Chapter - IV

Gender Discrimination

This chapter aims to interpret and analyze the plays of Mahesh Dattani from gender perspective. Almost all the plays of Dattani deal with gender issues. Dattani’s plays are concerned with the problems of the underprivileged sections of society including women, hijras and homosexuals. His plays dealing with gender issues are: *Where There is a Will, Bravely Fought the Queen, Dance like a Man, Tara, Thirty Days in September, Seven Steps around the Fire, Do the Needful, Uma and the Fairy Queen, Clearing the Rubble,* and *Final solutions.* Through these plays, Dattani highlights gender discrimination, violence against women, incestuous child sexual abuse, the system of arranged marriage, female infanticide and foeticide, exploitative nature of the patriarchal family structure etc.

*Where There is a Will* is Dattani’s first stage play in two acts. It was first performed by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 23 September 1988 in Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. Written in 1988, it portrays the Gujarati family in utter disorder under the leadership of Hasmukh Mehta, a business tycoon. It shows how the autocratic leadership of Hasmukh Mehta spoils the familial relationships and how Kiran Jhaveri, the mistress of Hasmukh Mehta, as a trustee of Mehta Group of Industries, manages the house successfully bringing all the members of the family into willing synchronization. Dattani describes it as “the exorcism of the patriarchal code” (CP 451).

The play is a family comedy aimed at exposing “the irrational control of parental authority” (B. Agarwal, Dattani’s Theatrical 29). It highlights how Hasmukh
Mehta, the head of the capitalistic patriarchal family, uses his money power as a weapon to impose his authority over all the members of the family while he is alive.

In the first scene of the Act-I, Mahesh Dattani presents the conflict between the autocratic father, Hasmukh Mehta and his individualistic son, Ajit. Hasmukh Mehta, a patriarch, thinks himself clever and other members of his family fools. He does not trust anyone, not even his son Ajit, though he has made him the joint manager of his company. The play opens with Ajit complaining about his father Hasmukh Mehta who has rejected his proposal thinking it as “one of his crackpot schemes” (CP 455). Ajit complains about his father: “I don’t think he has ever listened to me in his entire life” (CP 455).

Hasmukh Mehta is a head-strong person who has always demoralized his son Ajit by rejecting his project reports without reading them. He undermines Ajit’s individuality by disallowing him to take any decision on his own. Having been frustrated by Ajit’s defiant behaviour, Hasmukh regrets his decision making Ajit the joint manager of the company and praying God for him:

That was an even bigger mistake. What makes it worse it knowing that I actually prayed to get him. Oh God! I regret it all. Please let him just drop dead. No, no. What a terrible thing to say about one’s own son. I take it back. Dear God, don’t let him drop dead. Just turn him into a nice vegetable so he won’t be in my way. Ever since he entered my factory, he has been in my way. (CP 455)

The above words of Hasmukh show the mentality of a capitalist patriarch who is badly in need of a son to perpetuate his property and clan. He expects Ajit to follow his footsteps without any grumble. But Ajit is different. He does not like to be a mere
toy in his father’s hand. He is defiant. He tells his father boldly, “Daddy, you have no right to humiliate me in front of my friends!” The following conversation between Hasmukh and Ajit casts light on the father-son relationship:

AJIT. Don’t I have any right at all?

HASMUKH. You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders.

AJIT. Thank you. You are so generous. I could kiss your feet.

HASMUKH. There is no need to do that. Just polish my shoes every morning and I’ll be happy.

AJIT. You will never be happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune. And

I will never do that. (CP 458)

Hasmukh Mehta is a very autocratic father who does not allow any freedom to the members of his family. He treats them as if they are mere servants of the family. Being the master of the house, he is always right and others wrong. Ajit gives the reason of his behaviour. He says to his father Hasmukh, “…Anything I do is wrong for you! Just because you are a self-made man and had a deprived childhood, you feel that I am having it too easy. Nothing I do will ever seem intelligent to you. You are prejudiced.” (CP 459)

Ajit is right as far as his opinion about his father is concerned. Hasmukh is prejudiced about all the members of the house. No member of the house appears wise to him. He blames everyone for his hypertension. According to him, his son Ajit is “a
dead loss”, “a nincompoop”, and “a bankrupt”. Preeti, his daughter-in-law, is “scheming” and his wife, Sonal, is “mud”. Whatever his son Ajit does or says, he disbelieves in him. That’s why Ajit angrily asks his father, “Why is it that everything I say or do has to be something that somebody has told me or taught me to do!” (CP 459).

It seems that Hasmukh is much more worried about his company and his wealth than the career and future of his son Ajit. That’s why he tries to teach him how to give orders to the subordinates. He does not consider Ajit as an individual human being with his own desires and expectations but a block of wood that needs “seasoning”. The following conversation between Ajit and Hasmukh highlights the distinct nature of Ajit:

AJIT. Seasoning! What do you mean, seasoning? I’m not a block of wood!

HASMUKH. You are raw! Under all that pressure in the office, you will bend.

You will break. That’s why I’m toughening you up. Somebody tough has to be around to run the show.

AJIT. Your show, you mean.

HASMUKH. Well, later it will be your show.

AJIT. No, it won’t. That’s what you’re making sure of.

HASMUKH. What do you mean?
AJIT. I mean that you want to run the show, play Big Boss as long as you can or as long as God permits. And when all of sudden, you are ‘called to a better world’, you will still want to play Big Boss. And you can do it through me. In short, you want me to be you.

HASMUKH. I should have prayed for a daughter. Yes. I want you to be me. What is wrong with being me?

AJIT. And what becomes of me! The real me. I mean if I am you, then where am I? (CP 460-61)

Here, Where There’s a Will presents the basic conflict between the traditional father who wants his son to be the replica of him and the post-modern son who wants to lead his life following his own intuition. Hasmukh Mehta is a traditional father who demands absolute obedience from his son Ajit. Denying individuality and independence to his son Ajit, Hasmukh makes his son dependent on him. He tries to use Ajit as a means to achieve his end—to live his life through Ajit. He makes it clear his purpose in life and his purpose in marrying and desiring a son:

Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? . . . No. No, I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name? (Pause.) Why did I marry? Yes, to get a son. So that when I grow old, I can live life again through my son. Why did my father marry? To get me. Why did I marry? To get Ajit . . . (CP 474-75)
In fact, Hasmukh Mehta should be happy for being the father of a son, but he is unhappy because his son Ajit does not behave as per his expectations. All his hopes that he has invested in his son are shattered as Ajit does not conform to the expectations of his father. Having lived his life as per the expectations of his father, Hasmukh expects the same from Ajit and becomes unhappy:

Why am I unhappy? Because I don’t have a son. Who is Ajit? Isn’t he my son? No. He’s just a boy who spends my money and lives in my house. He doesn’t behave like my son. A son should make me happy/Like I made my father …happy. I listened to him. I did what he told me to do. I worked for him. I worked hard for him. I made him…happy. That is what I wanted my son to make me. (Gets a little worked up.) But he failed! Miserably! He has not single quality I look for in a son! He has made my entire life worthless! He is going to destroy me! It won’t be long before everything I worked for and achieved will be destroyed! Finished because of him! Well, I won’t let it happen! I won’t let it happen! I won’t let it … (CP 475)

Hasmukh Mehta lives a life planned by his father for him and in turn designs one for his son Ajit. He is grateful to his father for devising a life of hard work for him. Within no time, he becomes a successful industrialist, a money making machine and forms Mehta group of industries. He says, “Today, I, Hasmukh Mehta, am one of the richest men in this city. All by own efforts. Forty-five years and I am a success in capital letters.” (CP 464)

As Hasmukh Mehta becomes richer and richer, his ego increases. “Money has made him stubborn”, says his wife Sonal. According to Preeti, Hasmukh’s daughter-
in-law, Hasmukh is proud of his achievements. Being intoxicated with his money power, he trusts no one and treats others with disdain.

Mahesh Dattani’s *Where There’s a Will* highlights the condition of women in the patriarchal set-up. Sita Raina, in her “A Note on the Play”, remarks: “Women—be it daughter-in-law, wife or mistress—are dependent on men and this play shows what happens when they are pushed to the edge” (CP 451). The play is set in the capitalistic patriarchal Gujarati family. Hasmukh Mehta is the owner of the Mehta group of industries. He lives with Sonal, his wife; Ajit, his son and Preeti, his daughter-in-law. Being the head of the family, Hasmukh is at the centre of the family and the other members of the family are on the periphery. The relations between Hasmukh and the other members of the family are that of master and slaves. Hasmukh Mehta seems to believe in the Roman definition of ‘Famila’ which means “the total number of slaves belonging to one man” (Engels 121). He is the master of the house and his wife, son and daughter-in-law are his servants. He is unhappy with everyone as no one lives up to his expectations. He treats them as mere ‘means’ to fulfil his aspirations. He never consults either with his wife or his son about the domestic and official matters.

Hasmukh Mehta believes in the patriarchal society that considers males to be the norm and values paid work outside of the home while devaluing domestic labour. His treatment to his wife is the result of this patriarchal system. In patriarchy women are dependent on their husbands for survival. They are treated as “objects of pleasure by men” (Bebel 192). See how Hasmukh Mehta introduces his wife to the audience:

(look at Sonal.) Sonal. My wife. My son’s mother. Do you know what Sonal means? No? ‘Gold’. When we were newly married, I used to joke with her and say she was as good as gold. But that was when
we were newly married. I soon found out what a good-for-nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life. Mud. Twenty-five years of marriage and I don’t think she has ever enjoyed sex. Twenty-five years of marriage and I haven’t enjoyed sex with her. So what does a man do? You tell me. I started eating out….I needed a safer relationship. Something between a wife and a pick-up. Yes. A mistress! It didn’t take me very long to find her. She was right there in my office. An unmarried lady. … A shrewd hard-headed marketing executive. If there was anyone in my office who had brains to match mine, it was her. She is now one of the directors of the company. (CP 472-73)

It is crystal clear from the above words of Hasmukh that he regards women as means of sexual gratification. As soon as Sonal ceases to appeal him sexually, he looks for another woman to fulfil his physical hunger. By blaming Sonal for his miserable sex life, he justifies his action of keeping a mistress. It is the double standard of the patriarchal men to impose sexual restraints on women while freeing themselves to do anything. The condition of Sonal is not far better than that of a slave. As it is the duty of a slave to please his master, so is the duty of Sonal to satisfy her husband Hasmukh. She tries to make her husband happy either by preparing his favourite dishes to eat or by looking after all his needs properly. She lives not for her own sake but for the sake of her husband and his son. Her status in the house is a mere unpaid domestic servant. Engels rightly states:

The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife. In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of
supremacy without any need for special legal titles and privileges.

Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat. (137)

Even in the modern patriarchal society the woman is always a site of reproduction. No doubt, a few women like Kiran Jhaveri are setting out of the house and doing the jobs traditionally meant for men, yet they are not freed from their tradition duties like child-bearing and child caring. As soon as a woman is married, she is expected to bear a son to perpetuate the family and the patriarchal systems. Hasmukh Mehta makes it clear to the audience why he marries: “Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? …No. No, I think the important reason any one should marry at all is to get a son. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name!” (CP 474-75)

As soon as Hasmukh Mehta gets a son from Sonal, he loses his interest in her and looks for another woman for sexual gratification. He expects Sonal to bring up his son Ajit in the same manner as he was brought up by his mother. When Ajit resists Hasmukh’s authority and becomes disobedient, he blames Sonal for it. It is typical of Indian husbands to blame their wives for their son’s rude behaviour towards them. Hasmukh blames Sonal for his hypertension, for his son’s misconduct towards him and for his own sexual misconduct. According to Hasmukh, Sonal is a good-for-nothing wife. She has no identity at all. Her identity in the society is a wife of Hasmukh. Nothing in the house belongs to her. She herself is the property of her husband. She lives for others as she has been taught that it is the duty of a woman to live for others. Sonal rightly compares her position in the house to that of her husband. She says, “…He thinks he is King of all he surveys! And we are his subjects” (CP 472).
In *Where There’s a Will* Dattani explores the dichotomy between the male/female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and what happens when a woman takes over” (Asha Chaudhuri 57). Hasmukh Mehta, a ‘self-made’ industrialist is dissatisfied with his wife, son and daughter-in-law as they do not live up to his expectations as he had lived up to his father’s expectations. In order to take revenge on his avaricious family, he makes a will before his death by which he gives his entire property/assets to the Mehta Charitable Trust which will be run by Kiran Jhaveri, the mistress of Hasmukh Mehta and one of the directors of his company, for a period of twenty-one years until his grandson turns twenty-one. His intention behind making the will seems that at least for the sake of money his family should lead life as per his expectations and thereby to prevent them from squandering his money. The guarantee of an inheritance keeps the family together. It is Hasmukh’s will that makes them put up with his mistress, Kiran Jhaveri. The ghost of Hasmukh hovers in and around the house deriving perverse pleasure from the utter discomfort of his family until he is exorcised from the house by the union of the family with his mistress.

Kiran Jhaveri, as a mistress, remains invisible until the death of Hasmukh Mehta. The dead man’s will brings her to limelight shoving her at the centre of the Mehta household all of a sudden. All the members of Mehta household reluctantly allow her to live in the house. Since her arrival in the house, the lives of Preeti, Ajit and Sonal have been turned upside down. The dead Hasmukh tells the audience his intention making Kiran to come and live in his house. His intention was to make Sonal “regret having been such a good-for-nothing wife”, to “keep her from being a happy widow ever after” and “to keep a check on my daughter-in-law” (CP 496).
As soon as Kiran takes over the Mehta household, she begins to show her managerial skills. At the outset, she clears the misunderstandings of Mehta family regarding her authority as a trustee and thereby tries to make her position concrete. She states:

I think I must clear some misunderstandings you may have about my authority. I am only the trustee of all his wealth. Not the owner….Everything rightfully belongs to the three of you. Provided you follow his instructions. Ajit will have to attend office as usual. He will get a detailed brief on his duties tomorrow. Mrs. Mehta, you shall get a regular allowance to run the house, and a little more for your personal expenses. And Preeti, you too will get an allowance—when you become a mother. When your child is twenty-one, the trust automatically dissolves. Its holdings will be transferred to Ajit for him and his heirs to enjoy. (CP 493)

When asked by Preeti what her duties as a trustee are, Kiran says:

My main duty is to run the Mehta group of industries on behalf of Ajit Mehta. I have the authority to make all the major decisions in the interest of the companies. My duty also extends to training Ajit Mehta and eventually delegating most of my responsibilities to him in phases. (CP 493)

When Preeti tries to dominate Kiran by refusing her to stay with them, Kiran does not hesitate to warn her and others the ramifications of their disobedience. She asserts:
As the 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? (CP 494)

Kiran Jhaveri is “an efficient manager” (CP 505). She is an archetypal of those modern women who manage both the house and the office more efficiently than men. She takes Sonal into confidence and tells her “I managed. I managed my work, I managed my house, I managed my husband. …Your husband. And your house too now” (CP 505). Kiran does not hesitate to tell Sonal that her husband “respected my judgment and intelligence” that gave her “a lot of confidence” (CP 506). She is frank enough to tell Sonal that the main reason of her affair with Hasmukh was money and not love. She discusses with Sonal the nature of Hasmukh who, according to her, was “so insensitive to other people’s needs” and “almost cruel to Ajit in the office” (CP 507). She wins the minds of Sonal, Preeti and Ajit and unifies the family which was disintegrated under the leadership of Hasmukh Mehta. Kiran Jhaveri’s capability to manage home and office reminds us Swami Vivekananda words: “Woman is companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in every minute detail in the activities of man . . .” (Giri 215).

Mahesh Dattani, through the character of Kiran Jhaveri, would like to tell his audience that education and economic independence is not enough for the empowerment of women. Even educated women suffer in male dominated society. Kiran Jhaveri tells Sonal how her mother and she herself suffered from too much
giving. She recollects the life of her mother who suffered in her life from too much giving. She tells Sonal that she has learnt her lessons from her mother’s experience. She says: “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 every day with bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers. 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 me and my brothers, so that we wouldn’t hate my father. And I learnt when I kept my mother away from my father, so that in turn he would remain silent for those three hours when he came home, and before he fell asleep on the dining table, too drunk to harm us any more. I served him those drinks, waiting for that moment 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, your husband—they were weak men with false strength.” (CP 508) By giving her own example, Kiran proves that educated and financially independent women, too, suffer in the patriarchal society. There is need to change the mentality of men, convincing them that women are also human beings like them.

Thus, Where There is a Will exposes the patriarchal family structure in which only the head of the family is privileged and women and children are exploited, forcing them to live up to the expectations of the patriarch.

Mahesh Dattani’s Tara deals with the plight of a girl child in Indian society. Ours is a patriarchal society in which “the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners” (Levi-Strauss 115). She plays a subordinate role in the family and society due to her gender. As Clara Nubile says, gender discrimination begins in the womb and it goes on till death (23). In India the girl child
is unwanted, as it brings dowry debts and misfortune. Dowry remains the main reason for female infanticide and feticide.

Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara* deals with gender discrimination which exists in Indian society since the Aryan times. It throws light on the mentality of Indian parents that prefer a male child over a female child. Dattani in his interview with Erin B. Mee says that *Tara* is about “the male denying the female, and how the cultural construct of gender favours the male” (Invisible Issues 159). It lays bare injustice meted out to a girl child in an educated family of Patels. The play is about Tara, a girl child who is discriminated in her own house due to her gender. Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins of Mr. Patel and Bharati. They were conjoined from the breastbones down through the pelvic area. The twins were with the three legs. A medical surgery was essential for their survival. The third leg naturally belonged to Tara, the girl child as the major blood supply to it was provided by her body. But as per the conspiracy of Bharati and her father the third leg was transplanted on Chandan’s body but his body could not accept the leg and within two days the leg was amputated. Tara was denied her natural right to have both natural legs only because her parents preferred a male child over a female child. Bharati’s father, a very influential man in the politics, was without a son. He badly needed an heir to his property. Therefore, by bribing Dr. Thakkar, Bharati’s father tried his best to see his heir standing on two natural legs. But the operation was unsuccessful and both the twins had to depend on artificial leg. What is surprising and shocking is Bharati’s involvement in the conspiracy. The most awful aspect of gender discrimination is that in most cases the same discriminated women perpetuate this unlawful discrimination from one generation to the next. In this connection, Mumbai journalist Armin Wandrewala writes: “It is not men alone who are responsible for gender inequity and gender discrimination in our society.
Women themselves are also to blame in several cases, one generation visits onto the
next the inequities of the previous; and so the vicious circle goes on.” (The Times of
India, 26.02.2002)

Generally it is believed that the patriarchal family is the only locus of true love
and affection, but, in reality, it is “a primary locus of difference and inequality”
(Grewal and Kaplan 667), “a locus of struggle” (Hartman 368), a place where women
are neglected, sexually abused and battered. Tara’s discrimination on the basis of
gender in the house of her parents proves it. Her discrimination begins with the
medical surgery and ends with her death. The play presents a patriarchal family in
which women are expected to play second fiddle to men. Though we live in the
modern age, we still follow the patriarchal norms expecting women to remain at home
doing the add jobs such as cooking, sewing, childrearing and childbearing etc. Our
behaviour at home and in society proves that people still cling to the Tennysonian
wisdom regarding the separation of the roles and spheres of activity: “Man for the
field and woman for the hearth/ Man for the sword and for the needle she” (The
Princess, V, 427). In Tara, Patel is the representative of the patriarchal authority. He
clearly differentiates the role of his son Chandan from that of his daughter Tara. He
expects Chandan to be a businessman like him. That’s why he asks Chandan to come
to the office with him. Being a conservative patriarchal father, he does not ask Tara to
come to the office with him. The following conversation between Patel and Chandan
throws light on Patel’s conservative attitude.

PATEL. I was just thinking … It may be a good idea for you to come
to the office with me. (Glances surreptitiously towards the kitchen.)

CHANDAN. What for?
PATEL. Just to get a feel of it.

CHANDAN. You can take Tara. She’ll make a great business woman.

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

PATEL. (Firmly.) Chandan, I think I must insist that you come.

CHANDAN. We’ll both come with you.

PATEL. No.

The above conversation between Patel and Chandan clearly shows Patel’s biased attitude towards women in general and Tara in particular. Patel makes a differentiation between Chandan and Tara and provides Chandan with more opportunities than Tara. Both Chandan and Patel know that Tara can become ‘a great business woman’, yet Patel insists on Chandan to come to the office.

Again Patel does not like Chandan helping Bharati to sort out her mistake in knitting. Believing in the old gender roles, Patel thinks that knitting and sewing is a not a domain of men but of women. He scolds Bharati for “turning him into a sissy—teaching him to knit” (CP 351). Having been disappointed, Patel decides to take Chandan to the office as “I can’t see you rotting at home” (CP 351).

Mahesh Dattani exposes the hegemonic patriarchy that insists on the division of labour on the basis of gender. Patel, a representative of patriarchal society, has different plans for the son and the daughter. He seems unwilling to send Tara with Chandan to England for higher education. He tells Bharati, “Chandan is going to study further and he will go abroad for his higher studies” (CP 352). But when Chandan refuses to join college without Tara, Patel reluctantly prepares his mind to
send Tara to England to accompany Chandan so that he can join the college. But Tara is bold enough to reject the offer made by her father and tell him, “Look, I’m not going to go to college for his sake. So tell him not to not go to college for my sake” (CP 360). Patel, being the head and provider of the family, imposes his decisions on all the members of the house. He makes it clear to all of them that Chandan has to join the college in England. He says:

But this is certain, Chandan has to join. I have plans for him. Your Praful uncle will help him get a good university in England. I know he can get a scholarship on his own if he tries. But Praful will take care of the … special requirements for him. With a solid education you just can’t fail. Not to say that Chandan will have to work for a living. Your grandfather has left all his wealth to you. Since your mother was his only child, you and Tara inherit their home in Bangalore. (CP 360)

Patel’s determination to send Chandan to England with or without Tara expresses his patriarchal attitude towards women’s education. Certainly, it is Tara who needs higher education to be self-reliant, to stand firmly on her one leg. Truly, higher education would have served as a second leg in her case but her dictatorial father deprives her of equal opportunity for higher education. Perhaps, Patel considers bringing up a daughter and imparting her higher education to be “watering plants in the neighbour’s house” (Leela Dube 167). His attitude towards girls’ education is the attitude of the patriarchal society that denies equal opportunities to girls.

Dattani’s Tara also brings out the gender discrimination on economic level. Despite the inheritance law which assures daughters equal share in family property including land, daughters are deprived of their legal right to property. A girl child is
brought up considering as someone else’s property. Tara’s grandfather has left all his wealth to Chandan. Not a single penny has been left to Tara except home in Bangalore which she would share with Chandan. Chandan is well aware of the discrimination against Tara. When he learns from his father that his maternal grandfather has left all his wealth to him, he asks Patel, his father:

CHANDAN. And Tara?

PATEL. Nothing.

CHANDAN. Why?

PATEL. It was his money. He could do what he wanted with it.

Patel can not answer Chandan’s question satisfactorily and rationally. Though Chandan and Tara agree that there is no difference between them, their parents and grandfather differentiate between them on the basis of gender. In Indian society boys are raised to be providers and protectors of family whereas girls are raised to become replicas of their mothers. The government does not ensure what a Soviet international legal scholar Kudryguste Vladimir states, “an opportunity guaranteed by the state to its citizens to enjoy the societal benefits and values existing in the given society” (Quoted in Ujjwal Sharma 139).

The patriarchal family is the locus of gender inequality and gender discrimination and Tara’s discrimination in her house is an evidence of it. She is discriminated at every level. She is often reminded of her low gender status by the every word and action of her father. As a child she begins to understand the special value accorded to her brother Chandan. Patel’s every action proves that he prefers Chandan, a male child, to Tara, a female child. Whatever he says or does to children,
Chandan comes first. Whenever he pats children, he pats Chandan first; whenever he kisses them, he kisses Chandan first. In the matters of health and wealth too Chandan comes first. Thus, Tara plays second fiddle to Chandan in Patel household. When Roopa, a neighbouring girl, intrudes into the Patel household and asks Tara whether she has disturbed them, Tara remarks: “Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave” (CP 328). Tara’s remark speaks a lot. It shows that she is conscious of her secondary position in the house. Her remark exposes the patriarchal attitude of the Patel household that expects women to remain at home paying attention to the needs of men. In fact, it is Tara’s criticism of the male dominated society which still follows the norms of the Stone Age.

The humiliation of Tara in her parents’ house makes her desperate. Being tired of the male dominated society that denies her equal rights and opportunities, Tara stops to care for others except her mother. When Chandan taunts her that women mature faster, Tara retorts, “Yes! We do. We do! And we are more sensitive, more intelligent, more compassionate human beings than creeps like you and … Daddy!” (CP 371)

Tara’s retort evidently shows her indignation towards men in general and her father in particular. She seems to be a radical feminist who detests men folk for exploiting and oppressing women folk. Having been annoyed by her father’s dictatorial behaviour, Tara calls Patel a ‘creep’, showing her detestation for him. She begins to hate him for instructing the nurse in the hospital that “I shouldn’t on any account be allowed to see mummy on my own” (CP 373). She gets irritated and asks Chandan “How dare he stop us” (CP 375)? When Patel comes to know about Tara’s visit to the hospital, he warns her “Don’t ever go there without my permission”
Tara requests his father to allow her to meet her mother on her own, but Patel does not allow her to do so. Provoked by Patel’s decision, Tara rebels against her father and boldly tells him that “I’m going to hate you anyway! … We will go without your permission.” (CP 376)

Tara is not a traditional daughter who conforms to the dictates of her father. Like a modern feminist, she goes against the patriarchal norms by disobeying her father. She does not like her life to be controlled and run by her father or brother. She is more active, courageous, intelligent and rebellious than Chandan. Yet she has been neglected in the family and society only because of her gender. She reacts strongly against gender discrimination in the family which is a macrocosm of the patriarchal society.

Tara is shocked and totally disturbed when Patel reveals the truth regarding her being ‘one-legged’. By revealing the truth, Patel tries to show Tara that he does not hate her as she thinks. No doubt, Patel’s behaviour towards Tara in the house—his gender discrimination against Tara—is detestable, but more detestable is the behaviour of Bharati and Bharati’s father who deprive Tara of her leg in order to give it to Chandan in whom Bharati’s father saw an heir to his property. Patel tells Chandan and Tara about their physical separation by world famous Dr. Thakkar in Mumbai and the role played by their grand-father, who was an industrialist and an MLA, in their surgical operation. Patel tells Tara and Chandan:

Your grandfather got involved personally in our discussions with the doctor. The separation would be done in Mumbai, it was decided. … But there was one complication which hadn’t been discussed. There were three legs. A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to
the leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive … on the girl. Your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I wasn’t asked to come. That same evening, your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned except—I couldn’t believe what she told me—that they would risk giving both legs to the boy … Maybe if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn’t right and that even the doctor would realize it was unethical! The doctor had agreed, I was told. It was only later I came to know of his intention starting a large nursing home—the largest in Bangalore. He had acquired three acres of prime land—in the heart of the city—from the state. Your grandfather’s political influence had been used. A few days later, the surgery was done. As planned by them, Chandan had two legs—for two days. It didn’t take them very long to realize what a grave mistake they had made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have—might have—been Tara. Because of the unusual nature of the operation, it was easy to pass it off as a natural rejection. I—I was meaning to tell you both when you were older, but . . . (CP 377-78)

Tara is shattered and devastated when she realizes that her lameness is a result of the conspiracy plotted against her by her own mother and grandfather. The knowledge of her mother’s participation in the plot against her shatters all her aspirations and dreams. She only comments: “And she called me her star” (CP 379). Having left no one to believe in, Tara loses her interest in life and withers away day
by day and dies within a few months. Thus, Tara is a victim of the patriarchal society
that used to kill girl children at their birth in the past and that is now killing them in
the very womb of their mothers with the help of modern medical technology. What
Gouri Sen says in her poignant article in the Rashtra Mahila is appropriate here:

Denial to a girl child of her right to live is one of the most heinous
violations of the right to life committed by society. Gender bias and
deep rooted prejudice and discrimination against girl children and
preference for male children have led to female foeticide and female
infanticide … the people demanding foeticide include not only the
poorer sections who have socio-economic compulsions but members of
the upper and middle class as well … Even if a girl child is allowed to
be born, discrimination and gender bias are evident from day one. She
is denied the adequate nourishment and health care given to her male
siblings. (Quoted in Krishna Iyer 65)

It would be a great injustice to Bharati to hold her responsible for Tara’s
physical deformity. Since the ancient times, women have been socialized to behave as
per the social norms and regulations devised by men for them. They have been taught
to obey the older men in the family, to prefer a male child to a female child, to
sacrifice their desires and dreams to fulfil their husband’s, to please a husband by
giving birth to a male child, to raise a boy to be the provider and protector of the
family and a girl to be an ideal wife. If women have been taught all these, how could
we hold Bharati responsible for depriving Tara of her natural leg? She only obeyed
her father who had decided to give the third leg of the twins to Chandan. And what
was Patel doing when Bharati and her father were carrying out their plot against Tara?
Why didn’t he oppose them? Why did he keep silent while the operation was going
on? Why did he allow Dr. Thakkar to operate against his will? To prove his innocence, Patel has to answer all these questions. I think that Patel kept quiet while the third leg was being given to Chandan only because Dr. Thakkar, Bharati and her father were doing what Patel desired.

In the second Act of the play Patel twice refers to his inability to prevent Bharati and her father from carrying out their plot against Tara. He says, “Oh, Why didn’t I have the strength to stop her then (CP 377) …Maybe if is had protested more strongly (CP 378). These words of Patel clearly indicate that he might have stopped them if he had desired. Being a man, he believes in the patriarchal social order which prefers sons to daughters. He begins to blame Bharati and her wealthy father only after the failure of the operation giving third leg to Chandan. Had the operation been successful, had the third leg been survived on Chandan’s body, Patel would have kept quiet through out his life thanking Bharati and her father inwardly for their deed. Again if Patel had believed in gender equality, he would have provided equal opportunities to Tara and Chandan. We never see him treating Tara and Chandan equally.

Dattani’s Tara is replete with gender issues. The gender issue is so close to his heart that Dattani even makes his teenage characters—Chandan, Tara and Roopa—to discuss it on the stage. The movie that Roopa and Chandan discuss is ‘Sophie’s Choice’ in which the polish immigrant Sophie is placed in such a situation that she has to choose one child between her son and daughter. Chandan, raising the issue of gender discrimination, asks Roopa, “What would you do if you had to choose between a boy and a girl? Who would you choose? (CP 364) Though Roopa replies that she would be happy with either one, her conversation with Chandan casts light on the gender discrimination in every society across the world:
CHANDAN. That’s not the point. In the film, I mean. The Nazis will only allow her to keep one child. The other one would be taken away to a concentration camp or something.

ROOPA. How nasty of Nazis!

CHANDAN. Would you send your girl child to the concentration camp?

ROOPA. Definitely not! I think it’s more civilized to drown her in milk, if you ask me. (CP 364)

Roopa expresses her unwillingness to send the girl child to the concentration camp but she suggests the ‘civilized’ (?) way to kill the unwanted girl child, which was used in the past. Earlier in the play, Roopa tells Tara that girl children were killed in Patel families by drowning them in milk. So it was a pretty old practice among the Indians to kill the unwanted girl child by using various means. The attitude expressed by Roopa shows that the socialization of girls in patriarchal societies is so strong and powerful that they do not hesitate to kill the unwanted girl children.

Another movie the Chandan, Tara and Roopa discuss is “The Mirror Cracked” which depicts the plight of women in male dominated society. The condition of women in Indian societies is that of Lady of the Shallot—“Locked up. Not being able to see the world … just sitting and weaving a tapestry so something” (CP 346). The predicament of the childless woman is deplorable in India. She is maltreated, abused and exploited for her no fault. Tara gives vent to the fed-up condition of childless women when she says, “Imagine not being able to have children because somebody gave her German measles when she was pregnant” (CP 346). Thus, Dattani, making
children to talk on movies—“Sophie’s Choice”, “Fatal Attraction” and “The Mirror Cracked”—that deal with gender issues, heightens the gravity of gender discrimination which is the central theme of the play.

Dattani’s *Tara* also deals with the man-woman relationship in general and husband-wife relationship in particular. It throws light on the relationship between Bharati and Patel, the parents of Tara and Chandan. In the play, Patel talks about his marriage with Bharati. He says: “My parents were more … orthodox, and didn’t approve of our marriage. I broke away from them. Ours was a happy marriage. We were all overjoyed when we came to know Bharati would have twins. Until certain tests revealed the … complications.” (CP 377)

It seems that with the physical separation of the Siamese twins—Chandan and Tara—the emotional separation of Bharati and Patel begins. Patel blames Bharati for Tara’s tragedy and begins to hate her. Their relations exacerbate as the twins grow up. The main point of discord between Bharati and Patel is Tara. Patel pays more attention to Chandan whereas Bharati is worried about Tara’s future. Patel does not like Bharati paying more attention to Tara. But Bharati, in her attempt to amend her past mistake, concentrates more on Tara. The conversation between Bharati and Patel shows their concern for Tara:

PATEL. (To Bharati.) Why do you serve her so much if she doesn’t want to . . .

BHARATI. But she must put on more weight!

PATEL. She is fine.
BHARATI. No! She’s much too thin! She …she must put on more weight.

This morning at the clinic, Dr. Kapoor checked their charts. She’s lost half a pound in one week.

PATEL. Half a pound isn’t much …

BHARATI. (Over him). In one month she will lose a kilo! If I don’t force her to eat, how will she gain weight? She will keep getting thinner till she’s all shrivelled and she is only …skin and bones!

(CP 326)

The conversation shows Bharati’s concern about the deteriorating health of Tara and Patel’s negligence of it. It has been observed that in patriarchal societies sons are provided with more nutritious food than daughters, considering them to be the protectors and providers of the family.

Bharati is concerned about Tara’s health as well as career. She knows the importance of education in getting jobs. That’s why she gets irritated when Patel expresses his intention to send Chandan to London for higher education. She immediately reacts: “And Tara?” She talks to Chandan about Patel’s indifference to Tara’s education and career. When Chandan defends his father, she says, “Don’t tell me about your father. He is more worried about your career than hers” (CP 348). She thinks that Tara should not be tied to home doing unpaid household chores. She must have a career. She says: “It’s all right while she is young. It’s all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. The world tolerates you. The world will accept you—but not her! Oh, the pain she is going
to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh. God!” (CP 348-49)

These words of Bharati show how worried she is about Tara’s career and future. She wants Tara to be financially independent so that she could lead her life to fulfil her own dreams.

Being a woman, Bharati knows well how a woman is treated in the house of her husband if she has to depend upon him for livelihood. That’s why she tells Patel, “Ask her what she wants and give it to her!” (CP 353). It seems that Bharati struggles with her husband only to give justice to Tara. Bharati gives her kidney to Tara and proves that she loves her more than Chandan. Her every act shows that she is obsessed with Tara and her future. Her behaviour towards Tara is an attempt to atone for the sin that has committed by depriving Tara of her natural leg.

Dattani’s Tara also examines the relationship between Bharati and Patel, parents of Tara and Chandan. As long as Bharati’s father was alive, Patel had no role to play in the family matters. Bharati was at the centre of the house. The important decisions were taken by Bharati’s father. The decision to give the third leg to Chandan was also taken by Bharati and her father, hurting the ego of Patel. But after the death of Bharati’s father, he becomes the patriarch and asserts his power over Bharati and other members of the house. Now it is his turn to take the decisions. Patel does not like Bharati’s obsession with Tara and he goes on ill-treating Bharati in her own house.

Bharati is not a traditional woman to worship her husband. She is conscious of her self-esteem and does not like to be dictated by her husband. When Patel prohibits her from donating her kidney to Tara, she reacts angrily: “How dare you run my life”
When Patel tells her the reason behind prohibiting her to denote a kidney to Tara, Bharati objects to his authority and asks him, “Who are you to stop me? Just who do you think you are?” (CP 345) It seems that Bharati does not like to be treated as commodity, as an object in her own house. Her conscious makes her to overthrow the authority of her husband. She does donate her kidney to Tara and proves that she loves Tara. By giving her kidney to Tara, Bharati atone for her past mistake. Bharati appears to be desperate to reveal the truth regarding the third leg to Tara but her husband does not allow her to do so. He tells Bharati, “If at all they must know, it will be from me. Not from you.” (CP 345) That’s why he does not allow Tara to meet Bharati in the hospital on her own. When Tara rebels against him and decides to go the hospital to meet her mother, Patel reveals the truth and deprives Bharati of getting satisfaction of doing it. If he had allowed Bharati to reveal the truth, perhaps, Bharati’s mental condition would not have worsened. Maybe Tara might have pardoned Bharati, and it would have helped her to recover from her mental distress. Thus, Patel’s treatment to Bharati is responsible for her neurotic condition.

Dattani’s *Tara* also presents the world of perfidious doctors and their unethical practices. New research and technology in medical science has made human life more comfortable than in the past. But at the same time, the modern medical science has played a crucial role in gender discrimination. Earlier the unwanted girl child was killed after its birth, but now-a-days it is killed in the very womb of the mother. The female foeticide is a burning issue in the modern age. The female ratio to male is decreasing day by day, creating imbalance between male and female population. Both the male and female doctors are performing unethical sex determination tests and aborting the unwanted female foetuses for the sake of money.
In *Tara* Dr. Thakkar is presented as a God like figure who remains present throughout the play like the omnipresent and omnipotent God. Certainly, performing a successful surgery, he separates three month old Siamese twins and gives them life. Really, it is a miracle of the medical science. But the same life-giver Dr. Thakkar participates in the conspiracy hatched by Bharati’s father, an industrialist and an MLA, to give the third leg of the twins to the male child even though the blood supply to it was provided by the female child. Thus, the world famous Dr. Thakkar deprives the girl child of its leg for the sake of three acres of land in the heart of Bangalore city. This unethical act of Dr. Thakkar makes both the twins lame. Tara’s physical deformity is not natural; it is man-made. She becomes one-legged only because of her gender. It is shameful that the world famous doctor deprives a girl child of her natural leg for a piece of land. No one would have blamed him if one of the twins or both the twins had died while operating on their separation. Thus, in Tara, Mahesh Dattani criticises the gender biased and unethical medical practice.

In *Tara* Dattani analyses the reasons that responsible for the subordinate status of women in Indian society. He knows that as long as woman is ill-treated and deprived of her right to private property or economic resources, her condition will not be improved. Denial of economic resources is one of the basic reasons behind her subjugation. As long as she depends on her husband for her survival, she will be oppressed. The Indian society is not yet willing to offer daughters share in parents’ property. Bharati’s father leaves all his property to Chandan, Bharati’s son but not to Bharati or Tara. If he had made Bharati his heir and left the property to her, she might not have been treated so badly by her husband, Patel. Being the owner of the property, she might have enjoyed power in the house.
Dattani seems to agree with Judith Butler that gender is performative. He makes Patel look after his children while Bharati is in the hospital. Patel plays the role of Bharati—the role of a mother—in her absence. Like Bharati, Patel asks Tara, “Tara, what would you like for dinner? (No response) Will kanchipuram idlis do?” Surprised by Patel’s behaviour she remarks: “My, oh my! You sound just like mummy! (Goes towards her room.) You men can imitate us so well if you want to. Pity we can’t return the compliment.” (CP 357) Patel performs the role of a mother very perfectly. He pays attention to Tara’s likes and dislikes and mothers her properly. This proves that the man can play the role of the woman if he decides to and the woman can play the role of the man if she is given the opportunity. Thus, the gender roles can be reversed as they are culturally constructed.

Dattani’s *Dance like a Man* is a stage play in two acts first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall Bangalore, on 22 September 1989, as part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. It deals with gender roles and gender stereotypes. Gender roles are "socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behaviour and emotions of men and women" and gender stereotypes are "over generalised beliefs about people based on their membership in one of many social categories" (Anselmi and Law 195). It is believed that the sexual division of labour and societal expectations based on stereotypes produce gender roles. In patriarchal society boys and men are forced to fulfill a standard of masculinity by conforming to the patriarchal norms of masculinity. Of course, those who do not fulfill the standard of masculinity do not enjoy self-respect and dignity in the house as well as in society. Mahesh Dattani says of his play *Dance like a Man*, “I wrote this play when I was learning Bharatnatyam in my mid twenties. […] a play is about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women…” (Quoted in Asha
It raises a question “Can a man adopt the classical Bharatnatyam, a dance traditionally associated with *devadasis*, as a profession?” It shows how Jairaj Parekh, a son of Amritlal Parekh, tries to dismantle the stereotypes of gender roles by adopting Bharatnatyam as a profession and how the patriarchal society represented by Amritlal Parekh thwarts his efforts by using the power of authority and money. It presents different attitudes towards the classical and traditional Bharatnatyam dance. These attitudes are presented through the characters of the play— Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj Parekh, Ratna Parekh, Vishwas and Lata. The play shows that “the imagery of gender affects both men and women profoundly, if differently” (Michele Barrett 106).

*Dance like a Man* is a play that deals with one of Dattani’s pet concerns—gender—through one of his principal passions, dance (Chaudhuri 67). In the Indian society, every activity is gendered. It is believed that the traditional Bharatnatyam dance is a dance of women and, therefore, a man’s passion for the dance is considered against the societal norms. In the play Jairaj Parekh, the son of Amritlal Parekh, chooses the traditional Bharatnatyam as his profession out of interest. Being a true lover of the dance, Jairaj marries a Bharatnatyam dancer, Ratna. Even before their marriage, they used to practice dance in Jairaj’s house. Amritlal Parekh allows his son to practice the dance thinking it as his hobby. But he opposes his son when the same hobby becomes his obsession. He seems to agree with Plato that art effeminates the man if he plays the role of the woman. That’s why he does not like his son performing the woman’s dance. Being the guardian of the patriarchal society, Amritlal expects Jairaj to play the role of a man, to dance like a man. To him to dance like a man means to act like a man; to act like a man means to behave like the man. In a patriarchal society a man is expected to earn his livelihood by adopting a career suited to men. He should earn enough money to cater all the needs of his wife and children.
But to Amritlal, Jairaj ceases to be a man as he depends upon him for survival and for paying money to the musicians. While regretting his decision to allow Jairaj to dance he says, “I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn’t realize this interest of yours would turn into an obsession.” (CP 414-15)

Amritlal wants Jairaj to “grow up” by giving up his passion for Bharatnatyam. Like every Indian father he expects his son to be a money making machine. He says to Jairaj:

I have always allowed you to do what you have wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you. Why must you dance? It doesn’t give you any income. Is it because of your wife? Is she forcing you to dance? (CP 415)

Amritlal Parekh has certain objections to the dance of Bharatnatyam. According to him it is “the craft of a prostitute to show off her wares” (CP 406). Therefore, a man who practices such a craft can not be a ‘real’ man. He tells Jairaj that their priority as social reformers is “to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to our society” (CP 416). When Jairaj asks his father to allow devdasis to practice their art, Amritlal defiantly tells him that it would mean encouragement to open prostitution. According to him most of the devdasis are selling off their bodies in the name of the traditional dance. He does not like to “have our temples turned into brothels” (CP 416). Considering Chenni amma, a devdasi, as a prostitute, Amritlal does not allow Ratna to associate with her to learn the art of
abhinaya. He sends a doctor and five hundred rupees to Chenni amma as a compensation for depriving her of her only student.

Amritlal Parekh has no objection in reviving the art but he does object Jairaj’s association with certain people like his guruji. He does not like men with long hair. In his opinion only ‘womanly’ men grow their hair long. This shows how gender stereotypes are deep rooted in the Indian society. The following conversation throws light on gender stereotypes:

AMRITLAL. Your guru. What kind of a family he is from?

JAIRAJ. His mother was not a devdasis, if that’s what you wanted to know.

AMRITLAL. Why does he wear his hair so long?

JAIRAJ. Why do you ask?

AMRITLAL. I have never seen a man with long hair.

JAIRAJ. All sadhus have long hair.

AMRITLAL. I don’t mean them. I meant normal men.

JAIRAJ. What are you trying to say?

JAIRAJ(angrily). This is disgusting! You are insane! (CP 417)
Amritlal Parekh indirectly questions the gender of the dance teacher. If a man grows his hair long and walks like a woman, his gender is suspected because growing hair is associated with women. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri is right when she says, “The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him ‘womanly’—an effeminate man—the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned” (68).

It is this fear that tortures Amritlal Parekh. When he learns from Ratna that guruji has asked Jairaj to grow his hair long to “enhance his abhinaya”, he asks Ratna to tell Jairaj, “… if he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head and throw him on the roads” (CP 418). That’s why he gets angry with his son because of his association with his guruji and tells him, “I want this din to stop. I want guruji out, that’s what I want.” (CP 413)

Jairaj Parekh is a sincere and honest lover of Bharatnatyam. He may be an average dancer but he devotes his whole life in the service of it. Unlike his wife, he is credulous who can be easily swayed away. Though he performs Bharatnatyam, a dance of a woman, he tries his best to prove his masculinity. Going against the will of his father, Jairaj pursues his hobby and makes it his career. He rebels against his father and gains “the independence to do what I want” (CP 415). When his father asks him where his wife Ratna goes every Monday, he doubts his progressiveness and defiantly remarks: “Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn’t fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands. Why, you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us!” (CP 416) His determination to pursue Bharatnatyam as his career despite his father’s opposition and his decision to leave his father’s house for his passion for dance prove his masculinity. To Jairaj, dance is not only his hobby but a life force without which he can not exist. He uses
dance as a means “of defiance, revolt, negation of a particular way of life that was decided by his father, Amritlal” (Sagar Pandya 177).

Ratna’s calling Jairaj “a spineless boy who couldn’t leave his father’s house for more than forty-eight hours” and telling him that he ceased “being a man for me the day you came back to this house” (CP 402) hurts him a lot. He takes it seriously and asks Ratna:

While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter? Would you have preferred that? Do you think your uncle made such interesting proposals to all his nieces? No! That would be a great sin … So what was wrong with going back to my father? At least my father didn’t make . . . (CP 410).

Thus, Jairaj justifies his decision to return to his father’s house and proves his rationality which is generally associated with men. No man would have offered his wife to another man for food and shelter. Thus, Jairaj proves his masculinity by showing the traits—determination, decisive power, and rationality—that are generally associated with men.

When Jairaj returns to the house of his authoritative father within two days with Ratna, Amritlal changes his mind and allows them to live in his house. But he makes everything clear. He says:

. . . So I have changed my mind. I will allow you to dance. And I shall be very happy if you can earn your livelihood from it. If you ask me for money, I shall not refuse but I will be disappointed. … You carry
on using my library as your practice hall and your guru may come here
twice a week in the mornings. I hope I have made myself clear. (No
response.) Have I made myself clear? (CP 425)

Though he makes it clear to Jairaj and Ratna that they can dance, immediately
he conspires to spoil Jairaj’s dance career with the help of Ratna who is cunning,
scheming and selfish. Amritlal Parekh, reminding Ratna her intention behind
marrying Jairaj, assures her that he will allow her to dance if she helps him in making
Jairaj an adult. He tells her that a man’s real happiness lies in being a man. He
remarks: “A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a
man in a woman’s world is pathetic.” (CP 427) To him, for a man to dance like a
woman “isn’t being progressive, that is…sick” (CP 427). The following conversation
between Amritlal and Ratna reveals it clearly how they conspire to ruin Jairaj’s dance
career:

AMRITLAL. Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow
up.

RATNA. How?

AMRITLAL. It is hard for me to explain. I leave it to you. Help me
and I’ll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time
but it must be done.

RATNA (more definite). All right…And once he stops dancing—what
will you do with him then?

AMRITLAL. Make him worthy of you. (CP 427-28)
Here, Amritlal Parekh seems like a white coloniser in using ‘the divide and rule policy’ to controls the household activities. He knows that as long as Jairaj and Ratna are united they can fight back against his authority. That’s why he very cunningly compromises with Ratna, his daughter-in-law, to ruin the dance career of his son.

Ratna is very ambitious. She is ready to do anything to become a famous Bharatnatyam dancer. She is so selfish that even she does not hesitate to compromise with her father-in-law in destroying the dance career of her husband who has encouraged her to dance. Ratna, being aware that Jairaj can not dance alone, stops dancing with him making him to reject the offers of dance. She demoralizes her husband until he stops dancing and turns into a drunkard. She goes on scolding him to “do something useful before it’s too late” (CP 442). Knowing her participation in his father’s perverse plan of making him an adult, Jairaj blames Ratna for his present condition—for his drunkenness and his failure as a dancer, and asks her to return his ‘self-esteem’. He says:

Bit by bit. You took it (self-esteem) when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow. And when you called me names in front of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. And you call me disgusting. (CP 443)

These words of Jairaj expose Ratna’s manipulative nature. Regretting her participation in the plot, she places all the blame on her father-in-law, Amritlal Parekh. When Jairaj asks about her perversity she remarks: “Agreeing with your
father. Letting you off so that he could shape you into whatever shape he thinks a man should have. I should have guessed the result. When I say I regret it, I really mean that, Jai.” (CP 444) But Jairaj blames his wife more than his father for his miserable condition and calls her “quite a looker, quite a dancer, and quite an actress”. He says, “…You destroy me first, then give the impression that there wasn’t much to destroy in the first place, then blame it all on my father, then suggest I make myself useful by being your stage prop, then use words like ‘regret’ and expect me to shrug my shoulders, resign myself and believe that my calling in life is to serve you.” (CP 444)

It is a tragedy of Jairaj’s life that his own wife does not respect him. As he says, she does not have “the decency to talk to me when I’m lonely” (CP 442). She always calls him ‘a drunkard’ and expects him to do anything except be a dancer. Her words “Stay here, you drunkard. Don’t you dare come up” (CP 441) reveal what kind of respect she has for her husband. Again she does not fail to tell him that he deserves his present doom. She tolerates him thinking that her son Shankar will need him. She says: “…When he is a little older, he will feel the need for a father. Oh, you will be around all right. Where will you go? But all he will see is your exterior. It won’t take him long to realize that (points to his head) there’s nobody home!” (CP 445)

Ratnainsults Jairaj only because he does not act like a man. If he had behaved like any other husband in the patriarchal society, she would not have misused him. His liberalism and his passion for dance become an obstacle in preventing her from acting like a man. In fact, Ratna too goes against the societal norms by neglecting her motherly duties and behaving like a man, but no one blames her. She becomes alcoholic like her husband. The death of Shankar, the male child of Ratna and Jairaj, due to over dose of opium indicates the carelessness of Ratna as a mother.
The play *Dance Like a Man* throws light on the husband-wife relationship—the relationship between Jairaj Parekh and Ratna Parekh. In man-woman relationship, more often than not, it is the woman who is on the receiving end of the patriarchal oppression. But here in the play, Jairaj Parekh, the husband of Ratna Parekh, is subjugated because he goes against the societal norms by accepting Bharatnatyam, a dance of devdasis, as a career. Due to his gender role he is marginalised in the house. Ratna Parekh occupies the central position in the house pushing Jairaj to the periphery. She takes all the important decisions, forcing Jairaj to implement them. It is she who decides what career her daughter Lata should take on; it is she who manipulates Lata’s dance in the festival; it is she who manages the rave reviews of Lata’s dance performance. Here, Ratna Parekh acts like a man; dances like a man. In the house, in a true sense, she acts like a husband and controls all the household activities. In the very first scene of the play, Vishwas, when he learns from Lata that her father is Gujarati and tea is not made in the house, remarks “What a cruel thing to do a Gujju. Not giving him tea! Your mother must be dominating the poor man!” (CP 391) Lata, too, admits that her father is under the influence of her mother and he is “a bit more… pliable than usual” (CP 392).

Dattani’s *Dance like a Man* shows that a woman can play the role of a man if an opportunity is given to her. By making Jairaj dance like a woman and Ratna like a man, Dattani seems to convey that gender roles are socially and culturally constructed and they can be done away with. Again by making one actor to play more than one role—for instance, Jairaj plays the role of his father Amritlal Parekh, Vishwas plays the role of Jairaj, and Lata plays the role of Ratna, her mother—Dattani wants to suggest that any person can play any role. Thus, we are actors and the world the stage
as Shakespeare says. We perform the role given to us either by patriarchal society or chosen by ourselves.

The play also shows the attitude of the younger generation to the traditional dance of Bharatnatyam. This attitude is represented in the play by Lata and Vishwas, the daughter and son-in-law of Jairaj and Ratna Parekh. Lata is different from her parents. She looks at dance from a pure artistic point of view. Unlike her mother, she marries Vishwas for the sake of love and not for her career. No doubt, she, too, expects her husband to allow her to dance after marriage. When asked by Vishwas whether her parents are not anxious to know who their daughter is marrying to, she tells him, “Actually they couldn’t care less who or what you are. As long as you let me dance” (CP 388). She becomes a famous Bharatnatyam dancer— “a shining star in the sky of Bharatnatyam” (CP 432) due to her dedication. As Jairaj says, she deserves the rave reviews she receives for her performance. Vishwas, her husband, has no objection to her dance as she agrees to have “One child right away and another …let’s see” (CP 390). At the end of the play we are told about the happy married life of Lata and Vishwas who understand each other perfectly. Their child learns the first word ‘jalebi’ which indicates that Lata does not force her child to be a dancer as her mother did.

Vishwas has no interest in dance at all. He is totally ignorant about it. He likes the dance performed by Lata but he has certain quirks about it. He does not like Lata performing the ‘erotic numbers’. It seems that he likes the erotic numbers performed by other women dancers but not by his would be bride. He says, “Look, I know I’m not very knowledgeable on the subject. I merely said that because it was Lata who was dancing and …” (CP 435). In fact, it is essential to have a healthy attitude
towards any kind of dance irrespective of the gender of the performer. Such an attitude alone can strengthen the dance form.

In *Dance like a Man*, Mahesh Dattani unearths the heart of the dancers who yearn for recognition and suggests that ‘dance’ can be taken as a respectable profession in our society neglecting the old prejudices against the dance and dancers.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) is a stage play in three acts dealing with the twin issues of gender and alternate sexualities. It highlights the status of women in the modern patriarchal business family living in Bangalore. The plot of the play revolves round the Trivedi family that comprises of Jiten and Nitin, two brothers, Dolly and Alka, their wives, and Baa, an old and bed-ridden mother of Jiten and Nitin. The play is divided into three acts. The first Act is the women’s world that depends upon men for survival; the second Act is the men’s world that bothers less about women; and the third Act is free for all in which women dominate. The Act-I and Act-II namely ‘women’ and ‘men’ denote the classification of humanity on the basis of gender and Act-III shows how women dominate men in a world free for all.

The Act-I of *Bravely Fought the Queen* presents the position of women in the modern patriarchal urban families. All the women characters—Dolly, Alka and Lalitha, wives of Jiten Trivedi, Nitin Trivedi and Sridhar respectively—play subordinate roles in their homes as they depend upon their husbands for survival. Baa is both “a persecutor and victim”. These women are defined and identified by their relations to men. Dolly and Alka are introduced in the play as the wives of Jiten and Nitin Trivedi. When Lalitha enters into the Trivedi household, Dolly, unable to identify her, asks Lalitha:
What I was trying to remember was—whose wife you are? I know we met at the office party last month so you must be somebody’s wife. (Pause.) What I mean is your husband—I know—is working for my husband. 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? (CP 234-35)

Dolly’s words confirm that even in the modern world a woman is defined by her relation to men. Before marriage she is a daughter and/or a sister of someone; after marriage she is a wife, a daughter-in-law and/or a mother of someone. Her identity is always so and so of so and so.

In the Indian patriarchal families, more often than not, the husbands are breadwinners while the women take care of the household activities, besides bearing and rearing children. In Bravely Fought the Queen, Dolly and Alka are expected to please their husbands by looking after and accompanying their old, bed-ridden, and paralytic mother, Baa. They are imprisoned into their houses with Baa as a jailor. As their houses are far off from the city, no relatives including their brother Praful come to their houses to meet them. They live a life of seclusion with nothing to do except beautifying themselves and waiting for their unsympathetic and indifferent husbands. They have no freedom to go out on their own; even for that they have to depend upon the mercy of their husbands. When the play opens, Dolly and Alka are getting ready very enthusiastically to go out with their husbands, Jiten and Nitin, to meet Kapoors because “We haven’t been out since God knows when” (CP248). But Lalitha’s intrusion into their household to discuss ball spoils their plan. When Alka comes to know the fact that their going out has been cancelled, she pleads her husband: “Nitin, let us go somewhere. Just the two of us … just for a drive. Anywhere. There are so
many things I want to discuss but we are never…” (CP 241) Dolly, too, requests her husband Jiten in the same manner, “Look. Never mind the Kapoors. Let’s just go out somewhere. To that new restaurant. We could all go. We will invite Lalitha and Sridhar as well.” (CP 250)

The words of Dolly and Alka show how desperate they are to go out and how tired they are of their lonely life in their twin houses situated “Right in the middle of nowhere” (CP 238). But their indifferent, whimsical and prosaic husbands never bother about their physical, emotional and social needs. It is their fate to be rotten in their houses doing nothing except taking care of their old mother-in-law.

Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* “dramatizes the emptiness and sham in the lives of its cloistered women and self-indulgent, unscrupulous men, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception and hypocrisies” (Asha Chaudhuri 32). All the characters in the play have put on the masks to hide the reality of their lives. They live in the world of illusions they have created to escape the agonizing truths of their lives. The life of each one in the play is “full of sounds and fury signifying nothing” (Macbeth, Act-V). When the play opens and Lalitha enters into the Trivedi household, both Dolly and Alka, two sisters married to two bothers namely Jiten and Nitin, try to triumph over each other by showing Lalitha that they have a better deal than the other. But actually both of them have been neglected and ill-treated in their domestic lives by their unscrupulous husbands.

Dolly, the elder sister of Alka, is married to Jiten Trivedi who runs an advertising agency in partnership with Nitin Trivedi, his younger brother. It is her duty to care for Baa, her mother-in-law who tortures her by ringing the bell and
blurting out her name now and then. She has a spastic daughter named Daksha who is admitted in one of the institutions for physiotherapy. She leads a cloistered life “sitting all by herself, looking pretty and …wasted” (CP 260). In order to pass her time she listens to Naina Devi, the queen of thumri. Having been frustrated and disillusioned in her married life, she creates her own imaginary world in which she fantasies an affair with a cook, Kanhaiya who is nineteen and beautiful. She shares her private life with Alka and Lalitha thinking that “It’s nicer to have an audience” (CP 293). She tells Lalitha that her daughter Daksha is studying in a special school in Ooty where she takes lessons in dancing. Thus, Dolly leads a life of illusion and tries to show others what she is not.

Alka, the younger sister of Dolly, is married to Nitin, the younger brother of Jiten. Her married life is worse than that of her sister Dolly. Like Dolly, it is also her duty to take care of Baa, her half-dead mother-in-law who dislikes her and wants her son Nitin to drive her out of the house. Her married life is incomplete as she is childless. At first Alka thinks that Baa is responsible for her being childless. She says, “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!” (CP 284) But afterwards she realises the real reason of her childlessness. Now she blames her brother Praful for her loveless married life. When Dolly defends her brother, Alka cries out: “Our brother is a cheat! He lied about our father to them. And he lied to me! He lied to me by not telling me…” (CP 256) Alka does not expose her life before others. She pretends that she has a better deal than her sister, Dolly. In order to forget the harsh realities of her life she takes to drinking and becomes alcoholic. As Dolly takes refuge in fantasy to make her life comfortable, Alka drowns herself into wine to lessen her woes.
Lalitha, the wife of Sridhar who works for Trivedi brothers, is an educated woman. She thinks herself liberated but she is not. Like Dolly and Alka, her life is also empty. She too remains at home and devotes her life in the service of her husband. When asked by Alka whether her husband doesn’t mind drinking, Lalitha remarks: “No, I don’t think so. (Drinks.) As long as he’s around when it happens, he doesn’t mind. You must do a bit of social drinking too.” (CP 244) Her words prove that she is not free to do anything on her own. She comes to Trivedi household to discuss the masked ball which is a part of her husband’s duty. In order to while away her time she does a bit of freelance and creative writing, reviews cultural events, and grows bonsais. She tries to fill up her own emptiness with her obsession with bonsais. Thus, all the three women protagonists “try to escape the confines of their claustrophobic world in various ways: Alka with alcohol, Dolly with her fantasizing about Kanhaiya and Lalitha with her obsession with bonsais” (Asha Chaudhuri 54-55).

Mahesh Dattani has used the metaphor of ‘bonsai’ very dexterously to show the stunted growth of women in the patriarchal families. The lives of all the women characters in the play are not different from that of the bonsais. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri rightly remarks, “The stunted growth, the bizarre shape, the grotesque reality of the bonsai becomes resonant in the existence of all the characters that people the play” (54). The metaphor of bonsai reveals “the attitude of a power ridden society towards women” (Payal Nagpal 80). Lalitha, who is obsessed with the bonsais, tells Alka how bonsais are made:

You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and …stunt them. … You’ve got to make sure the roots don’t have enough space to spread. You still have to keep
trimming them as they grow. ...You can shape their branches into whatever shape you want –by pinching or wiring the shoots. (CP 244-46)

The process of making bonsais and socializing and policing women into gender roles is the same. Like the bonsais, women too are confined to the limited space of their households depriving them from the other resources of learning and earning. Trimming the roots of bonsais symbolize the displacement of women from their parents house to their husbands house and their dispossession from parental property. Shaping the branches of bonsais by pinching and wiring indicate the teaching of gender stereotypes through social restrictions. Like the bonsais women too are show pieces to be displayed.

Dattani’s Bravely Fought the Queen underlines the gender-based violence against women in the patriarchal families. Nearly all the women characters in the play are the victims of gender violence. Violence against women is as old as civilization. It is a worldwide phenomenon. According to SNDT University Research Centre for Women Studies, “violence, in general, is a coercive mechanism to assert one’s will over another, in order to prove or feel a sense of power. Those in power against the powerless can perpetuate it. Any individual, or group facing the threat of coercion, or being disciplined to act in a manner required by another individual or group is subject to violence”(Yashode Bhatt 67). Del Martin, a noted feminist analyst of wife beating writes in Battered Wives: “The historical roots of our patriarchal family models are ancient and deep...New norms for marriage and family must be created, since the battering of wives grows naturally out of ancient and time honoured traditions” (Del Martin 26) Societal tolerance of wife beating is a reflection of patriarchal culture that
supports male dominance in marriage. According to Del Martin “Marriage is the mechanism by which the patriarchy is maintained” (37).

Dobash in “Violence against Wives” writes: “…men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in Western society—aggressiveness, male dominance, and female subordination—and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance” (24).

In *Bravely Fought the Queen* nearly all the women characters are victims of gender violence. In Trivedi household, violence is “the norm with which the actions of the women are controlled” (Payal Nagpal 82). Dolly, the wife of Jiten Trivedi, is battered in her house by her husband as per the instigations of her mother-in-law. Jiten hits and kicks Dolly for her brother’s lie. Praful, the brother of Dolly and Alka, tells Baa a lie about his father and marries his sisters to Jiten and Nitin. When Baa comes to know the truth regarding the father of her daughters-in-law, and the identity of their mother as a keep, she gets angry and goads her son Jiten to batter Dolly without considering her pregnancy. She provokes Jiten to throw Dolly out of the house and beat her up. “No! Jitu, hit her on the face but not on the …stop it Jitu! On the face, only on the face! Enough! Stop!” (CP 311) This battering of Dolly results in the two-month premature birth of spastic Daksha. Apart from physical torture, Dolly is also tortured psychologically. She is humiliated in the house by her mother-in-law as the daughter of a whore. Physically challenged Daksha reminds Dolly her physical torture and it, in turn, tortures her mentally.

Alka too suffers from the brunt of domestic violence. Before her marriage, Alka was coerced and battered by her brother, Praful, to make her conform to the patriarchal code of conduct. Alka recollects with pain and pathos how her brother
once battered her when she took the lift of her neighbour to come home. She reminds Dolly how her brother cruelly bullied her:

I came home from school with the neighbour’s son on his scooter instead of walking with you. I told him to drop me before out 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. (CP 257)

Praful’s behaviour towards his sister Alka reminds the words of Clara Nubile who rightly says, “Sexual constraints on unmarred girls, control on their sexuality and the obsession with virginity are very common in India” (23). Like the Western culture, the Indian culture, too, has always been “obsessed with controlling women's bodies” (Diane Roberts 3) thinking the woman’s body “a site of conflict” (Peter Stallybrass 123-24). Due to her intimidation by her brother, Alka never looks at any man in her life; even she refuses to fantasize a relationship with a cook. When Dolly asks Alka whether she likes to have a relationship with a cook, she remarks, “No-o! I can’t! (Sits on the sofa, crying.) Praful, your sister is good. She’s good.” (CP 263)

After her marriage, Alka is ill-treated more by her mother-in-law and brother-in-law than her husband. When Alka insults Baa in her drunkenness, both Baa and Jiten provoke Nitin to throw her out of the house and Nitin does so. It is only after three months, she has been accepted in the house due to the entreaties of Dolly and Praful. Her husband is so insensitive and callous to her that it makes no difference to
him whether she lives in the house or not. He says to Baa, “Alka can stay here, or go away, or drink herself to death, I don’t care. It doesn’t make a difference to me…” (CP 305) Every one blames Alka for her drinking but no one tries to understand her feelings and find out the reason behind her drinking.

The fate of Baa, the mother of Jiten and Nitin, is not different from that of her daughters-in-law. She is both “the persecutor and the victim” (Asha Chaudhuri 56). In her youth she too was ill-treated and bashed up by her husband who had married her for the sake of money that she would inherit being the only child of her parents. Though she inherits the property of her father, her status in the family remains inferior to her husband. Her husband was cruel and dark—“as black as the night” (CP 272). In her old age, in delirium, she cries out:

You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! (Jerks her face as if she has been slapped.) No! No! Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? No on the face. I beg you! Hit me but not on …aaah! (Covers her face weakly as her scream turns silent an the light on her fades out.) (CP 278)

Baa reminds the cruelty of her husband in her old age and regrets her marriage with him saying “I have married such a village!” (CP 288)! Baa, in her reminiscence, tells how she used to sing before her marriage. After her marriage when she expressed her desire to “sing for everyone”, her husband became angry and asked her to sing for him only. Her desire to be a singer was crushed and she became the domestic servant to her husband despite her economic independence. After the death of her husband
Baa regains her freedom that she had lost being the wife and becomes powerful mother and mother-in-law. Now, exercising the same patriarchal power over her daughters-in-law, Baa becomes the persecutor. It is an irony that the same discriminated women end up playing a male role in the perpetuation of gender discrimination.

Besides Dolly, Alka and Baa—women of Trivedi household, *Bravely Fought the Queen* also throws light on other women –Dolly and Alka’s mother and the old beggar woman—who are the victims of gender violence and exploitation. Dolly’s mother has been deceived by her husband by keeping her in ignorance about his first marriage. As soon as the truth regarding his second marriage comes to light, he abandons Dolly’s mother and disappears from her life leaving her to her fate. The old shrivelled up beggar woman, who hides her bitter life under the tarpaulin in the backyard of Trivedi household, is mercilessly killed by Jiten under the wheels of his car.

Thus, Dattani would like to say that women are safe neither in patriarchal families nor in the patriarchal societies. There is a constant fear in their minds of being raped by the auto rickshaw drivers as Lalitha says, or being crushed under the wheels of cars that belong to chauvinistic, egotistical, insensitive and indifferent men. All women, rich or poor, are victims of gender violence and it will go on as long as they are dependent on their husbands for survival and as long as they are viewed as sex objects.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* also dramatises women’s resistance against their exploitation in the male dominated society. Dattani’s women characters are neither mute sufferers like the traditional women nor do they revolt against the patriarchy like
the new brave women. His women characters fight back the male authority in their own way. The title of the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* refers to the fight women put to the male dominance. Baa, the mother of Jiten and Nitin Trivedi, defies the authority of her battering husband by not giving in. She pleads her husband not to hit her on the face, but never implores him not to batter her at all. She says, “Go on. Hit me again. ... Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? No on the face. I beg you! Hit me but not on ...aaaah!” (CP 278)

Baa bravely tolerates her husband’s beatings refusing to give in to his tyranny. She tries to show her husband his place by reminding him her authority over the house and the property that he has usurped. She gallantly tells her husband that “This is my house! My house!” (CP 278).

Alka, the wife of Nitin, also resists her exploitation by the patriarchal men including her own brother, Praful. She feels that she has been betrayed by Praful forcing her to marry Nitin, his homosexual partner. Her behaviour in the Trivedi household in the presence of Praful indicates her revolt against the patriarchal norms. She deliberately drinks heavily and insults Baa by raising question regarding the fatherhood of Jiten and Nitin without thinking its ramifications. In order to make Praful feel small she asks Baa in that deliberate slur, “Your sons are so different from one another. They are both petty like you, but otherwise ...Do they have different fathers?” (CP 256) Asking such a question to the mother-in-law in front of her sons requires a ‘manly courage’ and Alka shows that courage.

Alka justifies her behaviour to Dolly. She tells her that she had not planned it. She says: “And I didn’t plan it, for God’s sake! I saw ... I saw them staring at each other at the table. (Pause.) I can’t forget what they did to me! Our brother is a cheat!
He lied about our father to them. And he lied to me! He lied to me by not telling...” (CP 256)

Dolly slaps Alka but never tries to understand her anguish. Having been ignorant about the homosexuality of Nitin, Dolly blames Alka but Alka’s deliberate behaviour—drinking heavily and insulting Baa in the presence of her sons—indicates her fight against the patriarchy that always dominates and silences women.

Alka’s dancing in the rain signifies her desire for freedom and her uprising against her enslavement. When Jiten and Nitin see her dancing in the rain Alka reacting: “What have I done that I should feel scared?” (CP 298) When asked by Jiten what she was doing in the rain, she defiantly replies: “I don’t know! I don’t know what I was doing outside. Aren’t there times when you don’t know what you are doing? (To Nitin.) What is the harm in that? Huh? (No response.) Tell me. What’s the harm?” (CP 300)

Alka’s reply to Jiten and her questions to Nitin justify her act of dancing in the rain. She thinks nothing wrong in it. It is a kind of her assertion of her right to behave as per her desires. It is also an assertion of her right over her body. She knows that no one is perfect. She does not hesitate to remind her husband his weakness. “I know I haven’t been an ideal housewife. And you haven’t been a …well, a competent husband. (CP 300)

Alka resists the authority of her brother-in-law by calling him ‘a lech’ and a ‘sinner’. She gives expression to her inner anguish in the following words:

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 her hands.) Finished. Matter over. Or is it? The saint has another sister who is (slaps her own face) bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend! The sinner’s brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a coincidence. (CP 300)

Alka fights back the tyranny of the Trivedi brothers by stripping them naked, by exposing the true nature of them. She takes the help of rum to boost up her courage to resist her exploitation. She would like to attend the masked ball in the costume of the Queen of Jhansi with a sword in her hand. It shows her longing to be brave like the Queen to fight for her rights and self-esteem.

Thus, Alka uses alcohol as a weapon against patriarchy to prove that she, a woman, can also drink like men. Her habit of consuming wine is a deviation from the gendered norms and expectations, and shows that gender norms and stereotypes are social constructs and can be changed.

Dolly, the sister of Alka, too voices her protest against the patriarchal system that is based on the male supremacy. Her love for ‘thumris’ sung by Naina Devi, shows her inner proclivity. She is fan of Niana Devi, perhaps, because of her deviation from the gendered norms and expectations and her strong longing to lead a life of her own dreams. To get respite from her dull and empty life, she listens to the thumris of Naina Devi secretly as such kind of songs are taboos in her house. Being neglected by the callous, insensitive and indifferent husband, Dolly fantasises a love affair with a cook, Kanhaiya and tries to fulfil her emotional needs. She tolerates the hitting and kicking of her husband silently without making a fuss of it. But in the final act of the play the role reverses and she makes her husband weep and run out of the
house by reminding him how his cruelty is responsible for Daksha’s miserable plight. When Jiten blames her mother for instigating him to beat her up, Dolly cries out: “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!” (CP 312)

Dolly, in the presence of Lalitha, exposes Jiten and shows him how his cruelty and tyranny make Daksha crippled. Dolly’s sarcastic ape walk, while showing Lalitha how her daughter Daksha dances, makes Jiten weep. Refusing to believe what Dolly tells, Jiten goes out of his house and kill the beggar woman crushing her under the wheels of his car in his hysterical mood.

While commenting on the character of Dolly, Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri says: “Dolly is the only character that emerges unscathed and strong in the play, even as she willingly lets go of her brutalized reality to enter the life-generating fantasy that offers some comfort. Mother to the spastic Daksha, and nearly a mother to Alka, Dolly, however does not need an exterior support system to prop up her own sense of selfhood. Even in fantasy, she is aware of her own truths.” (86) The bravery of Dolly lies in tolerating the battering of a callous and unsympathetic husband, enduring the life of shame and ignominy, mothering the drunken sister and spastic daughter.

Thus, the women characters of Mahesh Dattani are not innocent victims; they fight bravely against their exploitation. The endurance shown by Dolly and Alka is no less than the heroism shown by Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi. The title of the play refers to a popular Hindi poem that celebrates the manly exploits of Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi, who had fought bravely during her battle with the British forces in 1857 – "Khub ladi mardani thi / Wo to Jhansiwal Rani thi." The fight of
Dolly and Alka is not direct like that of the Queen of Jhansi but indirect one living within the domain of a stereotyped married life.

Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* shows how women are looked upon in the male dominated patriarchal society. It is distressing and unfortunate that in the patriarchal society the woman is “sexually harassed, victimised, and traumatized; is subject to discrimination, violence, exploitation, oppression and injustice; and is treated as a commodity for sale and purchase” (Ujjwal Sharma 138). She is treated as an object of pleasure. That’s why scantily-dressed beautiful women are being used in the advertising world to sell goods. Jiten and Nitin Trivedi, co-owners of the ad agency, intend to arrange a masked ball for the sale of ReVaTee products—ladies undergarments and night wear for women—in which they want to “get this Shirley girlie to strip at the end” (CP 265). But their ad-campaign has been rejected for the forth time because “it upholds the silliest of all Indian notions that a woman exists to please man” (CP 279). The directors said “we ... haven’t understood women” (CP 273). Jiten is reluctant to change the ad-campaign for the ReVaTee product and to make another presentation thinking that women don’t know what they want. He disregards the feelings of women consumers as they haven’t the buying power:

Yes! Men would want to buy it for their women! That’s our market.
Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power. Yes! So 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’. (CP 276)

It is clear from Jiten’s speech that he considers women as sex objects. He confirms it by asking Sridhar to bring a young whore for his physical gratification.
In his domestic life, Jiten is a violent, alcoholic, and lecherous husband who is insensitive to the emotional and physical needs of his wife. He is “the aggressive oaf” who often beats his wife and whores in the office (Asha Chaudhuri 56). His battering of Dolly, merciless killing of the old beggar woman under the wheels of his car, his whoring in the office and his rude behaviour towards Alka and Lalitha, shows his attitude towards women.

Nitin uses his wife Alka as a mask to hide his homosexuality. He conceals his homosexuality behind the sham of his heterosexual marriage with Alka, driving her into the bottomless pit of misery. He is representative of those homosexuals who pretend to be heterosexual and betray women by marrying them for social acceptance. Like Jiten, he too is indifferent to the needs of his wife and drives her out of the house when she insults his mother, Baa. Nitin is so mean and money-minded that, at the suggestion of Jiten, he is ready to drive his wife out of the house for good only to please Baa and thereby to inherit the old house of Baa worth one and half corer. Thus, through the character of Nitin, Mahesh Dattani brings out the exploitation of women in the heterosexual society due to its compulsory heterosexuality.

The attitude of Sridhar towards women is not different from that of Jiten. He is “as egotistical as Jiten” (Asha Chaudhuri 56). His apparent behaviour as a correct and sensitive husband is a mask he has put on to exploit his wife Lalitha for commercial purposes. Like the every patriarch, he believes that “women may not mean what they say” (CP 275). His restrictions on Lalitha’s life are indicative of his attitude towards women. He shows himself as “one of the many male chauvinists in the play” (Asha Chaudhuri 85).
According to Michael Walling, *Bravely Fought the Queen* is “fundamentally about performance as a way of living” (68), and “demonstrates how, in a world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life” (CP 230). By making characters to act masculine and feminine roles, the play subverts the traditional gender roles. As Shakespeare says in *As You Like It*:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players,
They have their exits and entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts. (Act II, scene vii)

All the human beings are actors and they play the part assigned to them by the patriarchal culture and tradition. In acting it is the basic requirement to forget the self and to act what one is not. Wearing the mask to hide the real self is a prerequisite in performance; and in *Bravely Fought the Queen* nearly all the characters put on the masks to play the gender roles in which they fail utterly.

The first act of the play entitled “Women” opens with Dolly wearing the mud mask and hiding her real face. From the very beginning she creates fiction to hide the reality of her life. We see her getting ready to go out for the party that has been cancelled. Even though she knows that they are not going out, she pretends so. She plays the role of “the contended, successful middle class Indian wife” and tries to show Lalitha how she has the better deal than her sister Alka (Walling 68). Hiding the reality of Daksha’s disability, she brags Lalitha about Daksha’s school prizes in dancing. Her acting as a lover of Kanhaiya is another fiction that Dolly creates to hide her loveless married life.
Alka, the younger sister of Dolly, also wears the mask of happy wife in front of Lalitha and tries to show her how she is happier in her married life than her sister Dolly. Lalitha, the wife of Sridhar, acts as an educated and liberated woman who is busy in making bonsais and writing for The Times.

All the women characters in the play, thus, try to show others how they are doing gender perfectly putting on the masks of the roles they play.

The second act of the play “Men” shows how male characters attempt to play the traditional masculine roles. Jiten Trivedi acts as the traditional patriarchal husband who is always aggressive, violent, and wife-beater. He hides his real self under the mask of an aggressive and violent chauvinistic man. Nitin conceals his sexual identity wearing the mask of a heterosexual husband. Sridhar, too, pretends to be a liberal and caring husband and hides his real self.

In the final act of the play “Free for All” the apparently “unemotional, work based, external space of the office is constantly subverted by the internal, emotional, female space of the home” (Walling 72). Having been aware of the real self, all the characters discard their masks and appear in their real forms. Dolly stops acting as a happy wife and unmasks her unsympathetic and indifferent husband Jiten who is responsible for her miserable married life and for the physical disability of her daughter Daksha. She tells Lalitha that her daughter is physically disabled child due to Jiten’s battering her in the advanced stage of her pregnancy. Jiten’s mask is ripped apart and he appears as weak as a woman who runs out of the house shading tears. It is Dolly who appears as the strongest character in the play. She shows more courage and determination than Jiten. Thus, by her behaviour, Dolly shows that gender roles can be changed.
Alka turns out to be the most miserable woman deceived by both her brother and husband. She appears as an utter drunkard who questions her husband and her brother-in-law. Like Dolly, she too appears more dominant than her husband Nitin. Her drowning herself in the wine shows that women too can drink and behave like men by practice. Nitin discloses his homosexuality and blames Praful for his marriage.

Dattani’s *Uma and the Fairy Queen* is a radio play dealing with the theme of murder of Michael Forsyth and its investigation by Uma Rao, the wife of Suresh Rao, the superintendent of police. Besides the theme of murder investigation, the play also highlights the status of women in the global culture. Though gender relations are constructed differently in different cultures (Dube 1), yet all the cultures are unanimous in assigning women the secondary role. *The Uma and the Fairy Queen* shows up the wretched condition of women in general and the childless women in particular in the Hindu culture through the character of Uma Rao, the wife of Suresh Rao, in the Islamic culture through the characters of Sohaila and Nila Malik, wives of Aman Malik and in the ancient culture through the character of Titania, the wife of Oberon.

*Uma and the Fairy Queen* highlights the deteriorating relationship between Uma Rao and Suresh Rao, young and well-educated Indian couple. Uma Rao is the daughter of a vice-chancellor, the daughter-in-law of the commissioner of police and the wife of the superintendent of police. She has interest in the detective work. She has proved her intelligence and her skill in sleuthing by investigating successfully the murder of Kamala, a hijra and the murder of Lady Montefiore, the sister of Charles Montefiore. But her husband, Suresh Rao, is a traditional husband who doesn’t stomach her success. Being jealous of her, he asks her to “stop coming over to the
police station and going through our files” (CP-II 426). He is so mean-minded that he never praises her for her detective work. Rather he says, “I know you think you are smart especially after that Scotland Yard guy gave a pat on the back (CP-II 426-27). He becomes suspicious of her association with foreign diplomats and remarks: “Everyone likes a pretty face! Do you really think they respect your intelligence? Those foreign cops and all those diplomats you seem to enjoy socializing with? (CP-II 427) He does not like her to be a detective and intends to use his power to prevent her from doing sleuthing. “From now on I am keeping an eye on you. No more sleuthing around, understand?” (CP-II 427) Thus, he expects Uma to stop her detective work and bury herself into the household work.

As soon as Suresh Rao comes to know about the murder to Michael Forsyth, the British actor who was playing the role of Oberon in Shakespeare’s play A Midsummer Night’s Dream, he suspects that Uma will investigate the Michael’s murder. He orders his subordinates not to allow Uma to the greenhouse, the place where Michael has been murdered.

Suresh Rao is a traditional husband who believes in the patriarchal gender norms. He expects his wife Uma to stop meddling in the murder case of Michael Forsyth and to concentrate on household duties. He suggests her to take interest in cookery. He says: “Why don’t you join a cookery class like all normal women? The problem with you is that you have too much time and nothing to do since you don’t have any children.”(CP-II 439)

Suresh Rao is the representative of the patriarchal society. In the patriarchal society, to be a normal woman means to do all the household chores, to imprison herself in her husband’s house, to wash and iron her husband’s clothing and polish her
husband’s shoes, to give priority to the needs of her husband, to sacrifice herself for the betterment of her husband and his sons, to provide a son or sons to run her husband’s clan and to merge her identity into her husband’s. In short, to be normal woman means to be the slave of her husband, abnegating herself.

According to Suresh Rao, Uma is abnormal because she uses her intellect and reasoning, spends her leisure time in investigating the murder cases, associates with the foreign cops and diplomats, disobeys her husband and tries to create her own identity.

Uma and Suresh Rao are childless. As Uma’s medical report is normal, she cannot be blamed for her being childless. It means that the fault for being their childlessness lies with Suresh Rao which bothers Suresh Rao more than Uma. He is desperate to be a father to prove his manliness, but he can’t. It tortures his mind. He feels that Uma is going away from him day by day and in his attempt to keep her under his control, he asks her to devote herself to household duties.

Suresh Rao considers Uma as his rival as she excels him in sleuthing the murder cases. Every time he fails as a police officer in investigating the murder cases and in bringing the murderers to light. Uma does the same work dexterously and over powers him. She outwits her husband by her intelligence and reasoning power that is what Suresh Rao doesn’t like. Actually, Uma Rao intends to help her husband in the investigation but his male ego comes in the way. He does not like her interference in his work. Ironically, due to the incapability of Suresh Rao, the murder case of Michael Forsyth has been transferred to the commissioner’s office that takes the help of Uma Rao. Suresh Rao, being jealous of his wife, suspects that Uma has used her influence to get the case out of his hands. That’s why he asks Uma:
SURESH. Was it Liam? Or that fellow from Scottland Yard, Charles whom you had a soft corner for?

UMA. Both. And Yes I like Charles.

SURESH. Why are you being so cruel to me?

UMA. Well... I don’t know. May be – because it is my turn. (CP-II 445)

This conversation clearly indicates Suresh Rao’s jealousy as well as suspicion. To make him more jealous, Uma tells him directly that she likes Charles though she doesn’t.

Suresh Rao desperately wants a son to prove his manliness. He feels very bad about it and asks Uma “Would you be happier if we had children?” (CP-II 447) He thinks that his inability to give her a child is the real reason of their strained relations and Uma’s increasing interest in detective work. By telling Uma the story of his friend who was childless, Suresh Rao tries to win over Uma to do the same thing what his friend and his wife did to become parents. He tells Uma: “Well, a friend of mine – they couldn’t have children of their own – you know what they did? … they stayed in his village for a few months … a poor distant cousin of his was expecting a seventh child and they couldn’t afford to keep her … so my friend and his wife, they brought the child with them and … everyone acknowledged the baby to be theirs.” (CP-II 447)

Suresh Rao’s intention behind telling the story of his childless friend is clear. Like his friend, Suresh Rao is also afraid of his neighbours and wants to adopt the way his friend adopts to be a father. But Uma Rao, a follower of truth, rejects his proposal. She tells him boldly, “I am sorry Suresh. I am not ready for it.” (CP-II 448)
No doubt, she does want a child but not by adopting deceptive ways. Like a traditional patriarchal man he believes that a woman’s happiness lies in being a mother and man’s in being a father. But Uma does not know “whether I will be happy being one or not” (CP-II 448).

Suresh Rao’s childlessness affects him psychologically. He suspects that Uma does not love him. He ponders over the murder of Michael Forsyth. Thinking that Michael has been killed by his wife Nila Ahmed, he asks Uma “if you hated me enough would you kill me? (CP-II 448) But Uma’s reply “I don’t know. I don’t hate you enough” indicates that she hates her husband though not enough. But the reason of her hatred is not her being childless but Suresh Rao’s male ego that does not allow her to do what she likes and his unwillingness to understand her. Suresh never gives equal treatment to Uma. He considers her as a traditional woman who is socialized to aspire for a child. That’s why he says, “No children. That is the problem. If there were children there wouldn’t be all this talk of murder.” (CP-II 448)

_Uma and the Fairy Queen_ also presents the condition of childless women in the Islamic culture and how some Muslim men to prove their manliness remarry a pregnant woman blaming the first wife for their being childlessness. The play presents the story of Nila Ahmed, the famous TV actor and Sohaila Malik, the first wife of Mr. Aman Malik.

From Uma’s investigation into the murder of Michael Forsyth, we come to know that Nila Ahmed was Mrs. Nila Malik before seventeen years ago. At that time she was famous in every household in Pakistan as “Ruksana the ideal house wife” the role she played in the TV serial (CP-II 462). Mr. Aman Malik had married Nila because his first wife Sohaila could not become a mother. Sohaila couldn’t become a
mother “not because of any problem with her” but because her husband was “unable to become a father” (CP-II 462). In his attempt to put blame on his first wife Sohaila and thereby to prove his manliness, Mr. Malik married Nila who was then carrying child of another man. But when people started pointing fingers at her for her being childless, Sohaila, the first wife of Mr. Malik, exposed the hypocrisy of her husband by making public the medical report of him. In her attempt to prove her innocence, Sohaila exposed the sin of Nila, the second wife of Mr. Malik. As Nila says, “overnight I became the adulteress from an ideal housewife! Public anger built up and there was a fatwa on me! That I should be stoned to death in public!” (CP-II 462)

Nila Malik, somehow, managed to run away to UK. There she met Michael Forsyth and married him. She wanted to take her son Feroz with her to UK but she couldn’t. After her divorce, Mr. Malik did not want to part with Feroz. Like Titania and Oberon, Nila and Mr. Malik fought over the boy and ultimately Mr. Malik succeeded in keeping the boy with him.

Nila Malik’s trajectory of her life throws light on the Islamic culture and its attitude towards women. In Islamic culture a female adultery is a sin which can be punished with being stoned to death in public. It is the double standard of the Muslim fundamentalist society to punish women to death for adultery and to glorify men for the same sin. Like the Hindu culture, the Islamic culture too blames a woman for her husband’s impotency. Go wherever; men are the same all over the world. Men like Suresh Rao and Aman Malik can do anything; can go to any extreme to prove their manliness.

In the course of her investigation, Uma Rao reaches to Mr. Aman Malik and Feroz, the husband and son of Nila Malik. While interrogating Feroz, Uma realises
that Feroz detests his mother very much. When Uma defends Nila for her action, Feroz bursts out: “She is a whore! She killed him! She was responsible entirely for his death.” (CP-II 456) When asked why she would kill her husband, Feroz points at Liam and says, “Because she is in love with this white man” (CP-II 457).

The words of Feroz show how much he hates his mother. It seems that his mind has been poisoned against his mother by his father. His hatred towards his mother is also the result of Islamic attitude towards women. A Muslim man can not stomach adultery even if it is committed by his own mother. This shows the extremist male attitude towards women.

Uma Rao, a sleuth, is confused as she doesn’t know who is lying. To find out the truth, she meets Nila and accuses her as the murderer of her husband. To her surprise, Nila admits that she has killed Michael Forsyth, her second husband, because “I wanted a divorce and he wouldn’t give me one. I also inherit all his wealth” (CP-II 461). Having known the truth, Uma does not believe in her words. She exposes Nila’s intention to save the life of her son Feroz who has killed Michael accidentally while shooting her. Nila is ready to go to jail in order to save Feroz, her son who intends to kill her. She regrets her behaviour and holds herself responsible for the suffering of his son and husband. She regrets: “He died because of me! My son suffered because of me! I just wanted to get away. I can’t. I’ve given up. I can’t.” (CP-II 464)

Even though Nila admits her guilt and intends to make amends, the fundamentalist society does not give her an opportunity to amend herself. When Feroz comes with a gun to kill her, Nila keeps quiet and only says, “Go ahead. Kill me if
that brings you any peace” (CP-II 464). She is helpless and can’t resist the male dominated society represented by her son, Feroz.

Feroz is a representative of the fundamentalist Muslim society. He is proud of his culture. He defends his culture by exposing his own mother. He says:

. . . She was a famous TV star. Everyone knew her face! She thought she could do whatever she wanted to do. But she was wrong. She was an immoral woman and that is something we do not forgive! She slept with her actor friends! For money, for pleasure, or just to please the Devil. And I was born out of her cesspool of lust. (To Nila.) You! You don’t know what I had to suffer. In school I was known as the bastard! At home I was the unwanted child. We had to move to India and live in hiding to run away from the disgrace, but you won’t let us live in peace. Unless you are dead you won’t let me live in peace. So die. Prepare to go to hell mother! (CP-II 465)

Feroz defends his society and himself by putting blame on his mother, Nila Malik. He blames his mother for his suffering but he does not blame his impotent father and the society that forces her to leave her country as well as her son to save her life. In fact, it is his father who is responsible for his suffering and disgrace. He deliberately allows Nila to carry a child of another man to cover up his own impotency. It is his father who is responsible for the miserable life of Sohaila Malik and Nila Malik. Feroz never thinks of the travails his mother has gone through to save herself from the fundamentalist male society.

Mahesh Dattani, by presenting the dialogue between Titania and Oberon from Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream through Nila Ahmed and Michael
Forsyth, throws light on the jealousy between the husband and the wife that exists since ancient times. Titania and Oberon, the Queen and the King of fairies respectively, claim to be the original parents of the mortal human beings. “We are their parents and original” (CP 435). Oberon is jealous of Titania’s relationship with the changeling boy who gets a lot of attention from Titania. Oberon thinks himself the lord of Titania and asks her, “Why should Titania cross her Oberon?” (CP435). He demands the changeling boy to be his henchman, but Titania is not ready to part with the boy. In order to divert her attention from the boy, Oberon puts her under the spell of love with the help of Puck, his servant. As a result she falls in love with the donkey and forgets the boy. To make things worse Titania accuses Oberon of loving Hippolyta. Oberon, too, accuses Titania of loving Theseus. Thus, through the story of Titania and Oberon, Mahesh Dattani would like to suggest that since the ancient times the woman is subordinated to the man and is expected to obey her husband who is her lord.

The play ends with Uma’s words “Damned if you have children, and damned if you don’t” (CP-II 466). Thus, the play presents the wretched condition of women in male dominated society irrespective of caste, race and religion.

_Thirty Days in September_, first performed at the Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, on 31 May 2001, was commissioned by RAHI, a support group for women survivors of incest. It presents the pernicious ramifications of child sexual abuse on Mala, who has been sexually abused by her maternal uncle. Dattani has deliberately set the play in the upper middle class society in Delhi “because I did not want them to dismiss sexual abuse as something that does not happen to people like them” (Dattani Quoted in Asha Chaudhuri 45). Mala Khatri is the daughter of Shanta Khatri who has been deserted by her husband. As a child Mala has been sexually abused by her own
maternal uncle from the age of seven to thirteen. No parent has paid heed to her crying. Whenever she went to her father with an intention to tell him what her uncle did to her, her father often asked her to go to her mother who was always busy in praying the Lord Krishna. Thinking that Mala was crying due to hunger, Shanta used to stuff her with food that she liked most. Mala’s parents neglected her sexual abuse by her own uncle who continued to rape her till she becomes “a whore” (CP-II 44). That’s why Mahesh Dattani remarks: “It’s the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like in this case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It’s this silence that makes the abused feel betrayed.” (Quoted in Asha Chaudhuri 45)

_Thirty Days in September_ is a story of “Mala, sexually molested by her uncle as a child and her relationship with her mother who knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle but chose to keep quiet, voicing no protest” (Asha Chaudhuri, 73). When the play opens, Mala is a young lady morally degraded and sexually exploited. She works in the creative department of an advertising agency in Delhi. She has become a whore as her uncle calls her after exploiting her sexually. She is “a very bad girl” who has gone “astray” in the eyes of her mother (CP-II 29). She becomes a sex addict. But no one except Deepak, her lover, delves deep to find out the reasons of her morally loose behaviour.

_Thirty Days in September_ also throws light on the mother-daughter relationship. As Lillete Dubey says, “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” (CP-II 4). The very opening scene of the play explores the relationship between Shanta and Mala. By Shanta’s conversation with Deepak, it seems that Shanta is afraid of her daughter Mala. She is
unwilling to speak to Deepak due to Mala’s strict warning to her. She pleads Deepak again and again to leave the house and come afterwards when Mala returns home. Shanta begs Mala in a terrified condition when Mala comes to know about Deepak’s visit to her: “Mala! … No. No! I tried to but he just came in! Mala! Please! I will tell him to go away! I will tell him to go away right now! …No. Don’t say that! Come home! Mala please come home!” (CP-II 17)

Shanta is much worried about her daughter’s future. She wants Mala to settle in life and stop flirting with men. When Deepak expresses his desire to marry Mala, she helps Deepak by providing information about Mala. She shows the calendar on which Mala has marked thirty days. Shanta tells him how Mala lies to her and to her friends as well. Whenever Mala gets depressed, she buys some magazines and spends her entire day in reading them. Shanta tells Deepak:

About a month ago, she told me she was going on Holi for a picnic to Palam Vihar with her office friends. But the next day, I overheard her talking on the phone to her office friend that she had to spend Holi with me. Why? Why should she tell lies? To her friend and to me? …But please don’t think bad of her. There are times when she is at home early from work and spends the whole evening reading magazines. She feels very restless then. That is when we quarrel. She is fine when she has work, or when she goes out. That’s why I feel sometimes, thank God she is going out. At least then she looks –happy. But I am her mother. I must worry about her. I pray for her. I never pray for myself. Only for her happiness. (CP-II 16)
It is very unfortunate that Shanta, instead of comforting the child for what has happened to her, she blames Mala for her behaviour. Shanta does not remember deliberately what happened to Mala at the age of seven or eight but she does remember what Mala did at the age of thirteen. In fact, what Mala has been doing from the age thirteen is the ramification of her sexual abuse in her childhood by her uncle. But Shanta willingly forgets it and accuses Mala for abusing her uncle and cousin. She says: “But Mala, I have seen it with my own eyes. You enjoyed it. You were an average child but you had my brother and your cousins dancing around you. That is what you wanted. Yes! How can I forget? I am trying to forget, please help me forget.” (CP-II 28)

Deepak loves Mala sincerely. He wants to marry her despite her perverse sexual behaviour. According to him, she is “the most intelligent, sensitive and dynamic woman” (CP-II 14). He loves Mala because she is “talented, beautiful,” and has “a rare gift of honesty” (CP-II 30). He is a different sort of person from Mala’s uncle or cousin. Unlike them, he tries to find out the reason behind her perverse behaviour. When Mala lies on the bed in his house covering her face and exposing her bra, Deepak tells her, “Mala, you cannot abuse your body like this! I won’t let you do it to yourself!” (CP-II44) He assures Mala, time and again, about his love for her and requests her to “Trust me Mala and tell me what is bothering you” (CP-II 39). Suspecting her sexual abuse in her childhood, he takes her to the counsellor for treatment so that she could recover from her psychosomatic trauma. He directly asks Shanta “Was Mala abused as a child” (CP-II48)? It is his hunch that her uncle is the abuser and he directly asks her about him. Mala, instead of telling him about her abuser, reiterates Deepak that it can’t work between them. Being exhausted by her indifference, he decides to give it one last shot and meets her uncle in the restaurant
along with Mala and Shanta. He tells her Vinay uncle that “Mala has been seeing a
counsellor” (CP-II 47). When Vinay uncle tries to place the blame on Mala’s parents
giving the reference of the therapists, Deepak indirectly blames him for her behaviour.
Mala’s uncle tries to defend himself by saying that “It is the fashionable thing to do,
blaming whoever is closet to her” (CP-II48). But when he presents the title deed of
the flat Shanta and Mala are living, Mala does not keep quiet. She exposes both her
mother and uncle. She tells her mother, “…He didn’t just buy a flat. He bought you!
…He bought your silence. So that you can never tell anyone what he did to your
daughter!” (CP-II 52) Mala becomes angry with her mother whom she holds
responsible for her tragedy. She blames her mother for her silence which she
considers a part of conspiracy against her by her mother and uncle. She bursts out
with angst asking her mother:

Where were you when he locked the door to your bedroom while I was
napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when
he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer
holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-
one or whatever. That’s how long or how little it took for you to send
me to hell for the rest of my life! Surely you must have known, Ma.
(CP-II 53)

Mala could not tell Shanta what her uncle did to her from the age of seven to
thirteen only because she was not available for her. That’s why she says, “I wish she
wouldn’t be so lost in her religion. I wish she had been there for me!” (CP-II 41) She
is angry with her mother because her mother never asked her “beta, what’s wrong?”
(CP-II 53).
Though Mala exposes her mother and uncle, she does not forget what they did to her. Thinking that she can not love anyone, she tells Deepak to forget her. When asked by Deepak why she can not love, she replies: “Because—because …I see this man everywhere. I can never be free of him. I am not so sure I want to be free of him. Even if I was, I am not so sure whether I have the ability to love anyone …else.” (CP-II 54)

Mala’s continuous molestation by her uncle has affected her psyche terribly. She loses her self-confidence and does not know whether she can love anybody. When Shanta asks Deepak to take her away from the hell of her house, Mala once again blames her mother for creating this hell for her. She says: “By staying silent doesn’t mean I can forget! This is my hell. This hell is where I belong! It is your creation, Ma! You created it for me. With your silence! You didn’t forget anything, you only remained silent!” (CP-II 54)

Shanta who is silent so far throws in the towel and admits her guilt in keeping silence. For the first time she speaks in defence of her telling them why she remained silent.

Yes. Yes! I only remained silent. I am to blame. That’s why God is punishing me today. I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn’t know how to speak. I—I can not speak. I cannot say anything. My tongue was cut off … My tongue was cut off years ago … (To Deepak.) Please save her. I did not save her. I did not know how to save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself? … (To Mala.) 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? No. 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. (CP-II 55)

Like Mala, Shanta has also been sexually abused by Vinay, Shanta’s brother. She too is a victim of his lust in her childhood. She confesses:

I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen … and it wasn’t only
summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!! (Pointing to the picture
of God.) I looked to Him. I didn’t feel anything. I didn’t feel pain, I
didn’t feel pleasure. I lost myself in Him. He helped me. He helped
me. By taking away all feeling. No pain no pleasure, only silence.
Silence means Shanti. Shanti. But my tongue is cut off. No. No. It just
fell off somewhere. I didn’t use it, no. I cannot shout for help, I cannot
say words of comfort, I cannot even speak about it. No I can’t. I am
dumb. (CP-II 55)

Shanta tolerates silently the pain and torture of the sexual assault meted out to
her in childhood. She takes refuse in God and spends her life worshiping the Lord
Krishna. No one sees the pain in here eyes and no one comforts her. Neither her
parents and brothers, nor her husband and daughter ask her about her pain. No one
tries to understand her. In the play, Shanta again and again tells Mala to forget the
past as she has forgotten. She tells Mala, “I forget I forget everything. Be like me.”
(CP-II 29) When Mala blames Shanta for father’s leaving them, Shanta only says: “I
have my God and that is enough for me. Krishna knows what all I have gone through.
He knows.” (CP-II 36) Indirectly, Shanta refers to her misery but Mala never asks her
mother what is troubling her. Mala thinks only of her pain neglecting her mother’s.
In *Thirty Days in September* Mahesh Dattani presents the pernicious repercussions of the incestuous child sexual abuse on Mala and Shanta. Due to sexual abuse in her early childhood, Mala becomes a “Bitch! Whore” (CP-II 44). She is desperate for a company. She can not live without a man and yet she ends her affair with any man after thirty days to be with another man. She goes “astray” and becomes “wayward” as her mother and uncle call her respectively. Deepak rightly describes her condition: “But she doesn’t want to be left alone. She seeks company. Desperately enough to offer sex in return” (CP-II 45). Her sexual abuse in her childhood converts her into a sex machine. She says, “I have been so bad … I –I seduced my uncle when I was thirteen! I –slept with my cousin –and –anyone who was available…” (CP-II 33)

Mala becomes a sex addict and goes on changing her sex partners from month to month because “I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone …else” (CP-II 54). Her perverse behaviour is the result of her incestuous child sexual abuse by her uncle, Vinay.

Shanta is a victim of sibling incest. Her brother Vinay molests her for the first time at the age of six and continues to rape her for ten years. As a consequence of this sexual assault, she loses interest in sex as well as life. She can not enjoy sex in her married life. She becomes a “frozen woman” (CP-II 36) because of which her husband abandons her for another woman. Mala blames Shanta for her father’s abandonment. She says:

You know why he left us … He left you not me. … You didn’t love him. The only reason you shared my room was because you didn’t want to sleep with him. All night long I had to listen to your mumbling
saying you didn’t want him near you. You didn’t want him touching you. … I remember daddy’s last words to me. You know what he said. He said to me ‘I married a frozen woman’. A frozen woman. (CP-II 35-36)

Mala is right when she blames Shanta for her husband’s leaving her for another woman. But Shanta’s frozenness is the result of her sexual abuse by her brother in her childhood. As Mala says, Shanta fails as a wife and a mother. She becomes only “a good servant” (CP-II 36). Due to sexual assault in her childhood, Shanta develops a nauseatia for sex and buries herself in worshipping Lord Krishna who, she thinks, helps her to forget the past.

_Thirty Days in September_ is also about Mala’s recovery from her tortured and abused past. In order to recover from any illness, it is very essential to acknowledge the disease. Once it is acknowledged, it can be cured. But when it is deliberately neglected, it gets worsened. In the case of Mala, her injury is deliberately ignored by her parents. As a result, it gets worsened. When Deepak comes in her life, he acknowledges her pain and decides to heal it.

Deepak is a true lover who acknowledges the pain of his beloved. Despite Mala’s perverse behaviour, Deepak loves her and suggests her to “see a psychiatrist or somebody” to recover from her abusive past. At the outset Mala rejects his advice saying that “I am not mentally ill or anything . . .” (CP-II 32). But afterwards accepts his advice and sees the counsellor along with Deepak. When she meets the counsellor for the first time, she blames herself for her behaviour and her father’s abandonment of them. Even she is afraid to reveal her name. She feels embarrassed talking about
her abusive past while the tape recorder is on. She says, “I am sorry but . . . I can only
tell you more if you turn this thing off” (CP-II 9).

When Mala meets the psychiatrist for the first time, she is “more unsure and a
great deal more nervous” (CP-II 9). She blames herself for her perverse behaviour.
She tells counsellor: “I know it is all my fault really…It must be. I must have asked
for it… Somehow I just seem to be made for it. Maybe I was born that way, maybe …
This is what I am meant for. It’s not anybody’s fault, except my own. Sometimes I
wish that my mother…” (CP-II 9)

After telling her trauma to the counsellor, Mala cries out, “Please, help me
stop this behaviour” (CP-II 33).

Four years of treatment makes Mala recover from her abused past. Now she is
transformed into a new Mala who is confident and self-assured. She would like to tell
her experience and the positive result of the counselling to the people. She feels like
beginning with a clean slate. She says:

   It’s 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 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 sudden you feel that you are –entitled to life. (CP-II 33)

Before seeing the counsellor, Mala’ was leading a lifeless life—a life without
senses. But after the treatment, once again she regains all her senses and enjoys life.
She says:
I can smile again. I can be a little girl again. Not again, but for the first time. At thirty plus I am the little girl I never was … My senses are working again. I can touch this chair and feel the chair touch me. My whole body can feel! And for the first time I enjoyed sex. Truly enjoyed it for its tactile pleasure. Not a craving for some kind of approval. I came alive and experienced what it means to be really loved. And for once I could look at Deepak in the eyes and say ‘I love you’ to him and believe it when he says the same to me. (CP-II 33-34)

Mala’s words indicate her complete recovery from her traumatic past. Now she is bold and confident. She is totally healed after four years of counselling. She hides neither her name nor her abusive past. In her happiness she says:

Mala Khatri. February 2004 … (Listening to the counsellor.) Why not? …I do not hesitate to use my real name now. Let people know. There’s nothing to hide. Not for me. After all, it is he who must hide. He should change his name, not me. … (Sighing, thinking about it almost as if it were a pleasant memory.) I wish he were here now, so I could see his face when I tell him I have nothing to hide. Because I know it wasn’t my fault …Now. I know now. (CP-II 8)

But soon she realises that he is dead, her uncle is dead and she celebrates the 29th February, the day of her uncle’s death, as her independence day.

Another indication of Mala’s complete recovery from her angst is her compassion for her mother. Before meeting the counsellor, Mala never used to think about her mother and her misery. But now she recognises the trauma her mother has
been through. She blames her uncle for destroying her mother’s life. She asks pardon of her mother for accusing her of “not recognising my pain” (CP-II 58). She regrets:

> While I accused you of not recognising my pain, you never felt any anger at me for not recognizing yours. We were both struggling to survive but –I never acknowledged your struggle. Ma, no matter where I am, I always think of you … I just want to … I want to ask you whether you need my help. Please let me be of help. (Gently turning her mother’s face towards her.) It’s not your fault, mother. Just as it wasn’t my fault. Please, tell me that you have forgiven me for blaming you. Please tell me that. (CP-II 58)

Mala’s soothing words to her mother proves her recovery from her abused past that used to haunt her before seeing the psychiatrist. Dattani, thus, emphasizes the need of the acknowledgement of the trauma of the sexually abused children and the need of counselling for healing their injuries—both physical and psychological. The play also expects parents to behave like Deepak—to be tender, caring, loving and responsible.

Mahesh Dattani presents the character of Vinay as a foil to that of Deepak. As Deepak says, Vinay uncle seems to be “a man of the world” (CP-II 47). He is a good actor who assures Shanta that “I shall play the dutiful uncle tomorrow at dinner” (CP-II 38). The role—the gender role—that Vinay plays out before others is different from the role he plays in the lives of Mala and Shanta. He is a beast in the form of a man. Like a beast, he lays his hands on Shanta and Mala, his sister and niece, to gratify his sexual lust and robs them of their childhood. He molests his sister Shanta at the age of six and continues to rape her for a period of ten years. He assaults Mala sexually at
the age of seven and continues do so till she reaches thirteen. As a result of his incestuous sexual abuse, both Shanta and Mala are terribly affected emotionally physically and psychologically. They become insensitive to the pains and joys of their lives as well as to the others.

Vinay’s behaviour towards Shanta and Mala is gendered. He uses the authority of the man—his size, age, his superior status in the house, his economic resources—to abuse them. Being a hypocrite, he puts on the mask of a dutiful brother and uncle and blames Shanta and Mala for their behaviour. He blames Shanta for Mala’s perverse and wayward behaviour. He says to Shanta, “If only you had controlled her from the beginning. She has always been wayward. You know that.” (CP-II 45) Again it is the patriarchal society headed by men like Vinay that decides whether the behaviour of a woman is perverse or not. It is their double standard of these patriarchal men who abuse women sexually to gratify their lust and call them perverse for the same behaviour.

When Deepak blames Vinay indirectly for Mala’s depression, he artfully says: “Ask her I have only given her love and attention, right from the start. I treat her like … my own daughter.” (CP-II 48) In public, Vinay pretends to be a dutiful and loving uncle. He tries to sideline the issue by saying that “It is the fashionable thing to do, blaming whoever was closet to her” (CP-II 48) He buys Shanta’s silence by sending her money every month for their household expenditure and buying a flat for her. He tries to show others how generous he is towards Shanta and how much he loves her. He says:

Shanta is my only sister. I know that life has not been very good to her. Our brothers say that she has brought it upon herself, the
loneliness and the—rejection. Her husband left her because—of her …

But she is my sister and I do have very fond memories of us growing up in our ancestral home … I am the oldest in the family and Shanta, the youngest, so I feel it is my responsibility … It is my way of showing my deep and sincere affection to you, my sister. (CP-II 51)

Vinay abuses his authority as an uncle and a brother with seemingly little concern for his victims. It is a play about the power that elders have over their children and the heartbreaking things that happen when that power is abused. The play highlights the issues of emotional coercion, a power imbalance between sexes and between an adult and child, an exploitation of the parental role, and her father’s lack of concern for her and her mother’s deliberate neglect of her exploitation due to woman disempowerment.

There is a cultural prohibition against speaking out about incest. The silencing of incest survivors supports a patriarchal social system by demanding that women hide the personal indiscretions of their fathers. The play publicly airs the pain and anguish that the incest has caused to Mala and Shanta.

It is a general practice among the Indian parents to pretend that incestuous child sexual abuse does not take place in India and to call it a western phenomenon. Whenever an abused child complains or talks about his/her trauma, they neglect it calling it her/his “wild imagination” (CP-II 53). Dattani, giving the examples of both Mala and Shanta whose sexual abuse has been neglected by their parents, lays emphasis on the need of the acknowledgement of the trauma of the sexually abused children and the need of counselling for healing their injuries. He also expects parents to be cautious in avoiding the incestuous sexual abuse.
Dattani’s *Seven Steps around the Fire*, is about hijra community that leads a life of social segregation in Indian society. In this play, Dattani voices his protest against the injustice meted out to the marginalized sections of our society namely hijra community and homosexuals. The play criticizes an age-old social institution of marriage that is based on the heterosexual relationship. Dattani pleads on behalf of the hijras and homosexuals to whom the privilege of marriage is denied by man and nature.

The play rotates around “the third gender- the community of eunuchs and their existence on the fringes of the Indian milieu” (Asha Chaudhuri 62). The plot of the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* revolves around the incident of murder of Kamla, a hijra, who is married secretly to Subbu, the son of a minister, Mr. Sharma. While working on her research paper “Gender related Violence”, Uma Rao, a research scholar and the wife of the superintendent of police, meets Anarkali, a hijra, who is put into the prison on the false charge of the murder of Kamla. Her intention behind the investigation of the murder case of Kamla is to “show their position in society” (CP-II 239). The hijra community has no space in male dominated society. They live on the margins of the society invisibly. The rights enjoyed by men and women are denied to them as they are, in the words of Serena Nanda, “neither men nor women”.

*Seven Steps around the Fire* presents the biased attitude of the heterosexual society. Munswamy, the police constable; Suresh Rao, the superintendent of police; and Mr. Sharma, the minister represent the heterosexual patriarchal society that hates the hijra community. Munswamy considers hijras as criminals and liars. When Uma Rao goes into the jail to meet Anarkali to collect information regarding the murder of Kamala, he tells Uma that there is no use of talking with Anarkali as “it will only tell you lies” (CP-II 234). According to him the hijras are worth neglecting and that is
why he suggests Uma to take another case for her research. While giving the details about the dead body of Kamla, Munswamy throws light on the criminal nature of hijra community. They not only steal gold and money but also kidnap small boys for money. Champa, the head hijra admits it in the play. She mistakes Uma as the mother of Ramu, whom hijras have kidnapped. She asks Uma to take Ramu home if she wishes. Generally it believed that hijras kidnap small boys either for money or to make them hijras.

Suresh Rao considers hijras as “just castrated degenerate men” who fight “like dogs” every day (CP-II 238). He warns Uma: “Don’t believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars.” (CP-II 237) Though Anarkali cries out, “I didn’t kill her. She was my sister!” (CP-II 236), the police officer Suresh Rao and the police constable Munswamy do not believe in her words. She has been beaten and ill treated in the prison. There is no separate prison cell for hijras. The other male prisoners torture them and scream with pleasure as they beat up Anarkali.

It is the plight of the terribly marginalized hijras in Indian society that they are not treated as human beings at all. They are not allowed to mix up with other people. The society, in which they are born and of which they are part of, does not pay heed to their needs and demands. The basic rights are denied to them. The parents to whom they are born, the brothers and sisters with whom they played in their childhood, and the relatives who caressed them and showered love on them when they were children—all these relatives consider them as disgrace to their families and avoid any kind of contact with them as if they are leprosy patients. They are not given any share in family property. As a result, there is no other alternative before them except begging, stealing and prostituting.
Mahesh Dattani is a humanist who has empathy for the marginalized, subjugated and oppressed class of people in Indian society. He speaks through the character of Uma, a research student in sociology. Her voice-over gives us more information about the lives of hijras and their origin. Her voice-over says:

The term hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning ‘neither male nor female’. Another legend traces their ancestry to the Ramayana. The legend has it that god Rama was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All people of the city wanted to follow him. He said ‘men and women turn back’. Some of his male followers did not know what to do. They could not disobey him. So, they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable-marriage and birth- ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature.

Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of ‘May you be the mother of a hundred sons. (CP-II 239-40)

Uma Rao’s Voice-over throws light on the miserable condition of hijras in India. They are socially, economically and culturally excommunicated. Marriage and
birth are the only two social events where their presence is acceptable but these two privileges are denied to them by man and nature. Marriage, love, family, birth, motherhood, and wife—these words have no meaning in their lives. Generally they address men and women as brothers and sisters. It shows how hungry they are for family and love. Anarkali addresses Munswamy as ‘brother’. But Munswamy does not like Anarkali addressing him as ‘brother’. He says her “Shut up. And don’t call me brother” (CP-II 240). No man likes to be called a brother by a hijra and wants to get involved with them. In the play all the men characters hate hijras and use the pronoun ‘it’ to refer to a hijra. They don’t like to be associated with them. So it seems that it is a general practice among men to treat them as stuff.

The play also throws light on the empty and insignificant lives of hijras. When asked by Uma to tell something about her life, Anarkali remarks: “What is there to tell? I sing with other hijras at weddings and when a child is born. People give us money otherwise I will put a curse on them…” (CP-II 241) There is nothing significant in their lives to tell others. They have no voice of their own at all. As Champa says, “We can not speak… When we want to speak, nobody listens. When we can not speak…” (CP-II 259). These words of Champa remind us Spivak’s “Can Subaltern Speak?”

Hijras are well aware of their position in society. When Uma expresses her desire to be her sister, Anarkali says, “Where you are and where am I?” (CP-II 242). However, she takes Uma in confidence and convinces her that she has not killed Kamla. But she does not reveal the name of the murderer to Uma. Knowing the power of the murderer, Anarkali states her dilemma to Uma: “Please, sister! I will die here. Help me out, then I will run away… They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don’t tell the truth, I will die in jail.” (CP-II 244)
Anarkali knows that there is one way out. Though she is innocent, she has to suffer only because she belongs to the class of people who have no voice of their own. Dattani talks about the trauma of hijras like Anarkali and Kamlia who have to suffer for no fault of theirs. Suresh Rao, after the release of Anarkali from the prison, admits that there was no proof against her. He tells Uma: “Anyway, we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. These hijras … they cut off their balls … they kill. It would be any one of them.” (CP-II 270)

Uma Rao, a mouthpiece of the dramatist, feels sympathy for Anarkali as she is convinced that she has not killed Kamlia. In order to give justice to Anarkali, she investigates the murder case of Kamlia and finds out the truth that Mr. Sharma, the minister, gets Kamlia burned to death with the help of his bodyguard Salim, being unable to tolerate his son’s marriage with her. After that, Mr. Sharma arranges his son, Subbu’s marriage with another girl. The marriage takes place but when the hijras dance and bless the newly wedded couple, Subbu remembers Kamlia and snatching the gun from Suresh Rao commits suicide.

Some days after Subbu’s suicide, Uma Rao shows the photograph to Suresh and tells him:

The photograph was what Mr. Sharma was after. A Polaroid picture that Subbu and Kamlia had taken soon after their private wedding in some remote temple. A picture of Kamlia as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him. The Poojari probably didn’t know that Kamlia was not a woman. Of course Mr. Sharma couldn’t have it, totally unacceptable. So he arranged to have Kamlia burned to death. But Salim had to tell him about the picture. Mr. Sharma simply had to have that picture. He sent Salim to threaten
Anarkali and Champa … He did get the picture eventually...after losing his son. What a price to pay! And now he will be arrested and tried for murder. (CP-II 280-281)

Suresh Rao, taking the photograph from Uma and tearing it, comments “I don’t know…” (CP-II 281). His incomplete sentence speaks a lot. Suresh tears up the picture and destroys the only proof of the marriage between Subbu and Kamla. His act of tearing the picture clearly indicates that he is a corrupt police officer who acts on the whims of the ministers like Sharma to be promoted. His comment “I don’t know…” also suggests that Mr. Sharma, being a minister, will not be arrested and tried for murder. In a democratic country like India the laws are only for the poor people and the marginalized sections of society, and not for the rich people like Mr. Sharma. By using their political power, politicians can easily put the innocent hijras like Anarkali into the prison to hush up the murders committed by the rich. It is very painful that the guardians of the law and order, the police, support the rich and men in power to suppress the voice of the weak, poor, and marginalized sections of society. It is Uma Rao who treats the hijras as human beings, empathizes with them and tries to give justice to them. She voices her protest against the injustice done to hijras and homosexuals by patriarchal hegemony.

By bringing the murderer of Kamla to light, Uma Rao proves the innocence of Anarkali but she fails to give justice to Kamla. No one bothers about them. No one believes what they say. They lead lives of humiliation. It does not matter to society whether a hijra is murdered or put in the jail. Wandering in the streets begging for bread and butter to fulfil their hunger, they lead the lives of cats and dogs. They are beaten up, raped, tortured and even sometimes murdered but no one raises a protest against the injustice done to them. Kamla is burned to death and Anarkali is put into
the prison on the false charge of Kamla’s murder. But the man behind the murder, Mr. Sharma, is not arrested and tried for murder. It is only because hijras have no voice and they have no space in our society which is constructed for heterosexuality.

Kamla’s murder by Mr. Sharma also proves that hijras can not have the married life either with another hijra or with a homosexual man like Subbu. The patriarchal society does not accept their marriage with another man.

Hijras are also human beings who care for one another and it has been proved in the play. Champa sells her jewellery and bails out Anarkali. She also nurses Anarkali when her nose is broken. All these acts show that hijras too are human beings and crave for family and love. If we treat hijras sympathetically, they also show their concern for us. Both Champa and Anarkali sympathize with Uma for being childless. When Uma goes to meet Anarkali for the last time, Anarkali takes out a locket and hands over it Uma and says: “A special mantra is in the locket. Champa gave this to me for you. Wear it. You will be blessed with children… sister! May you and your family be happy! Now go away, and do not come here again… Please go, sister!” (CP-II 282) The words of Anarkali show how much emotionally there are involved in the life of each other. Their relations seem stronger than the relations between actual sisters. By their behaviours, both Champa and Anarkali prove that they are not “just castrated degenerated men” but human beings with tender hearts (CP-II 238).

The play ends with Uma’s voice-over:

They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right.
The police made no arrests. Subbu’s suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people… (CP-II 282)

The play is about hijras and a homosexual, Subbu. It is a tragic love story of Subbu, a homosexual and Kamla, a hijra. Both of them desire to seek same sex love and marry each other secretly. Living in darkness away from the purview of an open society, they fail to fulfil their desire- to live together as husband and wife- as it is crushed by the heterosexual society represented by Mr. Sharma and in the play. Their love remains unnatural, pervert, and immoral in the eyes of society that upholds heterosexual relationship leading to marriage. They become victims of that society. One is murdered and the other has to commit suicide. Subbu commits suicide, perhaps, to become one with Kamla hoping to live as husband and wife in another world.

*Seven Steps around the Fire* also deals with the relationship between Suresh Rao and Uma Rao, a young and well-educated couple. Suresh Rao, the police officer, is no different from an average Indian husband who imposes many restrictions on his wife. Uma has to depend upon him for everything. She can not demand money for the bail of Anarkali; that is why she borrows it from her father. But Suresh does not like this act of Uma i.e. borrowing money from her father. He asks her “Why do you need so much money?”(CP-II 269). She can not tell him that she needed money to bail Anarkali out. He would not have liked it. Therefore she lies that she needed money to buy wedding present for Subbu. She shows him the money so that he should not suspect her of her intention. It is clear that, though Uma is the wife of the superintendent of Police, she is not free to spend money as she wishes. Like all other Indian women, she, too, is economically dependent on her husband.
Uma Rao tells Suresh about her visit to the doctor for treatment. Her mother-in-law takes her to the doctor for medical check up as she cannot bear children. Like every Indian mother-in-law, Uma’s mother-in-law also holds her responsible for being childless and takes her to the doctors. Thanks to the modern medical science that can tell who is responsible for being childless—either a husband or a wife. Earlier the wife was held responsible and was driven out of the house as she could not give a son to run the clan and husband used to remarry. Uma’s husband might have done the same thing if the fault had been with her. The conversation between Uma and Suresh throws light on man’s mentality.

UMA. I went to the doctor again. Your mother insisted. She takes me.

SURESH. What did they say?

UMA. Nothing …They want to see you.

SURESH. I don’t think so.

UMA. Just a test for your sperm count.

SURESH. I don’t have to go…

UMA. Would you like to go shopping with me? (CP-II 269)

This conversation clearly indicates that Uma was forced to visit the doctor by her mother-in-law but she can not force her son for the medical check up. It shows the biased attitude of Suresh Rao’s mother towards Uma. Besides his mother, Suresh Rao does not think it necessary for him to go to the doctor for the treatment. If something had been wrong with Uma regarding procreation, Suresh and his mother might have ill-treated and divorced her. But Uma does not utter a single word about it as she is a
woman. On the other hand when she realizes that her husband is not in the proper mood to discuss the most sensitive issue, she changes the subject so that her husband should not feel humiliated.

When Uma finds it difficult to win the trust of the hijras to collect information regarding the murder, she thinks of giving up the research. But thinking her position in the house, she determines to continue her research. Like the hijras, she too is subaltern and may be thrown out of her house any time. She says: “If my family throws me out, I hope that doctorate will come in handy” (CP-II 262).

Thus, the play Seven Steps around the Fire throws light on the miserable condition of hijras, homosexuals and women in Indian society.

Mahesh Dattani’s Do the Needful deals with the twin issues of gender and alternate sexuality. Besides the theme of homosexuality in Indian culture, the play also deals with the Indian system of arranged marriages in which individuals are coerced to marry against their wills. The play is about Lata who is “a young woman eager to prove her independence and break free from her parents” (CP 115). As Asha Kuthari Choudhari says, Dattani points at the shared spaces between women and gay men, both under the tremendous hegemony of mainstream patriarchal society that forces them to conform and live lives that are alien to their nature (61).

Devraj Gowda and Prema Gowda live in Bangalore with their daughter Lata who is “twenty-four and notorious” (CP 121). The Gowda family belongs to Marasu Vokkaliga Gowdas who have been landowners since the Vijaynagar Empire, but they are very desperate about the marriage of their daughter Lata who loves Salim, a Muslim terrorist. Being conservative, Gowdas does not approve of her love for a Muslim terrorist and force her to marry any Hindu boy. Being a modern girl, she does
not conform to the traditional arranged marriage. The following conversation between
the mother and the daughter throws light on the forced arranged marriage:

LATA. Please Amma! Please don’t insist I agree to this! You are
ruining my life.

PREMA GOWDA. You should have thought of our lives before
sleeping with that terrorist! (CP122).

No Gowda boy is ready to marry Lata as her affair with the Muslim boy Salim
is known to every one. That’s why Devraj and Prema Gowda are ready to marry Lata
with Alpesh Patel who is divorced and much older than Lata.

As Lata and Alpesh do not want to marry each other, they express their inner
desires to be rejected by each other. Both Lata and Alpesh expect each other to take
the lead to ‘do the needful’ to avoid their marriage. But at last Lata takes the initiative
and tells Alpesh: “Look, I don’t want to marry you, I am in love with someone else”
(CP 149). Alpesh, too, gathers his nerves and tells Lata, “Good. I am glad you don’t
want to marry me. Because I don’t want to marry you either” (CP149). Thus they
make their intentions clear to each other but it is not enough for them. Lata expects
Alpesh to say no to the marriage but it seems impossible for him. Lata even threatens
him that “if we do get married, I will give you hell! That’s a promise! (CP 151)

Thinking that her marriage with Alpesh is inevitable, Lata decides to run away
from the house to avoid her marriage. She tells her intention to Mali who believes in
an age-old tradition and moral values. Mali, reminding Lata family name and fame,
tries to prevent her from running away. He tells Lata, “No! Your appa and amma will
die of shame!” (CP 154) He also threatens her that he will commit suicide if she runs
away. He reminds her that “A daughter of Gowda can not do this!” (CP154). Thinking that Lata’s happiness lies at the feet of Alpesh, he requests her to marry Alpesh.

Mahesh Dattani ridicules the existing social customs regarding the arranged marriages which are in favour of custodians of heteronormative society rather than the individuals. It is very ridiculous that Lata’s marriage with Alpesh, a homosexual man, does not mar the family image but her running away with a Muslim boy brings shame to the family. Dattani perhaps wants to say that arranged marriages are not for the happiness of the bride and the groom but to maintain the social status and dignity of the parents.

Though Mali’s suggestion seems ridiculous to Alpesh, it appears useful and helping for Lata. She thinks over it and comes to the conclusion that it is worth trying. Lata and Alpesh come to the mutual agreement following the principle of “Teri bhi chup, mery bhi chup” (CP 142). The compromise that Lata and Alpesh make in marrying is, however, a clever and conscious choice, almost tailored to suit both the characters as well as the larger milieu, indeed a ‘forced harmony’ as Dattani would put it.

Dattani’s Do the Needful is a warning to the heteronormative patriarchal society that if the individuals are forced into arranged marriages having no choice to them to decide with whom to marry, such kind of dummy marriages will take place to protect their own interests. Lata and Alpesh marry as per the wishes of their parents but they deceive them by compromising to keep their marriage only as a façade to continue their relations with their lovers. Both of them agree to give enough sexual freedom to each other to carry out their affairs with their lovers. Alpesh can enjoy his life with Trilok and Mali; Lata can continue her affair with Salim.
Clearing the Rubble is yet another play that brings out gender discrimination in a low caste Muslim society. While clearing the rubble in her mind, Fatima, Salim’s mother, confesses how she preferred her son Salim to her two daughters Mumtaz and Saira hoping that Salim would support the family after getting the job. Mumtaz is forced to work in the house as well as in the hospital so that Salim could attend the school regularly without interruption.

Dattani’s Clearing the Rubble, a radio play, shows how a male child is treated and female children are neglected in Muslim families. The play is about a Muslim family consisting of Fatima, a mother; Salim, a son and Mumtaz and Saira, her daughters. The play is set in the direct aftermath of the earthquake that ravaged Gujarat in January 2000. Fatima is under the debris of the hospital along with her two daughters who are the victims of the devastating earthquake. While she is under the debris unable to move, she recollects her life and tries to clear the rubble in her mind before death. She feels she owes Mumtaz an apology. She begs pardon of her daughter Mumtaz to whom she forced to work hard to make the life of her son comfortable. In her ‘Thought’ Fatima accepts Mumtaz as a favourite child and Salim as “my dream, our future” (CP-II 77). That’s why Fatima favours Salim, her son, to Mumtaz and Saira, her daughters.

Fatima, the mother of Salim, has been strongly influenced by the patriarchal family structure that favours sons to daughters. In patriarchal families sons are privileged because they are thought to be the protectors and provides of the family. Fatima forces her daughter Mumtaz to do household chores, so that she could work as a labourer and Salim could go to school. In order to give an honourable life to Salim, Fatima deprives Mumtaz of her childhood coercing her to “wash the vessels, buy vegetables, fetch the water, light the firewood” (CP-II 73). Disobeying her husband,
Fatima sends Salim to school because “I did not want him to be a cobbler like his father” (CP-II 74). She tells Mumtaz her intention behind sending Salim to school:

If we had suffered a little to send Salim to school, when he grows up he could earn much, much more. We will be more wealthy, and you will find a husband who can support you well. That is the honour I was seeking. For that I had to make you work hard. (CP-II 75)

Mumtaz is representative of those girls who have to sacrifice their dreams and childhood to make the life of their male siblings comfortable. Even today, in many families girls have to give up their education and work hard so that parents can send their male sons to school.

_Clearing the Rubble_ also highlights the exploitation of girl children at work place. From Fatima’s ‘Thought’, we come to know about Mumtaz’s humiliation in the hospital where she has been stripped naked on the false charge of theft. It is the lust of men at the hospital that forces her to take off her clothes in the name of theft. Mumtaz is an epitome of those working class girls who are being sexually exploited at work place either by the employers or by the co-workers.

Thus, the play exemplifies the gender discrimination in Muslim families that favour the boys to girls.

Along with communal problem, _Final Solutions_ also presents the condition of women in Indian culture. We have three women characters in the play—Daksha/Hardika, Aruna and Smita. They represent three generations of Indian women since independence. Daksha’s diary tells us how Daksha becomes Hardika. Before marriage she was Daksha, but after her marriage with Hari Gandhi, her name was changed to Hardika to suit her
name to the name of her husband, Hari. Her marriage at the tender age of fifteen throw light on the practice of child marriage in India at the time of Independence.

From Daksha’s dairy we come to know that it was her dream to become the singer. But she could not fulfil her dream as her in-laws were against it. She writes in her diary: “All my dreams have been shattered … I can never be a singer, like Noor Jehan. Hari’s family is against my singing film songs.” (CP 166) Even her in-laws did not allow her to play the gramophone in the house. She used to go to the house of her Muslim friend, Zarine, to listen to the film songs.

Daksha had no say in family affairs. Neither her in-laws nor her husband consulted her in business and family matters. She was not allowed to meddle in their affairs. Once she asked her husband, Hari, “why we couldn’t give Zarine’s father a loan or something to start his business again” (CP 215) and “why did he come to our mill”. Hari became angry and “shouted so loudly, he sounded just like Wagh”. Being a wife, it was her duty “to please Hari” (CP 216).

Hari and his parents imposed certain restrictions on Hardika. She was not allowed to visit the house of her friend, Zarine. When Kanta, a maid servant, told Hari that Hardika ate the food in the house of Zarine, Hari battered her. Recalling that incident, Daksha writes in her dairy:

(as if to Hari.) No. What are you saying, Hari? It is not true! It is just not true! Kanta is lying. She lied to you! I did not touch their food! (Recoils as if she has been hit.) Ah! Don’t hit me! (Angrily.) Don’t do that! I swear I didn’t eat anything! Aah! Stop that! Stop it! All right. I won’t go there again. Please leave me alone. (Crying.) Please! Stop! (Lies on the floor, sobbing.) (CP 222)
Aruna’s condition is not different from that of her mother-in-law, Hardika. Though her husband Ramnik Gandhi is so called liberal minded person, his behaviour in the house is conservative. He never shares his secrets with his wife, Aruna. If he had told Aruna the secret about the shop, her attitude about the Muslims might have been different. We see Aruna always busy in Pooja room, worshipping the Lord Krishna. In Indian culture, women are socialised to devote themselves to religious activities and to emulate Sita.

In the play *Final Solutions*, Aruna, Hardika and Ramnik cross-examine Smita for being acquainted with Booby and Javed. They ask many questions to her and do not allow her to speak. Even Ramnik Gandhi, an alleged liberal secularist, doubts that Smita has some relations with them or to be precise she has some illegal relations with one of them. Smita tells her father that Javed is the brother of Tasneem, her friend, and Bobby is the fiancé of Tasneem. She also tells them that Booby and Tasneem often used to go out and they are getting married soon. Their interrogation of Smita proves that they are conservative Hindus who do not allow enough freedom to their girls to have acquaintances with either the Hindu or Muslim boys in the college. Aruna immediately remarks: “Stop her studies! From now on, she can stay at home” (CP 188)! The attitude of Aruna towards her daughter is not the attitude of Aruna alone, it the attitude of the Hindu mother towards her daughter. In Hindu society a female child does not enjoy as much freedom as a male child does.

Smita is different from Hardika and Aruna. She is as liberal as her father, Ramnik Gandhi. She enjoys freedom in her house despite her mother’s conservative thoughts. She believes in her own capacity and tells Hardika that “one can create one’s own freedom wherever one may be” (CP 220). Disagreeing with Smita, Hardika warns her that she may not enjoy the same freedom in her husband’s house. Indirectly she tells Smita about
the constraints that are imposed upon the newly wedded bride by her in-laws and husband. Thus, the play *Final Solutions* also brings out the condition of women in the Hindu society.

The plays of Mahesh Dattani draw attention to the problems of women in patriarchal society, highlighting their struggle for self identity, equal rights, and equal treatment. His plays present the wretched condition of women in Indian society. Dattani’s women characters neither emulate traditional role models like Sita and Savitri nor do they turn the patriarchal social norms and moral code of conduct up side down like the third wave feminists. They are middle class women who resist against their oppression without any resources in their hands. That’s why they fail in registering their protest against the patriarchal society. Bharati in *Tara*, Sonal and Preeti in *Where There’s a Will*, Baa, Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Uma in *The Swami and Winston*, Uma Nila and Sohaila in *Uma and the Fairy Queen* fight back against their oppression unsuccessfully. Dattani also portrays some women characters as self-centred and scheming. Preeti in *Where There’s a Will* and Ratna in *Dance Like a Man* are the examples of selfish conspirators. Tara in *Tara*, is a victim of gender discrimination and Shanta and Mala in *Thirty Days in September* are the victims child sexual abuse. Thus, Dattani portrays women characters realistically without any bias against them.