wearing and wears a Kaftan which signifies that recognition of oneself should become the means of cognition. She articulates her feelings and expresses her longing for theatre:

No matter what, nobody can take away the dances you’ve already had... I want more dances. Dances that nobody can take from me. Oh! this van is too small! It can’t take my dancing. Your cinema is too small for me. My life is big. I am BIG and GENEROUS! Only the theatre deserves me! (WDILMP 5)

These words of Nazia highlight her indulgence in introspection and her attempt to develop a whole and harmonious self, at both intellectual and emotional level. She realizes that this space is too narrow for her to negotiate and she needs to go back to the larger than life stage musicals of the 50s she used to be a part of in order to touch the essence of her art. She announces her intention to revive the play Shakuntala through a gutsier retelling. Nazia takes auditions for her new production – the revival of Abhigyan Shakuntalam, the poster with the title SHAKU! She had a theatre group in the past whose co-founder was her sister, Zarine who died during the communal riots. No matter what gruesome aspect of humanity she faced, she is determined to revive her theatre group with a new name i.e. “Post-modern Indian theatre”.

Dattani has used the technique of flash back in the play to merge the interior and exterior personalities of the characters into a single whole. Nazia was playing the role of Shakuntala and her co-star Suhel was Dushyant during a theatrical performance in Pakistan when the horrors of partition were being felt. During the performance, suddenly pandemonium breaks out and a woman from the troupe shouted that they should not allow Hindus in the troupes who are to be migrated to India. Nazia’s
character changes from a meek Shakuntala to an assertive woman when she declares that there is no Hindu in the group “except artistes”. Nevertheless, the insulting words of mob which represents the societal mind set do not waver her and she handles the situation with a firm hand by proving her strength.

We know the kind of plays you put up, prancing around naked on the stage. And then, you move around with that Hindu. Whores like you will not find no place even in Hell! (WDILMP 16)

These words of the mob represent patriarchal ideology where women is blamed for every situation. Although Suhel resents and searches for some weapon, Nazia shows swiftness of action and shoots the miscreant and saves Suhel. She advises Suhel to go to Delhi and expresses her desire to join him but Suhel objects to that:

Nazia. I’m going with you Suhel. Now.
Suhel. No. It’s too dangerous.
Nazia. I don’t care. I would rather die with you than live without you. (WDILMP 17)

Nazia convinces her sister to migrate with her to Delhi where they can fulfill their dreams of launching a theatre group against the wish of their father. She condemns the patriarchal code of conduct by liberating herself and does not marry according to the will of her father and also advises her sister to realise her own individuality:

Don’t be so foolish! Always dithering. For once in your life make a decision that will do some good. Obedient girls like you always end up in unhappy marriages... Well you make up your mind now. (WDILMP 19)

The forced migration and widespread communal violence bears testimony to the dehumanization of mankind during partition. Nazia’s had to pay a big price for her decision to migrate with Suhel. The killing of her sister because she gave her burqa to
Nazia when the intruders attacked the train was a bone-chilling incident and raised numerous unanswered questions in Nazia’s mind. Nazia recollects the gory incident and the innocence of her sister:

She gave me her burqa! She was always the one who was uncertain. She was always afraid of making a wrong decision! But now - She did not think twice! There was no doubt in her mind… (WDILMP 50)

Through the episode of Zarine’s killing and Nazia’s gang rape, Dattani portrays the gravity of sexual violence which women’s bodies were subjected to during partition. Such treatment of women was the outcome of patriarchal power where women have always been treated as instruments for men to display their power and honour. Nazia expresses the brutality of men who treated her as an object to prove their victory over the other community:

The butchers were on her and all the others. Suhel dragged me away. We walked all the way to the border. We crossed the border after bribing someone. But...You see...I was still wearing that piece of black cloth. But we were in another country, with a different set of demons. They came at us. They came at me. They pushed me down behind the bushes. Five or six or seven, eight of them. I don’t know. They tore at my clothes and at my flesh. All I could think of is why isn’t Suhel saving me? These are his people! I stopped looking at those eyes, so much anger and hatred! Hell bent on humiliating me. I stared back with hatred too, but they hurt me even more till – I stopped looking into their eyes. (WDILMP 50)

These words reveal the fact that these violent acts treat women bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed or marked by the assailant. Being extremely vulnerable, women become easy targets of every form of oppression. Women’s lives became the subject of patriarchal control during the riots when the partition of the country was actively under consideration. There was no longer a direct relationship
between a human being and a nation state but it became, for women, a gendered relationship via religion and patriarchy, to the nation-state. The woman’s body, as Veena Das points out:

Became a sign through which men communicated with each other. The lives of women were framed by the notion that they were to bear permanent witness to the violence of partition. Thus, the political programme of creating the two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women. (Critical Events 56)

Nazia musters courage to come out of the trauma and makes a new beginning where she refuses to accept patriarchal boundaries. She abandons Suhel who was the silent witness when her body was being treated as a territory to show male hegemony. The launch of her new play “Shaku” symbolizes her liberation from the appalling past. She offers the role of Dash — Dushyant to Vinay. The call of Suhel brings back the pain of her festering wound and she laments:

You think it is so simple? ... Things don’t get finished. They just hide in as dark corner like a ghoul and grab at you when you are not looking. And sometimes you have to beat the shit out of the ghoul to make it crawl back into the dark corner. (WDILMP 24)

These words of Nazia highlight that independence makes little sense in the lives of women like her for whom the freedom of the country is tethered to betrayal by their families, by the nation, and more substantially, by the loss of control over their bodies and the erosion of consent. Commenting on the violence women were subjected to and the responses generated from the women-victims of Partition, a noted critic, Veena Das pertinently comments:

The violence of the Partition was folded into everyday relations and that the events of Partition came to be incorporated into the temporal structure of relationships. (220)
Nazia has adjusted herself to the contingencies of life by indulging herself in the world of theatre but she expresses her fractured relationship and her resentment to Suhel in her words:

*We are not who we were. And I think it is a good thing. Of course I wish I were as beautiful as I was. And I wish you were too. We were both beautiful but- what’s the point now? It’s over. No point. Cobwebs.* (WDILMP 25)

Nazia remembers the past when they both were together playing the role of Shakuntala and Dushyant but there was frustration and discontentment in their relation. Nazia convinced Suhel that she has left her home, her country for him but Suhel replies, “You left Lahore because you knew you will have a better chance of starting your company here…”(28). Nazia’s rejection of her husband’s false accuses and her quest for recognition is satiated through her words:

*Oh so I am helpless? And I need you to help me? So you can take control over my life. Oh there are too many women in dance and theatre who have succumbed to those tactics. Too many who allow men to ruin their lives… I certainly don’t need your help in bringing about my destruction!* (WDILMP 29)

Therefore, Nazia develops an independent identity with her own aims in life, makes her own choices with a sense of responsibility. She is no longer fearful, dependent and suffering in silence. Commenting on the attempt of women who struggle for self realisation, Germaine Greer asserts:

*A woman has only to depart from the stereotype to find herself subjected to all kinds of discrimination and insult, although she may minimize it still for her own mental health.* (The Female Eunuch 300)
Nazia leaves behind all the traces of her traumatic past, abandons her daughter born out of the mutilation of her body but is constantly haunted by the past. Her daughter, Ruby too is portrayed by Dattani as an unconventional woman who despite of her rejection by her mother and husband becomes educated, self reliant and brings up her daughter, Nikhat. However, her only quest is to establish identity of her dead mother as a result she undergoes mental agony and struggles to search her true identity:

Everyone said my mother died after giving birth to me… Even as a little girl, being handed over from an actress backstage to a seamstress to the washerwoman. They fed me all the time. But I was only a pair of hands that could sew, or mend or bring in cushions and flowers or hand over a bouquet to the chief guest… I didn’t exist. Everyone sympathised with me. Poor girl, her own aunt doesn’t want to look at her. (WDILMP 46)

Nazia’s revelation of Ruby’s parentage is painful both for the mother and the daughter and reflects the agony of a rape victim. She suffers from some inconceivable upheaval within her and further expresses her trauma and her existence ranging between abject self-negation and aggressive self-assertion:

You were my flesh, wounded, humiliated. I didn’t cry when you came out. I was relieved- that the tapeworms infesting my belly left by those pigs who ate at my flesh, were out of my body. When Suhel gave you to me,… He persisted and I resisted. He did not understand that if I held you - that I could just take my veil, wrap it around your neck and snap that tiny neck - get rid of you and my pain. Not because I hated you, but because I hated myself… (WDILMP 52)

Nazia’s resilience is reflected in her move to rehearse her new play with a radical improvisation and adaptation. Dattani has portrayed her as a woman who tries to create a world of her own choice with the will to explore herself by shaking the edifice of male supremacy. She rejects social ostracism and makes her character Shaku as an
embodiment of woman’s courage to fight, to question and to rebel. Nazia’s Shaku rises in conflict unlike her mythical counterpart who succumbed to the patriarchal domination and meekly accepted the injustice as her fate. Nazia’s interpretation of Shaku is her rebellious way of revisiting the male hegemony in the institution of marriage:

You see, this is the interpretation I always wanted from Shakuntala! Not this whiny little creature whose entire future depends on whether husband can remember having slept with her or not. (WDILMP 37-38)

Nazia vehemently opposes sexual politics which operates in marriage and realizes that in a patriarchal society “to be born a female . . . is to be born into servitude” (Beauvoir 90). That is why, Nazia who once felt a great sense of achievement in performing the role of Shakuntala, brings about a complete reversal of the character.

Dattani’s vision for re-visioning gender stereotypes is powerfully depicted in two-three women characters in majority of his plays. In addition to the woman protagonist, the dramatist gives two more women characters who resemble the protagonist in their outlook and reflect the writer’s viewpoint. Nikhat, Ruby’s daughter is a young woman in her twenties and is a student of theatre at Yale. She proposes to play the role of Shakuntala to pay a tribute to her grandmother. Nikhat also feels the pain which her mother underwent and expresses the upheaval in her life to her mother:

You gave what you got. Oh you were always around at home, trying to compensate and make sure I didn’t go through the same feeling of abandonment. But even when you were holding my hand waiting for the school bus to pick me up, you too were thousands of miles away. Other mothers, talked to their daughters. Asked about their homework, their teachers, their friends but you never did. There was that whole week when you would give me my lunch box without packing my lunch in it, and at lunch break, I would open an empty lunch box. (WDILMP 47)
Dattani through the predicament of his women characters portray that women are always conditioned by the patriarchal society to conform to the established norms of patriarchy but they have to understand that conformity is the bane of creativity and one has to fight against it. Both Nazia and Ruby have tried to search for an authentic, unitary self against the forces of fragmentation and alienation that threaten to undermine their veracity. All of them perform the play SHAKU, produced by Ruby. All these women join hands in projecting a powerful Shakuntala which is their collective effort to articulate women’s point of view. Ruby applauds Nazia, the brain behind this creation when she says, “…there is no one as remarkable, bold, courageous and above all honest a person as my…”(WDILMP 54)

Nazia is a woman of substance and she could only achieve this due to her revolt against the authority of men be it abandoning her husband, her child and the veil which restricts the growth of women. The veil takes on different roles and connotations throughout the play and Dattani has used the veil as a distance between men and women, the veil of modesty, the veil which shrouds reality. Nazia has lived life to some extent on her own terms, who took on the stage as a profession because there was a stigma attached that it was nothing less than prostitution.

Ostensibly, Nazia shows that the identity of a female can be redefined by bringing to the fore its positive potential which can deconstruct the dominant concept of the male as absolute human subject and the subsidiary assumptions that validate it. She expresses her distinctiveness in her thank you note:

I know many of you geriatrics out there remember me for my role as Shakuntala…I don’t think I was right for the part. It belonged to my sister. A very kind, beautiful, generous, evolved soul. Like Shakuntala. Something I can never be in this lifetime. But what the hell. Who wants to be generous and evolved when you have two dancing feet...Oops. Mine are unavailable, temporarily. But that won’t keep me from dancing.(she begins to sway and clap) Dance away! And act like life is one big performance with a standing ovation waiting
at the end of it! Spin me around! Oh this wheelchair is too small for all the life that’s left in me. (WDILMP 55)

Women’s are the dissonant voices which are ordinarily deflected, ignored, subordinated, excluded or destroyed. But Dattani through his women protagonists, Smita in Final Solutions and Nazia and Ruby in Where did I leave my purdah? register protest against the unreasonable and irrational control of social conventions that do not permit women to articulate their feelings. His women characters make bold endeavor for recognition of their qualities and an appreciation of their contribution to society. They begin to rise in conflict against their tormented selves, against men and society. Dattani powerfully portrays the strong emotions of religious freedom and resentment by using the vision of his characters, particularly females. He uses his female characters to exhibit their internal enigmatic narratives of freedom at the same time depicting the religious hostility held by them. He attempts to articulate the voices of those women whose voices have remained inarticulate so far and they have evolved from woman who is circumscribed in the frames of the system to woman who battles with the dominant structures of power.