Chapter Two

Reconstruction of the ‘Female’

The position of women today appears to be very strange. Like a pendulum she is swinging between the contrasting forces of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality and revolt and compromise. (Somjee 4)

The presentation of women in Mahesh Dattani’s work carefully reconstructs the manifestation and individuality of the ‘female’ in India. His characterization is unique as his women are non-conformists in their own ways. Models of femininity have never been static in our society, and they must now be understood from the changing cultural, political and social contexts. To realize how the ‘female’ in Mahesh Dattani’s work has transgressed gender boundaries today, it is necessary to understand what ‘her’ boundaries were. What forced the ‘female’ to wage a strong movement against the unyielding gender boundaries? It is essential to learn about the objectives, mechanics and observations of the feminist movement as the debate on gender boundaries for the ‘female’ appeared as its immediate byproduct.

This movement began as a social struggle for legal, academic and political rights, denied to women till the twentieth century. It later developed into literary criticism that questioned the then existing gender hierarchy established through literature, and examined the representation of the ‘female’ through texts. This movement played a major role in evaluating the social conditions that forced women to behave in a particular ‘gendered’ manner, and also helped in establishing the strong and independent image of the twenty first century ‘female’. Major efforts of feminist critics were invested in exposing the biased mechanisms of patriarchy and social boundaries created through literature and culture. They noted the limited and secondary gender roles allotted to fictional heroines in literature. Indeed, the depiction of women in classic and pre-modern literature as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives and mother figures, was an integral means of perpetuating the traditional ideologies of gender.

British Feminist Rosalind Coward asserts, “More than any other radical movement, feminism is aware of the material effects of images and words and the
oppression or resistance which can be involved in them” (Coward 238). This movement revealed the facts that not only were women deprived of the legal rights and financial independence universally, but they also had to struggle against a male ideology pushing them to virtual silence and obedience. It laid emphasis on the examination of gender-power relations, and representation of women in texts and in life. It also drew the attention of the world towards the fact that only the body of the ‘female’ found representation in texts, her soul was silenced. Feminist critics raised significant questions about social mechanics that are used to construe men and women differently. It was observed that the presentation of women in literary, religious, philosophical and mythological texts formed the social construct of the ‘female’. These images or constructs were formulated from the perspective of the ‘male’ and, therefore, were discarded by feminist critics. French feminist critic, Helene Cixous wrote in her powerful manifesto *Le Rêve de la Méduse* (translated as *The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1976) that men have riveted women between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. Critic M.A.R. Habib reproduces Cixous’ idea of feminism:

The ‘abyss’ refers to negativity and dependence in a woman’s life and the other myth that of women as ‘Medusa’, a demon, beautiful and laughing, is a symbolic code of refusing the history of male conceptuality, of truth as defined by masculine traditions of thought. She has focused on the laugh of Medusa, suggesting that it could be a potential symbol of redeeming women, of liberating her from the degraded status in the history of literature. (Habib 702)

Feminist movement recognizes that in order to create a new image for the ‘female’, it is necessary to do away with the previous ones. With an aim to deconstruct the existing gender power relations, and reconstruct them in favour of the ‘female’, it examines the function of gender socialization and its boundaries which were sanctified by social and literary canons. Since time immemorial, the ‘female’ has been established as the *daasi*- the subservient one, who has to follow the orders of the male. In India, the *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been the major influences in shaping the behaviour towards women and of women themselves. Gender identity created through religious texts is not simply a matter of male or female identity; it largely affects the identity of the
entire culture. In ancient India, women were given the status of Devi or Goddesses and were worshipped. Vedas mention them with respect and affection. Women then attended discourses of Brahmans, the examples of which are Gargi and Maitreyi who held high positions as scholars. It is also believed that women enjoyed advanced status during the ancient times, especially in all those situations where matriarchy was a rule. However, feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir refutes the view that there was ever a matriarchy (a reign of women) in history. She states in her phenomenal text titled The Second Sex:

Even in the matriarchal era as described in the earlier texts, women’s power was viewed as alien, as other, as beyond the human realm. The female goddesses were projections of the male mind. And actual power has always been in the hands of men. Indeed as agriculture was refined and expanded through technological invention based on discovery of bronze and iron, man was able to master the soil...Hence, man’s mastery of the soil was concomitant with the mastery of himself: the religion of women, based on magic and mystery was overthrown by the male principle of rationality, intellect and self creation. (Beauvoir 69, 70)

Later Brahaminical texts such as Manu’s Code (Manusmriti) and mythological texts as The Ramayana played a decisive role in changing the status of women in India. They confirmed her initiation into a patriarchal order, reinforcing her subordination and repression. Obedience to her husband was considered the beginning, middle and end of a female’s life. Images of Savitri and Sita were sold to the Indian women as models worthy of emulation. Through these texts, it was established that women who submitted to the codes of patriarchy were able to reap familial bliss and eternal happiness. These texts created the construct of the Indian ‘female’ as one that is self-sacrificing, composed, unchallenging and subservient. This image was constructed from the viewpoint of the male and therefore it is crucial to understand here, that the ideologies of difference which confine women and men within boundaries were produced by men. These differences were woven so intricately in the cultural patterns of our nation that they now appear innate. Women or their perspective was not taken into consideration when these gender boundaries and cultural ideologies were being formulated. They were deliberately
kept away from the forums of education and their intelligence was doubted by many. In this context, Max Muller states, “Indians did not communicate their metaphysical doctrines to women thinking that if their wives understood these doctrines and learned to be indifferent to pleasure and pain, and to consider life and death as same, they would no longer continue to be the slaves of others, or if they failed to understand them they would be talkative and communicate their knowledge to those who had no right to it” (Chakravarti 41).

For the Indian female of the medieval times, the focus of attention gradually shifted from education to domestic life. Through religious texts, it was established that to look after the family was the dharma of a female. This spoilt the chance of the Indian ‘female’ to regain her original status of Devi. Therefore, to redeem the ‘female’ from her insignificant status, the feminist critics produced influential works that re-evaluated literature from the perspective of the female. The academic course of feminist criticism in the past forty years has taken us from a concentration on women’s subordination, mistreatment and exclusion, to the study of her emancipation and reconstruction. The attention of the literary world switched from contradicting the male perspective to exploring the nature of the female world, its outlook, and restoring the lost or suppressed records of female experience. In the last four decades, feminist theory has emerged as one of the most expanding areas of social research on gender and its boundaries. It lays stress on the comprehension of reasons that compartmentalize the world into feminine and masculine. It suggests that the ‘female’ has to evolve from its shadowed past and construct a fresh identity for herself. With the help of novel authors, women’s experience is re-presented, her ascribed boundaries are challenged and she is offered a new image in the twenty first century. Thus, the itinerary of reconstruction of the ‘female’ has begun. Helene Cixous named this contrasting new image as ‘New Woman’: “It is to liberate the New Woman from the Old. The New Woman will dare to create outside the theoretical and will bring about a mutation in human relations. The New Woman is struggling against the meanings and values of the male-oriented world. The struggle takes place within each woman when she refuses compliance with the male-attributed identity” (Habib 703).
In the contemporary times (after the Feminist Movement), women are observing a major revolution in their roles. With education and profession opening their gates for the ‘female’, her life has changed. Beauvoir calls it “the grand revolution of the nineteenth century, which transformed the lot of women and opened for her a new era” (Beauvoir 104). While in the west, the reconstruction of the female identity was the immediate effect of women’s movement for legal and political rights, in the Eastern countries (especially India), the focus was on the social and economic condition of women. Uma Chakravarti presents the views of Ramabai, a social reformer working in pre-independence India:

I beg of my western sisters not to be satisfied with... the outside beauties of the grand philosophies...and the interested discourse of our educated men, but to open the trapdoors of great monuments of the ancient Hindu intellect, and to enter the dark cellars where they will see the real working of the philosophies they admire so much... In cities and streets of sacred learning there are thousands of men who are spiritual rulers...they neglect and oppress women. (Chakravarti 75)

Right from the colonial days, women’s issues have formed an important part of agenda of the political and cultural movements in India. The female in India has also been struggling for a long time to gain an equivalent status within society. Indian feminist critics have also been trying hard to give a fresh shape and new lease to the life of women, and are making serious efforts towards reconstructing the identity of the ‘female’ in India through available literature. Meenakshi Mukherjee’s Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India provides a profound examination of the emergence of novel in India during the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century, and explores how the ‘woman’ in India was re-created through writers like Rabindra Nath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chatterji, Saratchandra Chattrejee, Premchand and Anantha Murthy. A collection of essays titled Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, locates the identity of women within nineteenth century colonial, patriarchal framework and discusses social reforms for women in that era. Uma Chakravarti, Partha Chatterjee, Nirmal Banerjee and Susie Tharu have made varied and valuable
contributions in this book to explain how gender socialization is involved in the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality.

India is living through a time of major transformation in societal relations. These transformations are inspired from the outside as well as generated from within. The rapid equalization between the sexes in educational and professional sphere and a marked increase in women’s self-confidence are probably the most lasting legacies of the women’s movement of the west, but in India the primary aims of the feminist movement are yet to be achieved. Indian women are still swinging between contrasting forces. On the one hand, the ‘female’ in India is fed on the success stories of the feminist movement in the west (which is causing tremendous stir) and, on the other, Indian religious and philosophical texts still compel the female to follow the tradition of submission. This ambivalent condition of the Indian female, where she has to choose from her stereotypical image and a more progressive one has become a crucial factor in the reconstruction of the identity of the female in India. In the light of the ideas and interpretations of the feminist movement in the west and in India, it can be understood that it is necessary for the female to withdraw from specified images and re-create her own reflection.

This course of reconstruction can be traced especially through the plays of Mahesh Dattani. He sincerely comprehends the state of the Indian female, explores her social space with great passion, and presents the changed meaning of her existence. Janet Brown writes in her book *Women, Gender and Anti-Colonialism*: “In the twentieth century the drama that is feminist in intention has exhibited a commitment to telling the stories of silenced and marginalized women, celebrating women’s community and expressing the moral concerns and societal criticism that arise from women’s experiences” (15). In accordance with Brown’s statement, Mahesh Dattani’s plays are certainly feminist in intention as he paints the ‘female’ in twin hues; the silenced and marginalized women who later evolve in order to celebrate their womanhood. His theatre acquires a feminist perspective as his plays concern themselves with women as subjects, explore their emotional realities and bring forth their expressions. Mahesh Dattani stated in an interview: “A writer always has a theme, a place, a character that proves to be the source of energy without which the writer will not have the creative, emotional or intellectual stamina to last through the process of writing. With me it happens to be marginal people
amongst others. Women interest me a great deal. I draw a lot of energy from the
women I know.” (Multani 166).

There are issues concerning the ‘female’ which are still un-discussed and
unrevealed on the Indian stage but Mahesh Dattani dares to acknowledge their
existence. Assistant Professor of Theatre at Swarthmore College, Erin B. Mee,
recorded his statement: “You can talk about feminism, because in a way that is
accepted... But you can’t talk about a middle class housewife fantasizing about
having sex with a cook or actually having a sex life- that isn’t Indian either-that is
confrontational even if it is Indian” (Mee c: 163). He amazes his audience with his
ingenuous introspection of the life of women. His portrayal of the female is
appreciated by audience and readers worldwide, as his women are dynamic and
determined. Defying the tradition of portraying them in an oppressed state of social
condition, he presents ‘his’ women as assertive individuals. He constantly shifts his
women from the state of being trapped in the social matrix to an authoritative space
of control and power. Female characters in Dattani’s plays do not fit within the
stereotypical image of the Indian female established through socio-cultural
institutions, and endeavor to move beyond the ascribed boundaries that relegate
women to an inferior position within the social and economic plane.

Dattani’s knowledge of humanity becomes apparent in his portrayal of
women, as his female characters revolt against the established gender margins.
Women in Dattani’s plays transgress gender boundaries as they not only seek to
challenge the processes of categorization, they also oppose limitations of a definite
image imposed upon them. They try to shed images of Sita and Savitri projected to
them as models of immense courage and sacrifice. The women in Dattani’s works
make efforts for recognition, and violate the convention of being unvoiced. From
generation to generation, women’s traditions have had their own part to play in
countering the patriarchal tradition that has limited and silenced them. Mahesh
Dattani explores these traditions, and through his characterization he challenges the
limits of gender construction. He sensitively portrays the social, financial, sexual
and psychological state of the Indian female, and clearly challenges the boundaries
of gender prescribed for the female. His stage has always been a potent site of
presentation of grave issues; concerns of gender that are often locked up in
cupboards of Indian families are brought out for discussion and debate. In this context, Asha Kuthari Chaudhari observes,

The range of (Dattani’s) themes, his mandatory split level stage, and his own internalization of his craft...have all contributed to the continued growth and renewal of his art both in terms of form and content. . From Where There’s a Will to the matrix of gender roles in Dance Like a Man to Bravely Fought the Queen that explores the shams of the upper middle class joint family...to Thirty Days in September which looks at incest and child abuse, Dattani has never fallen short of serious issues that need to be addressed. (Chaudhari 18, 19)

Dattani’s feminist perspective and the idea of reconstruction of the female identity resonate in his first creation Where There’s a Will. He punched patriarchal standards by empowering women in his debut play, and was appreciated by the audience worldwide. In 1987, Mahesh Dattani was invited by the Deccan Herald, a leading daily in Bangalore, to participate in Deccan Herald Theatre Festival where he wanted to direct a self-written play. In 1988, his theatre group-Playpen delivered its first production. Where There’s a Will. It was a major success, as Mahesh skillfully worked his narrative around the intrigues and maneuvering of a dysfunctional Indian family. Through the convoluted design of a ‘will’, the relationships between the five members of a ‘joint’ family are painfully twisted, and the characters struggle for freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, patriarchy, repressed desires and cultural constructs of gender.

The play revolves around a supposedly self-made industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta, the patriarch who considers himself supreme, his wife-Sonal, his spendthrift son- Ajit, his conniving daughter-in-law, Preeti and Hasmukh Mehta’s mistress, Kiran Jhaveri. In the first half of the Act I of the comic play, the highly dissatisfied Hasmukh is decidedly unhappy with the way in which his life has been spent, with no one living up to his expectations, the way he had lived up to his father’s. Hasmukh is decidedly unhappy with everyone as; Ajit, his only son enjoys life with his father’s hard-earned money and is not half as diligent as himself, Sonal is a ‘saltless’ wife who according to him, has failed as a wife and as a mother, and his daughter-in-law is sly, greedy, and demanding. He keeps reprimanding Ajit, treats
him like a child and is afraid that he may fall victim to the vices of the riches, so he plans a ‘Will’. Hasmukh’s wife Sonal spends her time talking to her sister on the phone, cooking dishes that no-one eats or complaining about her servants and her daughter-in-law. Hasmukh keeps nagging his wife, son and daughter-in-law, but they all ignore his interventions.

The play traces the absurdity and injustices of the Indian middle class family and in the first half the plot appears to be dreadfully simple. Everyone lives in their own world, their interests clash with each other and the house resounds with the noise of their petty quarrels. However, a sudden hush descends on the house, once Hasmukh Mehta dies of a heart attack. Though he could never teach his family any lesson while he was alive, he thinks of a plan that would work after his death. He makes an interesting Will that unfurls many truths later. Humour flows naturally in the second half of the play as Dattani generates the wonderful idea of a living ghost. Hasmukh gets back as a spirit intending to enjoy the exasperation his family would go through, after reading the Will. Soon after his ghost, enters his mistress- Kiran Jhaveri. She remains invisible until the death of the patriarch but surfaces all of a sudden, as she is declared the trustee of Hasmukh’s wealth. He bequeaths all his assets to a trust that is to be managed by Kiran Jhaveri, for a span of twenty one years.

The Will of Hasmukh places her in the central position within the Mehta family and she pulls the strings to manage them. Meanwhile, Hasmukh Mehta returns as a ghost to watch (with sadistic pleasure) the discomfort experienced by his family. Conversely, it is he who receives surprises and the audience and readers derive great pleasure. Initially the family resists Kiran’s entry into the house, but on realizing that they will be able to access Hasmukh’s wealth only after they allow her to live with them, they decide to welcome her. Gradually the family befriends Kiran; she becomes Ajit’s mentor, Sonal’s ‘friend forever’ and she also reveals the mystery behind Hasmukh’s untimely death. Kiran discovers that Hasmukh’s death was triggered by the tablets that were replaced by Preeti, and she uses this secret as a weapon to tame Preeti. A special bond develops between Kiran and Sonal as they discuss Hasmukh Mehta from twin point of view, that of a wife and of a mistress. They share their ‘shared’ life and with each passing day, their relationship becomes more harmonious.
The only ‘soul’ unhappy about this unusual bond is that of Hasmukh Mehta. He (more precisely his ghost) loudly disagrees with whatever the women unveil about him. His ghostly outrage does not synchronize with the voices of the two females who rediscover their identities through their friendship. Irritated over their bonding, Hasmukh Mehta finally decides to hang himself from the tamarind tree outside their house. The audience is told that the tree will be chopped off the following day, which suggests that the family will finally get rid of him. Though Hasmukh Mehta tries to control the lives of his family members even after his death (through his Will) all his plans are ultimately put paid to. Eventually, Dattani unmasksthe schemer (after his death) in accordance with the best conventions of comedy. This play is as much about a dysfunctional, middle class family as it is about the social dynamics of control, authority and hegemony.

Kiran’s characterization in the play is the inversion of stereotypical representation of a mistress, and to that extent, Dattani overturns our theatrical or dramatic expectations. Dattani deconstructsthe popular myth about ‘mistress’ in the Indian context, in which she is often perceived as a caricature (who is abominable and wishes to rob the wife of all comforts and pleasures) and not a character. In the play, she is the only character that has a strong presence and a definable personality. Kiran is the epitome of ‘Dattani’s woman’ as she is well-groomed, judicious, dynamic and worldly wise. She embodies attributes that Dattani staunchly holds as positive and essential for a female. In a way, Dattani’s play may be perceived as a relentless assault on the Indian patriarchy. Kiran befriends Sonal; this innovative idea of the mistress befriending the wife was uncharacteristic and new for the Indian audience. The moment the two women are placed centre-stage they begin to interact, introspect, analyze and criticize. They stop looking at themselves through the perspective of a male (that creates division), instead they begin to resolve their conflicts by re-defining and re-constituting the patriarchal space in female terms. The women in the play are transformed from objects to subjects, and their passive acceptance of gendered roles turns into a pro-active analysis of socially imposed codes of behavior.

Through the play, Dattani explores the traditional Indian middle class family headed by a male and describes what happens when a female takes over in a subtle manner. The power center becomes matriarchal, all of a sudden. This is not just a
positional shift; it is a strategic maneuver which clearly explains the reconstruction of the ‘female’, from a passive participant to a powerful administrator. Dattani’s perception of strength and dignity is invariably that of a woman like Kiran Jhaveri, almost invisible, secluded, suddenly thrust into action, accepting the challenges for what she is worth, and eventually emerging as a winner. She exercises authority with the sensitivity that is considered atypical of Indian women. The association of women with wealth and authority that finally falls to their keeping is seen as problematic in India, where women do not play an instrumental role in financial matters. However, in the case of Kiran, money and authority mingle together to produce symphony.

The roots of women’s present social status lie in the traditional gendered division of labour. In the Indian society, the division of labour is hierarchical; it places the man above the woman. For women to attain equal social status, it is important to eliminate this asymmetrical distribution. Kiran carefully does that, and also teaches Sonal to do the same. She is educated, can manage her world properly and that is why she is respected by Hasmukh. Kiran acknowledges, “He respected my judgment and intelligence. That gave me a lot of confidence. He trusted me” (WJW’506). Famous psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (who is known for his anti-feminist stance because of his penis-envy theory) suggests in his essay “Civilizations and its Discontents”:

Women are incompatible with a fundamental bond of civil society and justice and only men are capable of sublimating their passions and thus capable of the justice that civil life demands. Men’s involvement in public life and their consequent dependence on other men means that they have little energy left for their wives and families, thus a woman finds herself forced in the background by the claims of civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it. (99)

Kiran however, defies Freud’s generalized opinion about women. She is a wise woman who is able to bring the family together and tackles complicated situations with ease and poise. Kiran enters the troubled Mehta house as an outsider and consequentially faces the hostile behaviour of the members of the family. In fact, Preeti, the shrewd daughter-in-law of the house tries to dissuade Kiran but, she persuasively asserts her purpose and positions herself comfortably within the house.
The sharpness of her tone, the clarity of her conception and her manipulative temperament distinguish her from the clichéd image of the traditional Indian female:

PREETI: What if we refuse to let you stay with us?
KIRAN: (Studies Preeti) You are forcing me to say this. I never intended saying it outright, but now I have to make it clear to you. As a trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, I have the right to make a statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust, namely you all, are not complying with the rules set down by the deceased, the holdings of the trust will be divided between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder. Which will mean that you won’t ever get to see even a single rupee earned by your father-in-law. Now will you refuse to let me stay here?
PREETI: Welcome home. (WTW 494)

Dattani skillfully draws a comparison between the power play of a male and a female. Unlike Hasmukh Mehta, Kiran does not exercise authority and never claims to be the master of the Mehta family. She explicitly states that her duty is to run the Mehta group of industries on behalf of Ajit Mehta. Understanding the mechanics and economics of the Will, she clears the misunderstanding to the members of the family that she is just the trustee of the wealth, not its owner. Kiran stands against the image that considers the female ‘incompatible with a fundamental
bond of civil society’. She wields authority with a sensitivity that is perhaps considered peculiar to women. Hasmukh admits that, “any woman who is a mistress and a wife has to be clever” (WTW 496) and “if there was anyone in the office who had the brains to match mine, it was her” (WTW 473).

Hasmukh Mehta is not able to knit the family together in his entire life, whereas Kiran proficiently does that in a short span of time. Gradually, she becomes a ‘father-figure’ for the family. She becomes what Hasmukh should have been, but could never turn out to be. Kiran skillfully teaches Ajit how to live a disciplined life, something his father could never teach through his life-long nagging. She extends training to Ajit, to enable him to control his own life. Kiran eventually proves that it is not necessary to be a male, to be the head of a family or an institution. Dattani avers that headship of a family is not a position that gives a commanding edge to an individual; it is a position that demands timely fulfillment of responsibilities. She acknowledges that after the death of Hasmukh’s father, he found his ‘father’ in Kiran, and depended upon her for all the important official decisions. Dattani provides the audience and readers with an idea that women have the capability to guide and dominate. Hasmukh was steered throughout his life by his father and he never grew out of his shadow. Kiran discloses. “He wanted me to run his life...Hasmukh really did not want a mistress. He wanted a father... Men really never grow up” (WTW 510).

Dattani’s obsession with gender roles becomes obvious through this play, as he presents a contrast between the viewpoint of the male and the female. In the process of controlling the family through money, Hasmukh loses the prospect of bonding emotionally with his family. On the contrary Kiran uses the given authority to make eternal and strong ties. The whole family gradually accepts her as a friend and mentor. Ironically, it is not the father but the mistress who brings the family together by striking a chord with the wife. In this regard, Sita Raina writes in the foreword to the play:

To be the watcher of one’s self is to make intelligent changes in one’s life. In Where There’s a Will Hasmukh has control over his family through his money and forgoes an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationships. As do most of us. Consequently when he became the watcher of actions, he perceives that his desire for control
has led him to be the victim of his own machinations, unlike Kiran who uses the power play to essentially improve her relationships. (Raina 251)

Kiran tries to strike a balance between reason and emotion and, questions her identity in the patriarchal space. Her struggle is directed at denouncing the age old differential practices, and she seeks self definition. Kiran realizes the social distinction between a wife and a mistress, and commits herself to her own sense of personal fulfillment in all areas of relationship -sexual, maternal, economic and social. Though Kiran appears to be determined and manipulative (one who has always enjoyed the comforts of Hasmukh Mehta’s wealth) but the audience and readers learn gradually that she too, has a history of patriarchal violence to deal with:

SONAL: You are so lucky. You are educated, so you know all this
KIRAN: Wrong. I learnt my lessons from being so close to life. I learnt my lessons from watching my mother tolerating my father when he came home with bottles of rum….As I watched him beating her up and calling her names! I learnt what life was when my mother pretended she was happy in front of me and my brothers, so that we wouldn’t hate our father And I learnt when I kept my father away from my mother…I served him those drinks, watching… when he would become unconscious and I would say a prayer... Thank God, he was too drunk to impose himself on us! Yes, Mrs. Mehta my father and your husband were weak men with false strength. (WTW 508)

Economic resource is perceived as an important and powerful factor that helps in tilting the balance of power in favour of the female gender. Women in earlier times were not involved in the realm of power, but Dattani shifts Kiran to the space of patriarchal authority and creates conditions within which she evolves as a winner. He rationalizes Kiran’s relationship with Hasmukh Mehta, and also her status as a mistress. Kiran speaks her heart out, “No woman has an affair with an elderly man, especially a married man, for a little bit of respect or trust. It was mainly for money… It is strange how repetitive life is? And I, I too am like my
mother. I married a drunkard and I too have learnt to suffer silently. Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever” (WTW 508). She carefully understands the mechanics of the present world, governed by capital, and willingly gives in to the hardships of life. She says, “It all worked out to be quite convenient. I got a husband, my husband got his booze, and your father got... well, you know” (WTW 491).

These are the kind of notes that Sonal and Kiran exchange, much to the horror of the dead man. The affable relationship between the wife and the mistress ultimately undermines the oppressive patriarchal structure, and the female assumes authority unobtrusively. Sonal, who plays a docile woman till then, regains her confidence through her friendship with Kiran. Kiran’s compassion and Sonal’s emotional confidence can be felt through their utterances:

KIRAN: Yes, we all have to remain friends for another 21 years.
SONAL: Not for another 21 years. Forever. (WTW 515)

The realities of their lives that Sonal and Kiran share produce fissures in the strong patriarchal foundation which rests upon the principle of suppression. This bond of the wife and the mistress, an unusual combination, proves fatal for Hasmukh’s soul, and gives a critical blow to the power and machinations of patriarchy. The coming together of the wife and the mistress in a harmonious way was Dattani’s creative idea to explore patriarchal standards from a dual perspective. In his own intellectual way, the playwright presents female solidarity and explores the account of oppression experienced by the female.

Apart from the problem of matriarchal space within which female identity is reconstituted, Dattani also draws attention towards the idea of ‘sorority’ or ‘female bonding’ or ‘sisterhood’ especially, through his treatment of Kiran-Sonal relationship. A strong female bonding is emphasized for a mature relationship. However Preeti, the daughter-in-law, remains an outsider in this process. Does it mean, ‘sorority’ is based upon some kind of ‘code’ that governs it? It probably works upon the principle of collective struggle against subjugation that Sonal and Kiran launch together, but in which Preeti plays no role, whatsoever. Kiran and Sonal survive under the patriarchal oppression and could work (or talk) against it, only after the patriarch had died. On the other hand, Preeti purposely designs a
mechanism to get rid of Hasmukh Mehta for her material gains. She says, “He was a
slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He
succeeded with your mother. But I didn’t let him do that to me . . . After he’s gone
we can have all the freedom to do what we want, and also all the money” (WTW
501-502). That is the reason Preeti was kept out of the sorority. Earlier, Kiran tries
to equate her position with Preeti, “Don’t think of her as lower or me as higher. It’s
just a question of circumstances. I got my money one way. She is trying to get hers
by another . . . She hasn’t learnt to give” (WTW 506-507) but later she understands the
difference. She says, “Your mother-in-law was right. I compared myself to you. We
both desire money. She said; don’t lower yourself by comparing yourself to her. You
are low” (WTW 513). This verdict by Kiran is a clear indication of the fact that
feminism does not uphold corrupt means of attaining supremacy. Preeti is ambitious
like Kiran, but her modus operandi is devilish and causes death of a family member.
Dattani’s theatre lays emphasis on the fact that feminist struggle aims at
egalitarianism and not burning the bridges between the two indices of gender.

The dramatist aims to expose the actuality of male domination, while
struggling for the creation of a world in which, women try to establish a separate
identity of their own. India’s cultural ideology involves a definition of men and
women as different, contrasted, complementary and unequal. Gender identity as a
phenomenon is extremely powerful and dominating and it affects both men and
women. It is this reality of domination that Dattani resists. The question of female’s
liberation from male dominance is moral more than social, as it depends upon
voluntary actions and modifiable attitudes on the part of both sexes. Traditional
power equation among males and females has undergone a transformation in the
present context. The ‘female’ is now gaining power through financial independence,
but the male is still trying to cope with this change. C.G. Gupta writes in his book
Colonial Transactions:

Today the fact that most of them (females) have become highly
successful enterprises supports the new age theory that women are far
stronger, more ambitious, aggressive and adaptive to changing
circumstances than most men believed. . . . This change is however
recent, amounts to a dramatic change in gender equation. Today in
the so called developed world, a large majority of women already
consider themselves equal to men, entitled to their rights and having control over their bodies and emotional lives. (18)

Kiran is one such woman, and she tries to infuse a similar confidence in Sonal as well. The solidarity between Kiran and Sonal encourages faith in them, and they get a chance to reconstruct their individualities. Kiran helps Sonal recover from her inferiority complex and Minal’s shadow. All through the play, Sonal was emotionally dependent upon her sister, but once Kiran moves in, she enables her to regain her emotional strength with her compassionate attitude. In the end, Sonal is able to answer her sister back, “Well, as far as I am concerned you can go jump into a bottomless pit” (WTW 516). Through this powerful play, Dattani clarifies what feminism exposes, and what the ‘female’ opposes.

In his comprehensive research on female subordination titled The Subordinate Sex, Vern Bullough mentions: “Compared to men only a handful of women have managed to break into the pages of history. Men have been generals, kings, writers, composers, thinkers and doers, women have been wives, mistresses, companions, friends and helpmates” (3). The role of women (wife or mistress) is time and again considered subservient, but through Kiran Dattani presents a mistress who eventually assumes the role of a master. His bold attempt at Kiran’s characterization reveals the fact that, even after prolonged subjection to oppression, the ‘female’ has the power to revert. Kiran does not attack the prevalent patriarchal system in any way; on the contrary, she attempts to improve the conditions of the family within the framework of patriarchy and emerges victorious. Kiran- the mistress and Sonal- the wife, are both read and viewed in terms of Hasmukh Mehta, till they become friends. Such a bonding and sharing of experiences reinforces power and courage in the womenfolk. In the play, no bold issues are raised, no melodrama takes place, and yet two women find the meaning of their existence. Despite the suggestion of a light, clever and frothy comedy, Dattani’s confronts the issues of distribution of authority, and reconstructs the identity of the ‘female’ in a sincere manner.

Exploration of various aspects of gender and human behaviour is Dattani’s primary interest, which can also be discovered in his masterpiece, Dance Like a Man. Devanesan Mitharan, the Chennai based theatre director, elucidates that the play is about “trying to march to the beat of a different drummer” (Mitharan 87).
The play first performed in 1989 and directed by Dattani himself, constructs the female as ambitious, hopeful, passionate, responsible and acrimonious. Dattani claims: “My Women protagonists fight, scheme and get a piece of action albeit at great personal cost. These are seen as ‘negative’ qualities, sadly by some women too...but really we have yet to see feminism find expression in Indian society” (Chaudhari 70).

Through the narrative of the play Dattani explores the lives of two Bharatnatyam dancers, Ratna and Jairaj, wife and husband. They are both passionate about dance, and they follow it against the will of Jairaj’s father, Amritlal Parekh. He is an old, conventional man and does not allow his son to practice dance. He fights tooth and nail to force his son withdraw from his passion. To cultivate their passion for art, the couple decides to leave their father’s mansion and settles in the house of Ratna’s uncle. However, on realizing the malicious intentions of her uncle, Jairaj decides to move back to his father’s place as he is unable to provide for his family on his own (as is expected of the Indian male). Amritlal draws the maximum out of this situation and makes a pact with his daughter-in-law Ratna that he will consent to her career in dance only if she helps him pull Jairaj out of this profession. Ratna’s approval to this plan causes a disaster in their lives. She robs Jairaj of his passion, his life and ultimately his soul. Jairaj takes to alcohol, retires from dance and dreams of his son becoming a great dancer, and Ratna excels as a dancer and wins laurels. In their act of growing separately, the couple loses their infant son, Shankar, due to overdose of opium administered by the nanny and Ratna herself.

This heartrending incident shatters them both and later, Amritlal softens his stand on Jairaj’s passion for dance and bequeaths his mansion to Jairaj. Eventually, Ratna and Jairaj realize their dream through their gifted and brilliant daughter, Lata. Ratna supervises Lata’s debut as a classical artist and leaves no stone unturned to make it a success. They bask in the glory of her success and meanwhile, Lata decides to marry Vishwas, a businessman completely ignorant about classical dance. Vishwas and Jairaj develop a bond of understanding and Jairaj shares his life with him. Through their shared spaces, Dattani cautiously assembles layers of three generations to explore several human predicaments.

It was for the first time that the Indian audience received a female character that did everything she could to follow her passion. For Ratna, dance is her
obsession, and she crosses all limits of social norms to pursue it. She meticulously
removes all hurdles placed between her and her passion. Dattani weaves an intricate
web of gender relationships, a female for the first time on Indian stage, planning to
move against the wishes of her husband, robs him of his passion (as directed by her
father-in-law). The play dispels the notion that women are at the receiving end of
patriarchal power. Dattani exhibits the enterprising and committed aspect of the
female persona. Through the play, the ambitious and passionate side of a female is
revealed. Ratna, every inch a better dancer than her husband, outdoes her husband in
whatever feat they perform. This is made obvious to the audience and readers in the
very first scene: “Close up of two pairs of feet with dancing bells... The dancers
keep pace with the music as their feet execute a technically complex rhythmic
pattern. The music builds to a crescendo increasing the complexity of their footwork
till the male pair of feet cannot keep pace anymore. The male pair of feet give up
and walk away out of frame” (Dattani b: 91).

Ratna learns to counter her ‘demons’ very early in life. She was an innocent
woman trying to establish herself as a dancer but she gradually learnt the cunning
ways of the world to meet her desired goals. The play highlights that to perform as a
classical dancer came as a challenge in Jairaj’s life and ruined him for all times.
Though Ratna’s life was equally in tumult, she had to bear the brunt of Jairaj’s
choice, too. To continue her practice, she had to rob him of his passion and in doing
so she lost her love forever. Ratna appears a hardcore rebel as she has to counter the
perception of her father-in-law, provide for her family, and fight the hatred of her
husband. In fact, she learns the art of rebellion from her dance teacher, the devdaasi-
Chenni Amma. She infuses the spirit of rebellion as she teaches:

To master the art of abhinaya, you will have to find the God and
woman inside you- and to dance, you must fight the demons outside
you. To keep our tradition alive you have to be a rebel. Such is the
irony of our times. There are people who do not see the beauty of
what we do. They are the demons you must overcome. Those people
who do not understand the rhythm of life itself. (Dattani b: 118)
She is hinting at people like Amritlal who do not understand the rhythm of life but make other people dance to their tunes by exercising their power. Ratna, the efficient learner, overcomes all her demons that prevent her from realizing her dream of being an accomplished dancer. Ratna is presented as vicious and selfish; her ambitious nature assigns her a negative trait so much so that even her husband blames her for Shankar’s death. Mahesh Dattani mentions in “The Preface”:

Once a lady, who claimed to be a feminist, said that I am a woman-hater because Ratna in Dance Like a Man is responsible for the death of her child. A woman can never be so irresponsible. You should treat your women with more sympathy, ‘she said imperiously. What...does she think Jairaj should be doing? How it is only a woman’s responsibility to play the nurturer? It takes two to breed, remember? I wish I had said something like ‘A true feminist wouldn’t make such a remark.’ I wish, I wish. (Dattani a: xii)

However, a closer scrutiny of the play reveals that Dattani never blames Ratna for Shankar’s death and explains Ratna’s situation. The justification can be heard in the following conversation:

JAIRAJ. Are you all there for Shankar, when he needs you, where are you?
RATNA. I know my duties and my capabilities. And I have always taken pride in knowing where I stand. (Dattani b: 162)

This is how she is able to subvert patriarchy, paving the way for an equally strong matriarchal hold. Throughout the play, Ratna establishes her dominance in
various ways, overtly and covertly. Ratna’s powerful and dominant character defines her as a vicious female. She shows no interest in her daughter’s love interest or marriage, as her primary focus is to launch Lata as a talented artist. She infuses the spirit of the New Woman in Lata, whose primary aim is financial and professional independence. The only quality she finds in her future son-in-law, Vishwas, is that he is wealthy and would allow Lata to dance after their marriage. Through her own experience, she realizes the importance of fulfilling one’s dreams and could also anticipate the dire consequences, if the contrary happens.

RATNA. Oh, Vishal! He seems a bit strange but I suppose he is all right. Why?
LATA. He has asked me to marry him.
RATNA. He’s well off isn’t he?
LATA. Amma!
RATNA. And he will let you dance, no?
LATA. Yes.
RATNA. Then let the wedding be after Navratri. (Dattani b: 109)

Ratna doesn’t even know his name, her only interest is to save and nurture Lata’s dreams, as through her, she is realizing and fulfilling her own. She arranges for Ratna’s grand debut and organizes the entire event methodically. She gets overwhelmed on hearing the appreciation her daughter receives after her first stage performance, and feels that her hard work has finally paid off. Ratna shouts, “I heard. Rave reviews! The star of the festival! The dancer of the decade! And why wouldn’t she get reviews like these? I deserved it. Spending sleepless nights arranging things. Sweet talking to critics. My hard work has finally paid off, hasn’t it? Hasn’t it?” (Dattani b: 153) (emphasis added). Her desire to succeed, her eagerness to realize her dreams can be felt through her words. By promoting the idea that whatever one generation of women could not achieve for themselves is what they are trying to help the next generation achieve, Dattani establishes his position as a feminist.

Lata, the most pragmatic, assertive and confident character, tries to strike a balance between her professional and personal life. She realizes her parents’ dream of becoming a successful dancer. She fulfills her parents’ vision and tries to fill the void in their personal lives as well. In the last act of the play, when she is in the
advanced stage of pregnancy, she makes a promise to her mother. In the words of Ratna, “Lata says, if it’s going to be a boy, she would want to name him Shankar. Yes, I told her everything...finally” (Dattani b: 164). She is an ideal example of Dattani’s woman as in her we find a perfect amalgamation of strength and passion.

A constructive change in the growth of a female is witnessed through Dattani’s plays, from a docile, domesticated, passive person to, a reasonable, logical individual who can take independent decisions not only for herself, but also for other members of her family. Ratna’s potential and power proves that she can embrace several roles. This New Woman has punctured the stereotyped fallacies attributed to female nature and has demanded a position of parity for herself. Her success in the areas so far reserved for men, has confirmed researchers in psychology that there is no inherent difference in the aptitudes of men and women. Psychologist Robert Hertz ascertains in his book More Equal than Others, “If the difference appears, it is on account of their socializing and upbringing that leads them to internalize ideas about their being a stronger or weaker sex” (4).

The play establishes that Ratna’s powerful character leads to the ruin of Jairaj’s soul but the fact is that Ratna is struggling under the weight of ‘relocated authority’. In the traditional Indian family set up, ‘men hunt and women cook’. In India, where women were not provided opportunities of equality earlier, education and globalization have played a vital role today, and women have gained financial and social self-reliance. Apart from domestic duties, women today carefully handle the responsibility of family headship and monetary affairs, which were considered a masculine domain. In the contemporary times, authority has relocated itself on the heads of the female and they feel more stressed. Jairaj is never able to provide for his family independently. After moving out of their father’s house, the couple takes refuge in Ratna’s uncle’s dwelling. Ratna’s uncle tries to take advantage of her and Jairaj decides to move back to his father’s house but this time on Amrital’s terms. By no means can Jairaj provide for her and hence the burden of family responsibility falls upon her, which means she has to both hunt and cook. Her grief can be sensed when she discloses, “There are problems which you know about but conveniently forget” (DLM 402). She blames Jairaj, “You are fine because you never left your father’s home and stood on your own two feet . . . You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house” (DLM 402).
Ratna is conceived by Dattani as a determined woman, who obtains a fundamental position in the family. Unlike Kiran, who held the reins of power constructively to generate prosperity in the family, Ratna’s control of authority leads to catastrophe. She is always burdened by the responsibilities of domestic and professional situations, and receives no financial or emotional support from her husband. In fact, Jairaj adds to her troubles by being jealous of her accomplishments.

AMRITLAL. Don’t be late. I especially requested Gowda to attend the performance tonight.

JAIRAJ. You requested Gowda to attend? Wonders will never cease. Congratulations, Ratna. You’ve made dance respectable in this house.

AMRITLAL. That’s enough, Jairaj. You have a talented wife. At least have the decency to support her.

JAIRAJ. Oh, I do. I do. Very well, what Ratna Devi wants, Ratna Devi will get. (Dattani b: 156)

Dattani brings to light the fact that Indian mind-set finds it extremely difficult to accept that the wives may earn more money or fame than their husbands. A large number of marriages in India turn sour or end bitterly because such an imbalance in the family equation, owing to the wife’s higher status, high income and the resulting independence of thought and action. In this regard The Economist states, “If a husband earns less than his wife, she might rightfully expect him to take on some additional responsibilities at home. In reality, however, if she earns more, she spends more time taking care of the household and their children...One wonders whether such women feel compelled to soothe their husbands’ unease at earning less” (Bertrand 1). Ratna could have turned down Amritlal’s request and stayed with her husband elsewhere. However, that was not even an option to consider as Jairaj proves to be a non-provider. Therefore, Ratna earns for her family, endeavors to make Lata an accomplished dancer, and also puts up with the cold indifference of her husband.

*Dance Like a Man* has always been read and performed from Jairaj’s perspective. Though Ratna might appear as a failure from Jairaj’s point of view (as wife and mother) but professionally she emerges as a winner and becomes a role-
model for her daughter. Dattani tries to establish the fact that a matriarchal arrangement can also be commercially successful. A closer observation of the play reveals the pain and pathos of Ratna. The play elucidates that majority of women live in a state of agreement because either there is lack of agreeable choices or they consider themselves vulnerable and dependent. Dattani brings forth the fact that women’s interests and passions have always been regarded as subsidiary, subservient and always absent from the productivity quotient of a nation. He evidently tries to construct a powerful role of the female. Ratna broadens the horizons of female authority and capability, far beyond anything permitted within the confines of the conventional female role. Ratna is the most audacious female character conceived by Dattani, who openly challenges the dominance of the patriarchal hierarchy and conspires to be a winner in her own way. She reminds us of the Indian Goddess Kaali. According to mythology, Kaali’s independence (being unaligned with any male god), her physical position above God, her dark and dishevelled appearance are deliberate markers that place her in a very different league from other goddesses, who appear as docile maids in comparison to their male counterparts.

Dattani skillfully probes into the gender dynamics of social equations. The theme of domination and resistance pervades all his works. He creates an acknowledgement of the issues of gender supremacy and confronts it fearlessly. He acknowledges, “I am fighting for my female self. And since I have the male self, which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It is subsumed, yes, it’s marginalized, but it fights back” (Chaudhari 48). This idea of marginalization and fighting back, which is crucial to the reconstruction of the female, is nowhere more conspicuous than in Dattani’s Bravely Fought the Queen.

First performed at Sophia Bhava Hall, Mumbai in 1991, the play painfully reflects on the appropriation of women in a class and gender biased society. It charts the emotional, sexual and financial structures in the lives of an urban Indian family and deals with the issues of gender relations in the contemporary urban scenario. Michael Walling, artistic director of Border Crossings, mentions in “A Note on the Play”: “This is a play about performance, and uses the theatre to demonstrate how, in a world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life...By exploiting layer upon
layer of performance, of unreality. Mahesh allowed his actress a route to emotion in its rawest form: the pain, the anguish in the blood knot of the family which is his constant theme” (Dattani a: 230). The play scrutinizes how far the position of women has really changed in urban families as the audience is introduced to an urban family which comprises the Trivedi brothers, Jiten and Nitin, co-owners of an advertising agency. They are married to two sisters, Dolly and Alka respectively, who spend most of their time at home looking after their bed-ridden mother-in-law, Baa. They take turns to nurse Baa as they are not pleased with her attitude towards them. The play dramatizes the hypocrisy and sham in the lives of its cloistered women and self-indulgent, unscrupulous men, through two more characters: Sridhar, an employee in the Trivedis’ advertising agency and his wife, Lalitha. Bravely Fought the Queen deals with the issues of varying gender relations in the contemporary urban scenario. The script is laid out in three acts titled ‘The Women’, ‘The Men’ and ‘Free for All’.

In the female world of Act I, Lalitha comes as an uninvited guest to Dolly’s house where she also meets Dolly, and gradually, they all share, discover and reveal their lives and secrets. This act is pitted against the male world of business and advertising in Act II, where Sridhar spends his entire time convincing his bosses not to treat women as objects of sexual desire and respect them as consumers. He fails but does not give up. In Act III, the two worlds fall apart and the characters stand exposed. Dolly’s daughter (Daksha) and her brother (Praful) are characters who do not appear on the stage physically but they give the play a constructive direction. Their virtual absence unfolds many dark secrets and exposes the hypocrisy of the world of an urban middle class family in India. Blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, the play reveals dreadful secrets of domestic violence, homosexuality, alcoholism, adultery and hypocrisies.

With the help of Lalitha, an uninvited and unwanted guest, Act I of the play reveals the cloistered lives of Alka and Dolly. The three women plan costumes for a masked ball, discuss their lives and explore how each is limited within patriarchal boundaries. It unveils many layers of subjects that are buried deep within Indian families, and portrays gendered ways of being men and women. The play also illustrates the gender deviants and Dattani himself acted as one, in one of the rehearsals. In the paper titled “Everyone will be in Costumes! And will have masks
on! Gender and Performance in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, theatre director Michael Walling reveals:

Mahesh suddenly became very animated during rehearsals and asked, ‘Michael- let me play Dolly today- please, please!’ I could hardly turn down so intense a request…Mahesh portrayed the blind panic of a woman living through fiction, whose carefully constructed façade of a successful ‘normal’ daughter was in danger of being discovered and dismantled…Mahesh’s playing of Dolly that afternoon was a great revelation for all… Moreover, the fact that a male actor was able to portray the female character was deeply subversive of the gender norms which the play dissects and questions. (Walling b: 67, 68)

The gender norms are examined through the Trivedi family where all standards of social existence are set strictly in accordance with dictates of patriarchy. Through the mechanism of the play, Dattani reveals that in the liberated set up of urban families, women are still judged according to age old parameters. The women belong to their men and put up with all forms of ill-treatment. Under the veneer of sophistication and social pretence, lies the norm of violence, controlling the actions of women. The lives of Alka and Dolly were controlled earlier by their brother Praful, and later by their husbands. The pathos of the brutality inflicted upon these women can be felt through Alka’s words:

Nitin and Praful were home talking. I came home with my neighbour’s son from school. I told him to drop me before our street came. He didn’t understand and dropped me right at our doorstep. Praful saw. He didn’t say a word to me. He just dragged me into the kitchen. He lit the stove and pushed my face in front of it! I thought he was going to burn my face! He burnt my hair. I can still smell my hair on fire. Nitin was right behind us. Watching! Just…Praful said, ‘Don’t you ever look at any man. Ever. (*Bravely Fought the Queen* 257) (Emphasis added)

Traumatized by such ruthless means, Alka is further forced by her brother to marry the same silent observer, Nitin. She discovers later that her husband is a
homosexual and his sexual partner was none other than her brother Praful. As Alka is not given a choice, she cannot refuse to accept the decision and is threatened into matrimony. In *Gender Inclusive*, Adam Jones reveals:

> The Women have been denied freedom and independence and made subservient to the male, looking after his children, his household and catering to his sexual needs. Her own sexuality was supposed to lay dormant until ‘given away’ in marriage by one male, her father to another male, her husband, who thereby acquires exclusive property rights to her body. Without an understanding of male supremacy and female oppression, it is impossible to explain why the vast majority of incest perpetrators are male and majority of victims are female.

(11)

The audience gradually learns that at Nitin’s house too, she is beaten brutally by her husband and is forced out of the house, for misbehaving with Baa. No one understands her suffering and she tries to find solace in alcohol. She creates her identity through acts of defiance such as consuming alcohol and dancing in the rain publicly. To the audience, she might appear to be an uncivilized drunkard but Dattani clearly paints the picture of a female, yelling in anguish and struggling every inch, to free herself from the crippling limitations of patriarchal domination.

Alka and Dolly share their loneliness in *Bravely Fought the Queen* (staged by Department of English and Cultural Studies, PU).

Within the Trivedi family, there is a sense of ownership associated with the relationship between men and women. Another victim of domestic abuse in the family, Dolly, maintains the lie that her daughter Daksha is a brilliant dancer, and is
away to a boarding school in Ooty, while she is actually a physically challenged child. Daksha is a painful reminder of the violence enforced on her by Jiten while she was in the family way. However, during the course of the play, she musters up the courage to acknowledge the reality in front of outsiders, and holds Jiten responsible for the tragedy. She blurs:

You want to see her dance? They teach her dance where she goes! Only they call it physiotherapy. I'll bring her tomorrow from her...special school and she will dance for you! Like this.... *(She demonstrates a spastic uncoordinated arm and neck movement with her eyes dilated.)* Right, Jitu? Isn't this the way she dances. *(Repeats movement. Jiten looks away.)* Look! Look! No! Oh no! I will not let you get away so easily! They were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me! It's in your blood! It's in your blood to do bad. *(BFQ 312)*

Michael Walling was extremely touched by this particular scene, and he states that this may seem an "innocuous line on the page. But this writing is writing beyond words: This is theatre" *(Walling a: 230)*. This is definitely theatre by all means, as it candidly replicates the position of women in the middleclass domestic household. Dattani uses his keen sense of dialogue to generate tension between Dolly and Alka, who exchange hurtful words at times, each trying to score over the other. However, later in the act, the playwright skillfully creates the fortitude of female affinity, as the sisters are seen supporting each other. While discussing their bondage within their households, they develop bonds of affection, and also share their intimate secrets. Though they were already aware of each other's secrets, but there comes an instance where they share them willingly with each other and are also able to appreciate and enter into each other's worlds of fantasy. They become unmindful of Lalitha's presence and envelop her within their world.

Lalitha, the interloper, offers a marked contrast to the two sisters. In this meeting the women relate to each other in terms of their patriarchal identity as wives and also in terms of their capitalist identity as employer and employee. Lalitha's entry introduces a different representation that is totally alien to the two sisters. In their stratified system in which women have assigned roles to play, Lalitha is able to create her own space. She enters the Trivedi household as an audience to
their routine life but gradually, becomes a participant. Unlike the Trivedi sisters who appear to be clueless about their lives, she seems confident and independent. Lalitha proudly mentions, “I keep myself occupied. I do a bit of writing. Freelance. I write an occasional column for The Times. Sometimes I review cultural events. I am into meditation. And oh-yes, I grow bonsai plants- I’ve been growing them for years. I do a bit of creative writing as well. You know, poetry and stuff like that” (BFQ 243). She is also familiar with the professional affairs of her husband. Though it appears that she is the archetype of the New Woman, but she too, is trapped in the claws of patriarchal authority. Through her, the audience is drawn towards another common reality which undermines the identity of the female. A woman cannot plan her family on her own; she has to seek permission from her husband which means that she has to alter her desires in accordance with her husband’s. Lalitha cannot plan her child because her husband is saving money to buy an accommodation. She feels lonely, gives her love to bonsais but has no say in this matter. Similarly, Alka blames Nitin and Baa for being childless. She cries, “You know why I can’t have children. You won’t let me. That’s why... He needs your permission to have children and by God you won’t give it to him” (BFQ 284). The predicament of Lalitha and Alka in the play reflects Dattani’s feminist viewpoint regarding the status of women and their freewill in the modern social and cultural environment. Alka loses her pain in the dizziness of alcohol whereas Lalitha grows bonsais to fill up the void in her life.

The bonsai is an interesting trope used by Dattani; it represents womenfolk, whose lives are controlled, ‘stunted and trimmed’ by men. On the one hand, it reflects on the nurturing aspects of Lalitha, and on the other, it unveils the attitude of a power-ridden society towards women. The women in the play are like Lalitha’s bonsais. Lalitha explains, “You stunt their growth. You keep trimming their roots and bind their branches with wire and... stunt them...You plant the sapling in a shallow tray- you’ve got to make sure that the roots don’t have enough space to spread. You still have to keep trimming as they grow...You can shape their branches into whatever shape you want -- by pinching or wiring the shoots” (BFQ 246). The desires of women in the family, too, are constantly trimmed. Their roots, implying their identities, are not given proper space to spread. All the cutting and trimming makes the bonsai a pretty and expensive, decorative object, just like the women in the family.
Payal Nagpal in her essay “Consuming and Selling Women: An Analysis of Gender Play and Politics of Capitalism in Mahesh Dattani’s Bravely Fought the Queen” asserts, “Alka, Dolly and Lalitha all are bonsais each of different kind, with one difference. Unlike the bonsai, their nurturing needs are also not taken care of. But like the bonsais, they too reflect on the beauty and class quotient of their male counterparts. Yet one must keep in mind that this is the only functional motif that is associated with the women in the play” (80). On a closer observation, one discovers that the shriveled old “woman under the tarpaulin” (BFQ 94) is also a reminder of the state of women in the Trivedi household. She is constantly kicked from one house to another, the way the Trivedi women are driven out from Praful’s house to the Trivedis’. The way she looks out of the tarpaulin for the first time, to see Alka dance in the rain, reminds the audience and readers that it is the first time that any female of the Trivedi household is listening to the dictates of her heart. Just as the women in the family become targets of violent behavior, she is also “kicked till she got up and left” (BFQ 259). Later in the play, the woman under the tarpaulin is run over and over again by a car, and is brutally killed which is reminiscent of the violence inflicted upon the women in urban Indian scenario. The play confirms that in conventional Indian societies violence plays a primary role in regulating the actions and behavioural patterns of women.

The play also pinpoints another phenomenon that is common to Indian women, and is closely related to their subjugation. Indian women, who are married, are not addressed by their first names and at times, are even not recognized by their own names in their social circle. To acknowledge their identity they have to qualify themselves as Mrs. So-and-so or wife of Mr. So-and-so. Not being recognized by one’s own name becomes a major challenge to one’s identity, but Indian women accept it as a part of tradition and overlook this gendered practice. This practice appears as an extension of the fact that Indian women are passed on from the custody of one man (father or brother) to another (husband). In the play, Dolly does not recognize Lalitha till she mentions the name of her husband, though she had met her many times earlier.

LALITHA: It’s okay I understand you must be meeting a lot of people at parties. I’m Lalitha.
DOLLY: I did remember your name, Lalitha . . .
LALITHA: It’s okay even if you didn’t.

DOLLY: No, no. I did. What I was trying to remember was—whose wife are you...Jiten did mention that Lalitha will be coming and she happens to be so-and-so’s wife. Which is what I have forgotten. Whose wife are you?

LALITHA: I get what you mean. Well, I m Sridhar’s wife.

(Dattani also presents the contrast, the other side of this subservient attitude. Alka, who is beaten for her defiance, takes a firm stand for an identity that is established by the first name. When Lalitha introduces herself to Alka as, “I m Sridhar’s wife”, she quickly answers, “Oh yes. Lalitha, right” (BFQ 242). This gives a boost to Lalitha’s confidence which can be read in her laughter that follows. Alka also forbids Lalitha to address her as Mrs. Trivedi. She asserts, “Call me Alka” (BFQ 248) and tries to establish her personality, her individuality that is detached from her husband. This play introduces newer ways for women to observe their identity and also suggests certain measures to safeguard it.

In this creation of Dattani, questions about gender, sexuality and identity are raised, silence is voiced and the concealed is made visible. In Act II titled ‘The Men’, one can capture the conformist male perspective about the female. For their advertisement campaign of an undergarment brand- ReVaTee, the Trivedi brothers transform women into brand slogans. Jiten’s disrespectful opinion about women is apparent when he suggests, “And get this Shirley Girlie to strip at the end” (BFQ 265). Despite Sridhar’s (their employee) efforts, the Trivedi brothers are unable to understand that women are the actual clients of the product, and they have to respect their sentiments as customers. They believe that their product is to make women attractive and appealing to men. They present the female as a sexual object in their ‘AV’- audiovisual advertisement:

You see, take our press ads. You’ve got the model lying on the bed and the signature is ‘Light his fire with ReVaTee.’ In the storyline for the video commercial, you have the model looking out of the window and she sees that her husband or her lover has come home. She quickly rushes, opens a box, removes the new ReVaTee bra, panties and nightie. Cut to her dressed in them. She lets her hair loose,
pirouettes and lies down in the bed, just as the door opens. Freeze. Signature: ‘Light his fire with ReVaTee’. *(BFQ 274)*

In the advertisement, the female is presented as an object of desire and her perspective as a consumer is ignored. This leads to a clash between Sridhar and Jiten. Sridhar argues, “I told you about a market survey. About a dozen women...We had given them a questionnaire each to fill up after seeing the AV...They all said in different words of course- but most of them used one word to describe it-offensive...They say we haven’t understood women” *(BFQ 275).* Through this man-to-man discussion, Dattani underscores the stereotypical male views about women, handed down from one generation to another. These views are finally challenged by the female characters.

Dattani gives a hint about the problem of ‘commodification’ or ‘objectification’ of women, widespread in the Indian culture in which women and their lives are majorly established or modified by patriarchal limitations. The treatment of women as objects since ages is narrated through the epic *Mahabharata* wherein the Pandavas share their wife as common property irrespective of the fact that she chose only Arjuna as her husband. Later, just as a commodity, she was lost to the Kauravas in a gambling game, was dragged forcibly by her hair and was disrobed publicly. Even the great king Harishchandra sold his wife as a commodity. These examples from mythology state that the Indian society is dominantly male-centric, as far as its power structure is concerned. Women are still judged according to parameters laid down by men. In the modern era, women who earn for themselves and have purchasing power do not fit into the Trivedi (comformist) patriarchal arrangement and exist only as ‘screwed up women’. In their campaign and life, the only acceptable position of women is that of a commodity. Jiten claims, “Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power. Yes! There’s no point in asking a group of screwed up women what they think of it. They’ll pretend to feel offended and say, ‘Oh, we are always being treated like sex objects” *(BFQ 276).*

Only a feminist would refuse to give in to such a thought, and Dattani’s feminist viewpoint is voiced by Sridhar. He reads out the response of the women about the audio-visual campaign, “It was tasteless and degrading. Despite its womanized treatment, it up holds the silliest of all Indian notions that woman exists
to please man etc., etc. (reads another) No woman waits for her husband to arrive to change into a frilly overpriced nightie and jump into bed” (BFQ 279). These hackneyed thoughts which are read as feedback of the female consumers are not just another set of clichéd lines. Sridhar puts his thoughts firmly, “These are valid comments” (BFQ 279). Through these lines, the dramatist magnifies and exposes the wide gap between male and female culture, and the way they have comprehended each other over centuries. The Trivedi brothers conveniently forget that the females constitute the major share of the consumer market. “If the consumer economy had sex, it would be female,” wrote American author Bridget Brennan in her book *Why She Buys*, adding that “market executives should learn to become female-literate” (Vasudev 12). In India, the economy was traditionally run by patriarchal heads, and therefore women had no say in the matter. Even for things that were primarily for women, they were dependent upon their men as they had the buying power. It can be observed as a clever strategy to keep women away from the circle of power and finance.

The only way to escape from the boundaries of social and financial stratagems created for relegation is to enter them. And to do so, women must realize the strength of togetherness. Adrienne Rich offers a potent hypothesis of a female diaspora:

> The idea of a common female culture- splintered and diasporized, among the male cultures under and within which women have survived-has been haunting the feminist thought over the past few years. Divided from each other through our dependencies on men- domestically, tribally, and in the world of patronage and institutions- our first need has been to recognize and reject these divisions, the second to begin exploring all that we share in common as women on this planet. (Warhol 224)

The women in the Trivedi household, too, take their first step towards solidarity by sharing what is common between them --- the history of their abuse, and their ways of dealing with it. Dattani first presents the women in a fractured social space and then, consistently relocates them within patriarchal space of control and authority. While discussing the masked ball, each one wishes that the other should
LALITHA: We’d heard the praises sung so often
   So bravely fought the manly queen...
   So bravely fought the manly queen…”
ALKA: ‘Khoob ladi mardani who to…”
DOLLY: Bravely fought the manly queen? Why manly?
ALKA: Because she is brave.
LALITHA: I always laugh when I remember the poem.
   I guess it just means that she was brave.
ALKA: Brave enough to qualify as a man.
LALITHA: Full of manly valour. (BFQ 295, 296)

Women in the play possess the insight to realize that the association of the female with bravery is a paradoxical term. In every situation, where a female holds a powerful position, her actions are endorsed as manly. Gina Allen explicates in the treatise titled “How Your Daughter Grows Up to Be a Man”: “When a woman goes for work she is part of ‘manpower’. If she is physically abused she is ‘manhandled’…If they do something dumb, they are told they behaved just like a woman. If they say something intelligent, they are told they think just like a man” (Havemann b: 53). In the Indian context, too, the Queen of Jhansi, who was courageous and valorous was labelled—*mardaani* (man-like). To qualify Rani Laxmi Bai as brave, even the poet Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, had to define the brave queen as *mardaani*. Dattani establishes how even in the course of history, the immense bravery of women is appropriated by the patriarchal concept of heroism. In actuality, women who display the attribute of bravery are at the risk of losing their feminine image. The Young Ladies Counselor brings this fact to light: “In the early twentieth century, young female readers were asked not to admire Joan of Arc because her masculine attitude casts...a shadow upon her more womanly qualities...Her position as a military leader and combatant, unsexes her before your feelings” (Wise 23). Such notions illustrate the truth that the female has to forgo her feminine image if she has to meet the criteria of being brave. However, fortunately for this generation, writers such as Mahesh Dattani make an effort to reconstruct the female in terms in which she can candidly express her bravery and fortitude,
regardless of how she is imprisoned within a stereotypical image of hers, as someone feeble and coy.

The women giggle and laugh at the idea of dressing up as a brave queen. In fact, Alka swishes an imaginary sword, demonstrating the valor of the queen. This suggests that despite years of conditioning by the patriarchal laws, women still have the courage to challenge detrimental social forces. Rani Lakshmi Bai, the woman who gave a tough challenge to the English army is presented in the Indian history as a model of courage and bravery. Her biography tells us that while going for the battle, she tied her son on her back. This shows that an Indian woman never ignores her responsibilities, and even in moments of extreme crisis, she fulfills her duties.

Women in the Trivedi mansion also try to do the same. They face violence at the hands of their husbands, and have no say in any affair but, they still share the responsibility of Baa. Even though they do not like to serve Baa as she is offensive in her language and patriarchal in her behaviour, they do it patiently. They do not avert their responsibility as they are (like the Rani of Jhansi) completely dedicated towards their duty.

The dramatist strongly explicates that under the garb of sophistication and social pretence, the coordinates of abuse still persist. It is believed that women are more liberated today and are on an equal footing with men but. Dattani uses his theatre to present a very different reality. He lifts the veil of refinement and civility off the urban situation and exposes the reality of the power structures in society that continue to disempower women. The practice of policing the behavioural patterns of women shows how deviously it impacts the characters of the Trivedi household. Since generations, their women have been subjected to physical and emotional abuse, and this has been used as a way of controlling and manipulating them. Baa, who makes her presence felt with a shrieking bell, is the only female character in the play who gets to exercise authority. Initially, she had been subjected to violence by her husband, and later, she abets her sons in physically abusing their partners. Dolly was beaten brutally by Jiten, while she was expecting Daksha, and hence she was born with physical anomalies. Baa is ridden with guilt for causing the premature birth of her granddaughter. For this reason, she refuses to give the ancestral property to her sons, and instead gives it all to Daksha, and makes Praful the trustee of her wealth. The dramatist draws attention to the fact that the ‘female’ is now trying to
mend the wrongs committed in the past so that more genial affiliations can be established.

Though it might appear that Dattani’s main objective in the play is to configure the history of women’s oppression, but his real idea is the re-construction of the female courage that can ultimately help her establish her identity within the patriarchal institutions. His female characters face the truth with determination and gusto. In the ancient times, women were treated as no more than objects of exchange between families that formed alliances through marriage. Though this kind of barter system may not exist in contemporary societies, marital relations are still largely managed by the male members of a family. Participation of the female in decision making is limited. The pain and pathos of the women living in such a society is evident when Dolly says, “Twin houses. Side by side. One for each brother. And two sisters! One for each brother” (BFQ 238). In the present context, women are given the liberty to choose only from among the choices their family patriarchs define or delimit. Alka, however, is not given that choice either. She discloses:

Our saint of a brother used to warn us against men like you (Points to Jiten) and what does he do? The saint gives his sister to the sinner and disappears! (Makes a motion of wiping his hands) Finished. Matter over. Or is it? The saint has another sister who is bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he had this friend. A best friend! The sinner’s brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a coincidence. (BFQ 300)

Duped by her brother and husband, Alka drowns her reality in alcohol while her sister Dolly evades the reality of a retarded daughter, and escapes into the world of fantasy. Dolly defines her sexuality through a fantasy, in which she is involved with the cook named Kanhaiya, who satiates her emotional and physical desires. Alka tells Lalitha, “Five days or nights, when everything gets really quite…and the husbands have gone to club and Baa has been fed, Dolly plays a love song” (BFQ 293). She imagines the Kanhaiya of her dreams, plays the thumri of Naina Devi and that is perhaps the best time of the day for her. Dolly comments, “The thumri plays and ends. Another one ends. I forget when that ends and another one begins! All I am aware of is two powerful arms around me and the beautiful sound of heartbeats of a warm gentle soul” (BFQ 294). The idea of fantasizing about a sexual life on
stage was somewhat radical and revolutionary for the Indian women. Jasbir Jain states in the essay “Gender and Narrative Strategy”: “Fantasy allows an extension of the self—and becomes a survival strategy and when indulged in by the writer and the character, it signifies the desire to cross the boundaries” (Kaur 53). A female celebrating her sexual freedom, even if it is in her thoughts, was an idea that could have easily set the stage afire. The ‘female’ may be considered as an object of male sexual desire, but voicing her own sexual desires publicly is not permitted to her within the Indian cultural construct. However, Dattani tries to create a space for women where they can voice their repressed emotional and sexual desires.

The Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, whose work has influenced Dattani greatly, wrote in his notes on A Doll’s House: “There are two kinds of conscience, one in man and another, altogether different, in woman. They do not understand each other, but in practical life the woman is judged by man’s law, as though she were not a woman, but a man” (Singh 4). These two types of conscience of man and woman have found the best representation in Bravely Fought the Queen. The way women are judged by the laws of men can be seen through the lives of Dolly, Alka and Lalitha. They are the kind of characters that the middle class audience can easily identify with. The problems they reveal are faced by a majority of women in India and the sensitivity, with which Dattani has mentioned their pain, shows his deft craftsmanship. There are no scandalous issues discussed in this play, it simply induces in us a mood for introspection. Dattani reveals that the lives of women still exist at the interface of social and economic inequality, and gender socialization is used as a tool to maintain and reproduce social inequality. By voicing their pathos and expressing their asphyxiated lives, Dattani re-evaluates the importance of the female, which is, otherwise, denied to her in the urban family set up.

The main quality of Dattani’s Bravely Fought the Queen and all other plays is that they do not provide a unidirectional solution to a problem. Dattani provides his audience and readers potent themes to contemplate over. He minutely scrutinizes the status of women and refashions their position in the middle class Indian family. Though he does not provide any solution to the problems, he definitely offers multiple perspectives on the situation he portrays. Dattani’s prime interest is in the presentation of relevant issues. He reveals: “I am strongly affected by social issues.
especially when it comes to power play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leitmotifs of my plays...I am, however not a social activist...my first service is to the story” (Nagpal 93).

Responding to his call of duty towards the society, he traces the development of the woman from being a silent species to an assertive and expressive being, in his tragic play *Thirty Days in September*. It is based on the subject of incest and child sexual abuse. It was premiered at Mumbai in 2001, under the direction of actor and producer, Lillete Dubey. She mentions in “A Note on the Play”:

*Thirty Days in September* has touched hearts and consciences everywhere. Sensitive and powerful without ever offending sensibilities, it manages to bring home the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship...After every performance, women have come backstage with their own traumatic stories writ large on their faces, grateful for the catharsis the play offers, but even more, I think, for the expiation of their own guilt which they have carried as a heavy burden for so long. Meeting them alone has made the play worthwhile. For through it, they believe, their silent screams have finally been heard. (4)

The play arouses catharsis among a number of women as it foregrounds the multiple indignities women have to suffer in an abusive patriarchy. The play endeavors to lift the veil of silence and dares to reveal the haunting memories of Mala and her mother Shanta. The work provokes and disturbs as it exhibits their sexually exploited past. Mala is presented as a bold character in her twenties, working in an advertising firm. She is unable to voice her pain, acts in a licentious manner and misbehaves with her mother for she finds her responsible for her molested childhood. On the other hand, Shanta appears to be submissive and vulnerable, one who takes refuge in her prayers, and always carries with her a burden of hurt feelings. Under the garb of silence, she desperately tries to evade reality. The paedophile who makes their lives miserable is Shanta’s brother, Vinay. He sexually exploits both of them and is responsible for all the twisted facts of the family. He grabs hold of their social and financial life as well, and makes sure that his secret is not revealed to the outside world.
Thirty Days in September is an aptly produced title because this is the poem Mala’s uncle makes her recite while abusing her and it has now become a potent symbol of her exploitation. After attaining maturity, Mala refuses to be a victim and decides to fight her trauma, and her mother’s silence. She seeks professional help, and in this process, she is helped by her friend Deepak. He gives her emotional support and the required remedial help as well. He provides both Mala and Shanta the necessary assistance they require to overcome their past and this eases the tension between the mother and the daughter. Towards the end, Mala emerges as a courageous winner, brave enough to fight her history and take charge of her future. Mala is Dattani’s ‘New Woman’ as she finds the courage to deal with her circumstances. She finally understands the meaning of mother’s stillness and hopes for forgiveness from her. Her pain, embarrassment, inner struggle and efforts to recover are evident through her words:

Mala Khatri. February 2004… (Listening to the counselor.) Why not? I do not hesitate to use my real name now. Let people know. There is nothing to hide. Not for me. He should change his name, not me…It is he who must avoid being recognized…And I can make that happen. I have the power to do that now. I have nothing to hide. Because I know it was not my fault…Now. I know now. (TDS 8)

By exploring this painful problem of incest and child sexual abuse, Dattani raises several valid concerns, and structures a world of optimism in which the wrongs can be rectified. Victims of rape or incest are usually presented as escapists, women who hide or run away from their realities. Fortunately Dattani has not conceived Mala as a victim but as a fighter who defends herself and tries to lead a normal life. Moreover, she even lends a helping hand to her mother so that she, too, could do the same. In her paper “Feminist Utopias - Strategies for Women’s Empowerment” Jyotsana Agnihotri states: “There are two kinds of Utopias- ‘utopia of escape’ and ‘utopia of reconstruction’. The first leaves the external world as it is, the second sort seeks to change it” (Kaur 26). Through Shanta, the “utopia of escape” is being explored and Mala assists in the creation of “utopia of reconstruction”.

The play manages to evoke deep emotions and strong outrage among the audiences across India and the world, each time it is produced. Despite being on a
subject that people hesitate to discuss openly, this play is considered Dattani’s most sincere and severe play. It discusses the core issues related to child abuse and defines how silence plays a prominent role in propagation of such crimes. “Child sexual abuse spans a range of problems, but it is this complicity of the family through silence and a lack of protest that is the ultimate betrayal for the child” (Chaudhari 73). Mala willingly weaves a cocoon of stoicism around her and does not let anyone notice her wounded soul. Behind this unresponsive attitude is a seething cauldron of anger and frustration of a ‘girl of seven’ who was scarred then and now wishes to be rescued from that trauma. Mala too, feels betrayed as she holds her mother responsible for not saving her, when she should have. Mala comments: “She could have prevented a lot from happening... Here are names of people whom I have been with. But if you ask me, whose face I think it is- it must be my mother’s” (TDS 18).

The patterns of female sexuality are inescapably the product of the historically rooted power of men, and these patterns define what is necessary and what is desirable. However, the empowerment of the ‘female’ has given her a new identity, and she does not accept violence, rape, wife-battering and incest as an inherent part of domestic culture. Dattani regards rape and sexual abuse of children as particularly glaring examples of exploitation of females by males in traditional patriarchal society and therefore, he discusses the social, psychological and economical aspects related to it. His work illustrates that traditional women accept violence or sexual abuse perpetrated by family members uncomplainingly. They do so because, either they are financially dependent on their men or they have completely lost the ability to challenge it. Shanta, an incest-victim and an abandoned wife, is unable to voice protest and chooses to keep quiet because monetary help from her brother was required to sustain life. Dattani also draws a comparison between the traditional and the contemporary woman, where he paints the former as economically and socially dependent and the latter as one who loathes dependence of any form. The following conversation reveals this:

MALA. What way has he helped us
SHANTA. I don’t know... Mala, I am sorry
MALA. Tell me!
SHANTA (looking away, more nervous than before).
I should have told you . . . The money that we kept receiving after your father left us was from your uncle.  
MALA. And father? Didn’t he send anything at all?  
SHANTA. Nothing.  
MALA. But you pretended it came from him (father). You lied... It doesn’t make a difference to me. (Getting up) I don’t think I am going to wait for him (uncle). (TDS 35)

In a family, wife’s economic status is an important factor in domestic decision-making. When women lack monetary resources to bargain for power, they subordi

While Shanta finds respite in her prayers, Mala fights her trauma through her own queer ways. Being an educated woman, she is opinionated about gender, and does not accept the definition of gender taught through the institutional mechanisms. It is her conversation with her colleague that reveals that she does not accept stereotypical gender constructions. The audience/reader learns about her opinion on gender only once she discusses her concept on advertising in her office. While preparing an advertisement for a sanitary napkin she expresses: “To start with, I don’t think she should be skipping rope with her daughter. That’s not real freedom. It is still very gender constructed” (TDS 19). Her ideas on the advertisement bring forth her cloistered feelings of revenge and urge to hurt her exploiter. In fact, her resentment and exasperation can be sensed as she proceeds:

If you ask me she should be playing cricket with her daughter and husband...The important point is her physical ease and freedom. Start with her batting. A perfect hit...Then show her bowling while her
husband is batting. He makes a snide remark about her being irritable because it is that time of the month. She bowls, hits him straight in the crotch. He runs yelping to the house. She tosses the ball in the air. Freeze. *(TDS 19)*

Mala plays queer games to fight her past. She dates unknown people and makes sure that the relationship lasts for only thirty days. She is afraid of commitment and even shirks the true friendship offered by Deepak. She mentions: “It’s just a game... I know it is terribly wrong... But it means a lot to me. I like it. That is why I’m a bad person. I have no character. I suppose it’s these western values, I wish I were more traditional then I wouldn’t behave like this... That’s very easy to put the blame elsewhere” *(TDS 18)*. On the other hand, the traditional woman—Shanta, maintains a quiet and anxious stance throughout the play, but towards the end she discovers her voice when her daughter holds her responsible for everything. In Indian mythological texts, married women are represented as dependent and unassertive. Sita waits for her husband to liberate her from the clutches of Ravana and Draupadi awaits Lord Krishna to save her from public disgrace. But in this play, Dattani proves that strength and courage acknowledge no gender boundaries. The silence of the abused child and culpable mother breaks into an outburst afterwards:

You say I did not help you! I could not help you. Same as you could not help me. Did you ever see the pain in my eyes? Nobody saw anything. Nobody said anything. Not my brothers, not my parents. Only *(pointing to the man)* he spoke. Only he said, only he saw and he did. I was six, Mala I was six. And he was thirteen. And it wasn’t only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years! *(TDS 55)*
She discloses that the reason behind her inability to help her daughter is that she herself has not recovered from her own trauma. Voicing of emotions is an extremely strong step for those Indian women who have been bred in a culture of silence. Indian society is not vocal about cases of child abuse and incest, and women are taught to hush up such incidents. Therefore, after having said the truth, Shanta tries to cut off her tongue. She finds herself guilty of speaking the truth. Even though she is innocent, she tries to plead her case in the patriarchal court. She laments after speaking the truth: “I cannot even speak about it. No, I can’t. I am dumb… (Gesturing with her hands to say she will not tell anyone. She jumps to where the pieces of glass from the portrait are and picks up a sharp piece and jabs it in her mouth)” (TDS 55).

After discovering the reality, Mala’s opinion about her mother changes completely. Until then, she had held her mother culpable for being a silent observer to her ordeal. However, the revelation of truth changes quite a lot. Mala feels guilty for not understanding the reason behind her mother’s silence. She admits:

Dear mother…While I accused you for not realizing my pain, you never felt any anger for me for not recognizing yours. We were both struggling to survive…Ma, no matter where I am, I will always think of you. I want you to know that I am listening. Waiting for you to speak. I promise you I will listen. I am waiting for a sign from you…to say that you have forgiven me. (TDS 58)

Through Mala, Dattani delivers the message that women must first come to terms with the reality of their own traumas, before they gain power to re-construct themselves. Nothing can deter the spirit of the ‘New Woman’ as she has learnt to oppose the tradition, and tread a different path, altogether. Years of counseling, economic independence and Deepak’s unflinching support to her and her mother, finally brings new life to Mala. A whiff of fresh air can be felt when Mala says:

I feel I want to tell it to people who would understand. It’s like starting all over again. It’s like you never had those scars. It is like taking off the bandages on your face after a bloody car crash that left your face all scarred beyond recognition, as if you didn’t have a face at all. To wake up after many years, as if from a coma. . . And to let
the bandages come off . . . and suddenly discover a whole new face again. All of a sudden you feel that you are- entitled to life . . . I can smile gain. I can be a little girl again. Not again, but for the first time. (TDS 33)

Mala is one of the most spirited characters in Dattani’s dramaturgy, as she brings out the reality of incest and child sexual abuse blatantly. In this play, the women are not only breaking conventions of ‘silence’ about their sexual past, they are also standing up against their own family. Dattani’s presentation is unique in the manner that he does not present Mala as a sufferer, but as a courageous person who boldly accepts her own as well as her mother’s empirical reality. The writer does not choose a simplistic solution for the victim (revenge or suicide), he reconstructs Mala as a mighty individual who takes constructive steps to overcome the horrors of her past experiences and tries to move ahead. The play gives impetus to the fact that women have a history of oppression, but they can never unburden this weight of history until they ‘speak’.

The play also brings to question, the role of institutions like society and family that are gradually becoming unsafe for women. The recent Delhi gang-rape incident shook the country’s faith in social institutions and practices. The issue of safety for women is recurrent in Dattani’s plays. In Thirty Days in September it is obvious, and the playwright touches this issue slightly in other plays too. Lalitha says, “Sridhar thinks it is unsafe for women to move about alone at night. I hate to admit it but he’s right. They should have women auto drivers. You might still lose your jewellery, but at least you won’t get raped” (BFQ 236-237). Ratna’s safety is also threatened by her uncle in the play Dance Like a Man. For the woman of the twenty first century who has stepped out to work and travels the world, safety remains one of the primary issues of concern. Dattani draws the attention of the readers/ audience towards it and encourages them to look deeper within to discover a solution.

In Dattani’s plays, the women evolve from silent spectators to aggressively articulate actors. In the world ruled by sexual hierarchy, Dattani has reconstructed the identity of women by re-defining the limits of social space within the patriarchal framework. His work provides the most crucial set of distinctions between ‘feminist’, ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ which are explained by Toril Moi as: “the first is
a social position, the second a matter of biology and the third a set of culturally defined characteristics” (Moi 24). Dattani exhibits a truthful ‘feminist’ stance by providing each female in his plays, a space for self-expression where she challenges social constructions and institutions that fail to safeguard her interests. He ably portrays the cultural and social milieu that plays a fundamental role in limiting the horizons of the ‘female’. His plays illustrate how the evolving ‘feminine’ role is pushing the gender envelope to claim egalitarianism. By filling up the lacuna between text and reality, Dattani has brought forth the coherent and reasoned reflections of the ‘reconstructed’ female.

Dattani’s characterization corroborates that in India, gender hierarchy not only excludes women from highly valued forms of life such as government, capital, creative and artistic endeavour, but, also forces them into supportive roles as that of a wife, a mother. Women are often forced to stifle their own interests in the interest of masculine importance, status and reality. What decides the difference between male and female or masculine and feminine? What makes a phenomenon right and proper? What should be hoped and what should be feared by the women? All these questions are vehemently asked in Dattani’s plays and he lets his audience contemplate possible answers to them. He reconstructs the female in a different role, demanding a different performance, a person with endless disguises, a mistress of multiple selves. Commenting on the social acceptance of his female characters, Dattani says:

It is a tricky business. I think one has to come to terms with the fact that audience are unpredictable and you have no control over their feelings unless you want to tell them that all is well with their world and they are perfect people. That they will accept as we can see in Bollywood and Ekta soaps where the ‘heroine’ is a paragon of virtue whose strength lies in sacrifice and always thinking of others. If that is the self perception of the bulk of our audience I would rather have them laugh at an inappropriate moment either by way of contempt or just plain embarrassment. Even by rejecting the true feeling of these characters they are acknowledging their presence and their own attitude towards them. (Multani 170)

Through his presentation of the New Woman, Dattani has tried to reconstruct the human relations in a new frame. His plays drive home the fact that it is the
women who are harmed, women who are subjugated and subordinated, and women whose consciousness has changed due to oppression, and it is for them to believe that this state of affairs is escapable and can be challenged. Helene Cixous suggests, “The New Woman will embody risk, the danger of being a self-creating woman...She will bring about a mutation in human relations, embodying a new “other bisexuality” that designates each one’s location ... of presence of both the sexes...In one another we will never be lacking” (Habib 706, 707). From Cixous’ point of view, Dattani’s women do correspond to the idea of the New Woman. They are willing to take risks and also transgress gender boundaries. His ‘reconstructed female’ does not choose to move out of the social institutions, but works within the patriarchal framework as mother, daughter and wife so that she can have a ‘better deal’ inside the family. Indian women have yet not taken the matter of oppression or subjugation to the streets, and have not given it a shape of a collective movement, but they all are contributing their share to give their future a better silhouette.

Dattani’s work exemplifies that the ‘female’ needs to be reconstructed within the family, society and nation. The forms of system to be adopted and to be eliminated have to be decided by the woman herself. Mahesh Dattani rebuilds the paradigm that feminism as an ideology does not necessarily oppose the male perspective or disrupt the family structure. It should aim at creating a novel world based on the principles of egalitarianism and humanism. His work ascertains that the practice of transgression of gender boundaries by the female should be comprehended as a step to move beyond ideology and theory, and reconstruct her identity on her own terms. To sum up, let’s take recourse to the lyrical words of Asha Hans, who says:

I live in a cocoon of social making
Peeping out of the world from behind a curtain.
I search for orbits outside those traversed.
I find my sisters in solidarity....
It’s time we moved together,
To locate spaces in the public sphere
And in the private worlds of men and women.
Pursue till we locate them
If we go together, we know we can
Make this cradle of humanity ours. (Hans 5)