Chapter 4

The Female Entity

Frantz Fanon in the chapter, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” of his The Wretched of the Earth, warns that an underdeveloped country must guard against the danger of perpetuating the feudal tradition which holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine. Women will have exactly the same place as men, not in the clauses of the constitution but in the life of everyday: in the factory, at school and in the parliament. (163)

What he says about colonial domination can easily be applied to masculine domination. Like colonialism, the result looked for by male domination was to convince women that it was beneficial for them. It was, in effect, “an interior colonization” (Srivastava 9). Yet again, both colonialism and patriarchy are “a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity . . .” (Fanon 200). This forces the dominated “to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’ ” (Fanon 200).

It was this question that made writers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880 - 1932) and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858 - 1922) raise their voices against the oppression of women. The former’s Sultana’s Dream (1905) and the latter’s The High Caste Hindu Woman (1888) made people sit up and take notice of female subjugation. In recent times, more and more women are
trying to break away from the old image, in the attempt of evolving a new one. Most women comply with the strictures of patriarchal society, "some because they are unwilling to face social ostracism and others because they are too imbued with traditional concepts" (Uma 7). Due to lack of confidence and self-knowledge, women did not dare to rise in conflict.

However, in the second half of the twentieth century, changes began to manifest themselves. Western education, participation in the freedom struggle and women's movements encouraged women to assert themselves. These external influences began to give women an awareness of their own strength and a sense of being individuals in their own right. Women began to rise in conflict against their own socialized selves, and against men and society. They began to realize that they were of equal human value. There was a realization of their own power.

Feminism emerged as a major force in the Western world in the nineteen sixties. Although the initial goal of feminism was women's uplift, it soon shifted to equal rights for women. Toril Moi defines feminism thus: "'Feminism' then, is a specific kind of political discourse; a theoretical and political practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" (Moi, "Men against Patriarchy" 182). She summarizes Michele Le Doeuff's essay, "Women and Philosophy", in these words:

First, woman is perceived as lacking the phallus. According to the patriarchal imagination, what a woman needs is a man, not philosophy. On this logic, the thinking woman becomes
synonymous with the blue-stocking or the frustrated spinster. Thus woman's access to philosophy can at best be a compensation for their real frustration: the female lack is never truly a philosophical lack. But women are also deemed incapable of philosophy because of their self-sufficient plenitudes; lacking the philosophical lack, they are complacent, cow-like content; in short plant-like, as Hegel poetically puts it. Woman is an inferior thinker, in other words, not because of her lack, but because of her lack of a lack. (French Feminist Thought 9-10)

Feminism seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has been denied them by the dominant culture. It asserts that nurture more than nature is responsible for the comparative lack of eminent women. The call is “to dismantle the system that assigns to all women a single identity and a marginal place” (Poovey 267).

The ripples of this movement struck the Indian shores also and influenced the writings from the second half of the twentieth century. The novels of Manohar Malganokar, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, the poetry of Kamala Das, A.K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, the drama of the post-Independence period, all show the influence of this trend. However, the liberation movement found in Western countries has not much relevance in India due to differences in culture and tradition. Many of the problems faced by the majority of Indian
women are different from those faced by women in the West. But the new awareness created by the liberation movement spread world wide. Women’s groups and organizations in India, especially grassroots organizations like mahila mandals and mahila samitis, have been important instruments in the emergence and growth of the women’s movement.

Thus, we see the rise of a “new woman” in literature and in life, whose image is marked by a struggle for identity. She is unwilling either to be subjugated or to be deified. She demands to be treated as a human being; as a responsible member of the society with equal rights and with freedom to pursue her own aims. What she expresses is “a person’s need to be seen as an individual, as an entity valuable in itself, independent of family and social circumstances” as Karnad says in his introduction to *Three Plays: Nīga-Mandala; Hayavadana; Tughlaq* (9).

“The advantage man enjoys, which makes itself felt from his childhood, is that his vocation as a human being, in no way, runs counter to his destiny as a male” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 691). But the woman finds that society sees her claims to be acknowledged as a human being as running counter to her “femininity”. Thus, the nascent woman walks a path fraught with difficulties. It is not easy to break the bonds of convention and create a new role-model. This often leads to conflicts within and without. Chanana in her introduction to *Socialisation Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, makes this clear by an illustration:
An educated, working woman is comparable to Trishanku, a character in Hindu mythology who had to hang between heaven and earth, since he dared to enter heaven with his body. . . . The working woman who steps out of the traditional confines of the home into the world of work, faces a similar problem for she can never be fully accepted in the world of work nor can she come back to the world she has stepped out of and left behind. (22)

Man arrogates to himself the triumphs of activity, as compensation, he offers woman passivity and safety. He is intimidated by, and therefore, rejects the woman who tries to achieve the pinnacles conquered by him.

The necessity for a clever woman to conceal her cleverness in order to relate happily to men, the degree to which it is still assumed that a woman’s fortune will depend on her marriage, the prevalence of complex sexual binds created by men for women—these remain issues for modern feminists, causes for suffering in modern women, subjects of modern novelists and poets. (Spacks 296)

It is this that made Stendhal say, “Every genius born a woman is lost to humanity” (qtd. in Beauvoir, “Women and Creativity” 18).

This emerging new woman is not merely an import from the West. She is a product of the transformation in Indian society. The migration to the cities, the growth of the nuclear family and the increase of literacy and
employment among women are some of the reasons for this emergence. The emergence has, therefore, been, of necessity, a slow one.

But it should be noted that the Indian Women's Movement affected only the elite segment of society and left the masses untouched. Its members were women from urban educated families and the benefits were confined to them. The women from the villages and the less privileged women in cities still continue to be held fast by the quagmire of the patriarchal set-up.

Malavika Karlekar in her "Note on the Empowerment of Women" defines "empowerment" as "capacity building" (146) and goes on to say:

The notion of capacity building stresses individual growth as much, if not, more, than an external adjustment in the sharing of power and authority. Nonetheless, as enhancing individual capacity involves new skills as well as new ways of viewing oneself, the process may cause a woman to reflect on her situation, including a sense of autonomy or lack of it; it may also help her work towards a better adjustment to domestic power relations as well as her attitude to the wider environment. (147)

This is true in the case of the women characters discussed in this chapter. Urvashi in Bharati Sarabhai's Two Women, Nalini, "She" and Shiela in Ezekiel's "Nalini", "Song of Deprivation" and Don't Call It Suicide, Malti and Tara in Currimbhoy's Thorns on a Canvas and This Alien - - -
Native Land, Malini and Mallika in Mehta’s Brides Are Not for Burning and “Getting Away with Murder”, Padmini and Rani in Karnad’s Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala, Jaya in Padmanabhan’s Harvest and Uma, Smita, Lalitha, Tara, Kiran and Mala in Dattani’s plays are all beacons of hope to the beleaguered Indian woman.

In 1952, when Bharati Sarabhai published Two Women, the emancipation of women must have seemed a far-off dream. So, what we have in Urvashi, one of the women in the title, is an idealized figure. Her very description is that befitting a goddess:

Urvashi is luminously dark, with long, black hair falling over her white sari, which is fine Dacca muslin with a small gold border to it. No decorative aid or device modifies her personality, which has character, unity, simplicity. She has the untroubled quality of the very young, or the very old. Like the clusters of leaves and blossoms at the window from which she has emerged, she is a part of invisible Nature. As we see her, sometimes her figure, which is tall without losing its symmetry, stands out structurally like bare sculpturesque form of a bronze Chola queen. And sometimes it is the eyes alone that fill up the scene for the beholder. She has beauty. (37 - 38)

She is put in contrast to Anuradha who is the other motif in the play. Anuradha and Urvashi are childhood companions,
each with a strong initial artistic and devotional urge, but differently moulded by circumstances—one into the disillusioned companion of a self-centred and domineering husband, the other into a woman fully conscious of her power to sway the crowd by her religious and political fervour. (Asnani 93 - 94).

While Anuradha stands for restrictive domestic life, Urvashi represents the freedom of a spiritual life. Urvashi is the ideal that Anuradha craves to become. Urvashi is a woman above material desires and sensual pleasures. She inspires Anuradha to aspire for freedom. She makes Anuradha realize that there is another woman inside her who demands recognition.

Urvashi is a child-widow. She is a child prodigy and is well versed in Sanskrit. Lata, Anuradha’s daughter wants to be like her. Kanak Raya is surprised at his daughter’s desire. But she says, “I want to be eighteen, nineteen, twenty-one . . . like the minute hands of a clock! For only then will you let me go far away and alone! Only then you will let me be what I want to be!” (34 - 35). Even the unimaginative Miss Boulton is inspired to say of Urvashi: “She is like Nature. An open book of wisdom for all that have eyes to see, and hearts . . . that can feel and understand” (45).

Darshan, Anuradha’s brother, falls in love with Urvashi. He is an artist and he is attracted by her otherworldliness. His marriage had been arranged with Kanak Raya’s niece, Sudha, but he finds her too
westernized. Anuradha pleads with Urvashi not to disappoint her brother. But Urvashi feels that marriage would hamper her. She is the leader and guide of thousands who see in her their guru.

Towards the end of the play, Urvashi becomes a national leader, Urvashi Mata. She gives an inspiring speech on faith and on the concept of nationalism. The crowd becomes ecstatic and Kanak Raya says, "Perhaps they see in you, what they would like to be; strong, fearless" (104). The crowd calls her Mira Bai. When she is asked why she left her home, she answers that women, like men can take up a life of public service." Why do you make the home an enclosure for us? To you, we are your mothers, we are your wives, sometimes your models. There is also a human spirit in us which is none of these, and which is more than these" (105).

She decides not to marry Darshan. In the springtime of her youth, she may have decided differently, but now, as she says, "Life has chosen me already. I will not marry. It can never be" (109). She explains further: "She whom the people love, is not the lover of a single person. She may seem human to you, but she is less than human; perhaps also more than human" (110).

Urvashi, thus, is not human enough for the readers to identify with her. Darshan tries to awaken the woman in her—"When I look at you, I see two heads. . . . One woman looks at me with the eyes of Urvashi, the beloved; but the other looks away with the eyes of Mira, the saint. Is she one, or is she two?" (111). Urvashi invites Darshan to be her companion in
her life's mission. The dramatist speaks through Anuradha when she prays, "Let her not be wasted, let him not be consumed. . . . If it seems to you, as it seems to me, in the ripeness of time, break the last wall between them. As you did at last between my husband and me. For neither man nor woman can break it alone" (113).

This is perhaps the final message that Sarabhai gives through her play.

The picture of the modern woman becomes more realistic in Ezekiel's plays. Nalini, in Ezekiel's play "Nalini" is the perfect example of the independent, self-assured woman. The real Nalini is very different from the sex symbol visualized by Bharat. When Raj approaches Bharat with the suggestion that he help her put up an exhibition of her paintings, Bharat pictures her as a dabbler in arts. In his imagination, he sees a sensuously dressed Nalini succumbing to his charms. He is, therefore, shocked into reality when she appears. She turns out to be a serious artist well-versed in her art. The contrast between the dream which borders on self-deception, and the undeniable reality is seen clearly. With the appearance of the real Nalini, "Bharat is . . . subdued while Nalini is confident and over-powering. He feels shaky and locates Picasso's influence on her paintings and being confused, later names Matisse and Manet" (Rahman 53). While he had slept with her in his dream sequence, "in real life Nalini starts pulling off the mask he wears all the time" (Rodrigues 128).
Nalini has to undergo a constant conflict with man. “It is through the portrait of Nalini that Ezekiel tries to project the struggle of a genuine artist who wants to establish herself by her own effort” (Karnani 116). Bharat who is a braggadocio projects himself as an aficionado of art, and tries his best to woo and win her. When his methods do not work, he tries another ploy. He confesses that he knows nothing about art. He promotes artists because, as he himself says, there is prestige and intellectual respectability in art. Nalini is aware of the fact that he is putting on a pose, and that all his speeches are set ones. She “rightly snubs him for making her art the vehicle of his exhibitionism” (Karnani 116). She sees through him and rejects his advances. When Bharat accuses her of being a prude, she retorts: “Prude? For not surrendering to your empty charms, your hollow ideas, for not admiring your self-indulgent description of how you live! You expect me to consider you honest, because you admit your weakness. It’s sheer hypocrisy” (TP 36). The play exposes the hollowness and pretensions of contemporary men who see themselves as pillars of respectability in society, and use art as a ploy to carry out the deception. The playwright reveals the ulterior motives of such promoters of art and the resistance put forward by a genuine artist.

Such resistance is necessary because “the general notion about woman as a shadow-figure to a male caretaker, be he a father, a husband or a son, continues to persist” (T.N. Singh 12). Most men, therefore, have a condescending attitude to women who create a niche for themselves in
areas earlier monopolized by men. They also feel threatened because with women’s education and employment, virtually no area remains an exclusive male preserve. The resistance put up by women artists is not without cost:

There are some determined women who choose to give up everything else, in order to paint or to sculpt. But they use up so much energy in the process, it takes so much to resist the pressures of public opinion and to overcome their own internalized resistance, that they find themselves much less free in their work than the man who is spared all these difficulties. (Beauvoir, “Women and Creativity” 23)

Women, thus, have to try twice as hard as men to achieve success. Conditioned by the patriarchal society to conform, the woman has to understand that conformity is the bane of creativity, and fight against it.

Bharat finds it difficult to understand a woman like Nalini who wants “to create a world of her own, just as a creative man does, a woman with the will to explore herself and the world around her” (TP 38). He reveals his annoyance when he calls Nalini, “an independent woman with the intelligence of a man and the determination of an orthodox Indian mother-in-law. She’s a living insult to men . . .” (TP 45). He believes, as many men do, that “there is evidently something distinctly ‘unfeminine’ about possessing talent. It goes against all the ‘proper’ qualities of a woman to pursue fame actively, to seek out ambitiously, distinction as a great
artist" (Talbot 148). But the truth is brought home to him at the end and he
says, "There's nothing wrong with Nalini. There's something wrong with
us" (TP 46). This recantation by Bharat is a major factor in the dramatic
strength of the play. Thus, Nalini "is a dream and a reality, and more
importantly, an agent of evaluation" (Taranath 124).

Ezekiel does not explore the conflicts within the mind of a self-
assured woman like Nalini. He refers to the conflict within her as she
paints. She feels herself dividing into two persons: "I realised that she
suffered from some unimaginable upheaval within her. She was alone,
separated from humanity" (TP 41). The reference is to the conflict within
the mind of an artist. But it could symbolize the isolation of the
independent woman in a man's world. Such a woman sees herself as one
suffering from a divided personality; the "normal" woman seeking
personal happiness in love given and taken within the framework of a
successful marriage, while the other self claims the right to fulfilment of her
own capabilities. Thus, "we are made aware that intellectuals like Nalini
have to cope with an identity crisis throughout their lives" (R. Rao,
"Theme of Alienation in Nissim Ezekiel's Plays" 90).

Ezekiel portrays the young urban woman of the twentieth century in
"She", the woman character in "Song of Deprivation". The entire play is a
telephone conversation between a "He" and a "She". "She" believes in
sexual freedom, is assertive almost to the point of aggressiveness, and
demands freedom to choose her own way of life. "She" is a symbol of
female aspirations of the emerging Indian womanhood. The character created by Ezekiel in 1969 with its futuristic implications is now too obvious a reality to be dismissed as improbable. It is significant that while the male character, “He”, has a face heavily made up to resemble a mask, “She” has no make up. The mask may indicate male pretensions while the natural look probably indicates the woman’s need to be herself.

Society, in the play, is represented by the grandmother who restricts the freedom of the heroine. The grandmother stands for conventional patriarchal attitudes. The man in the play tries to dominate over the woman. When she switches on the transistor, he orders her to switch it off. She, however, refuses to comply, thus revealing that she lives life according to her volition. But there is yet a conflict within her which is indicated by her change of dress. When the play begins, “She” is in a bikini. Later, she changes into a sari and says that she feels “a different woman altogether” (n.pag.). The man responds saying that she is now “the social creature... the woman in the all-covering sari” (n.pag.). The natural woman has been transformed into the traditional woman created by society. The tragedy of this creation is that she has “to pretend all the time” (n.pag.). Although, “She” prefers to be the girl in the bikini, she has to be the girl in the sari for society to approve of her. Consequently, “She” suffers from an identity crisis. Her frustration and anger at this hypocrisy burst out in a long monologue. The tirade summarizes all the restrictions that Indian girls
have to face in life. "Sexual constraints on unmarried girls, control on their sexuality and the obsession with virginity are very common in India" (Nubile 23). "She" accuses society of resenting spontaneity and hating everything modern. She refers to the limited topics that tradition-bound women converse about. In the peroration, "She" expresses her desire to get out of the social rut, and argues for freedom to live her own life.

But, for all her bravado, "She" still seems to want to be accepted by society. She puts on a bikini when she is by herself and changes into a sari before her grandmother returns and sees her. "She" is, therefore, the perfect symbol of the modern woman who has an ambivalent attitude towards emancipation. She wants the pleasures of freedom and the fruits of security. She would like to have the best of both worlds. The end of the play shows "She" bursting through the division that separates her from "He" and uniting with him, apparently resolving the conflict within her, by achieving both freedom and security. Freedom from sexual restrictions is seen as part of the liberating process.

Ezekiel's Don't Call It Suicide tells the story of a father trying to come to terms with his eldest son's suicide. Even ten years after the tragedy, Mr. Nanda finds it difficult to accept it. His wife does not like the word "suicide" and speaks of it as a natural death. The son's widow, Meeta, stays with her in-laws, doing all the work in the house and asking for only food and shelter. The two other children, Shiela and Hari are married to Gopal
and Malti respectively. All the family members meet at a dinner get-together and Ezekiel presents four pictures of the marital relationship. Mrs. Nanda is the domineering wife who fails to understand her husband’s anguish. At the end, with his suicide, she makes this painful realization. Hari is the wife-battering husband who expects his wife, Malti, to be a slave to his wishes. It is only in Shiela and Gopal that we see a happy pairing of two understanding individuals.

Shiela gets angry with Malti’s submissiveness: “You have decided to do nothing about your situation, like millions of other women in our country” (19). She tries to make Malti understand how a husband should be: “Even if he disagrees, he ought to know your views, try to understand your feelings” (19). She urges Malti to tell Hari that she is “his wife not his slave”. (19). However, her words produce little effect. She sees Malti scurrying after her husband when he calls her in a peremptory manner.

Shiela appears in just one scene in the play. Since her character is not developed, she fails to create an impact. As Vrinda Nabar says, Shiela “is the only woman with a degree of individuality, but her role is far too minor” (81).

Ezekiel’s intention in these plays is to draw our attention to the many possibilities that lie before the Indian woman. Nalini is an artist in her own right. Her confidence, her education and her career make her assertive. Thus she out-manoeuvres the ploys of Bharat. “She” is the rebellious young Indian girl, who refuses to be tied down by the
patriarchal customs of yester-years. Shiela shows how a wife can be an equal partner in a marriage. Her opinions reveal how a woman is as much to blame as the man for the master-slave relationship in a marriage.

In Currimbhoy’s plays, one woman who emerges triumphant is Malti in *Thorns on a Canvas*. The play is a satirical picture of art academies which claim to promote art, but often throttle young, promising artists. Currimbhoy laughs at art academies built on fake motives and their pretensions. The play “sets out to expose the mediocrity of conformist art patronised by the Lalit Kala Akademies of India” (Kaul 13).

The characters are symbolic representations. The Patron represents customary patronage which aims at self-promotion. His daughter, Malti, symbolizes perfection without a soul. Yakub and Nafesa stand for natural art—forceful, raw and original. Though the play is about the struggle of an artist against the tyranny of collectivized art, it is significant that Currimbhoy chooses Malti to represent the artist in conflict. Malti, who learnt art at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in France, is, at first, submissive when faced by her domineering father. But she is intrigued as well as fascinated by Yakub and Nafesa. She is aware of the fact that her paintings lack a soul and her journey towards the self-realization of an artist begins when she appreciates Yakub’s painting of her. The play revolves round the transformation in the character of Malti and her resultant awareness of what constitutes art.
Malti represents the conflict of an artist, and the conflict of the artist as a woman against patriarchal society. An attempt is made to transform Malti from “a beautiful dove . . . into a buzzard” (35) by the Art academy owned by her father. She obeys her father at first when he asks her to paint certain types of paintings for her exhibition. However, both Malti and her friend, Nela, struggle against the attempts to suppress their individuality in art. Nela feels that her art is perfunctory and not meaningful. She feels like a puppet attached to strings. It is the sense of dissatisfaction that opens the door to fulfilment in the case of Malti and Nela. An abject surrender to the dictates of man and society would only result in the snuffing out of the artistic flame. The transformation of Yakub, “the flame-pure artist into an efficient functionary adept at manipulative organisation, a resourceful factotum, a soulless machine,” as Iyengar says in “The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” (250), points to this.

Malti has also to undergo a conflict within herself before she can break free. She has to step outside the confines of her studio and see the reality of life. Yakub takes her out of the precincts of the studio into life where art “speaks for itself. Where it is not wound like a mechanical clock nor dances like a puppet on strings” (47). The reality may be painful. But without pain “there can be no awareness: without it there can be no birth . . . no greatness to painting” (50). The shock of reality hits her when she finds Yakub and Nafesa in bed together. She realizes that it is only out of pain that true art is born. She will attain the rose of love and fulfilment only
if she is ready to experience the prick of the thorn. The scene metaphorically represents her freedom from the rule of the Father and sexual repression to the understanding of her sexual urges. She resolves the conflict within herself and gets rid of her superiority complex. Yakub, who had been transformed into the servile Bukay, changes back into Yakub under her influence and she steps confidently into the future with him. “... the conflict between the yearning for artistic expression and the desire for relationship, is not peculiar to women, but women are more likely to express it with special intensity” (Spacks 166).

Currimbhoy’s *This Alien - - - Native Land* presents an Indian Jewish family torn between India and the newly formed Jewish state of Israel. As M.K. Naik says in “Half-God’s Plenty: The Drama of Asif Currimbhoy”, “... the emotional claustrophobia generated by personal relationships in a close-knit family isolated from the mainstream of life” (127), adds to the tension of the play. Joseph and Rachel are content with their lot. But their children, Jacob, David and Sarah want more out of life. David dreams of a better job and Sarah dreams of a happy married life. In desperation, Sarah, gets involved with a married Muslim. Finally, dissatisfied with the secrecy and humiliation of such a liaison, she leaves for Israel. Jacob marries an Indian woman, Tara. Currimbhoy makes Tara stand for India. She is represented as a sensual, earthy woman who lives her life as she pleases. “Panther-like”, “dark and smouldering” (25) are some adjectives used to describe her.
Joseph sees her as Salome, and Sarah mistakes her for her childhood friend, Ruth. David desires her. Meanwhile Jacob, who is in adulation of his mother, finds it impossible to lead a normal married life. The play ends with the death of Joseph, the departure of Sarah, Jacob and Tara, and with the elevation of David into the position of his mother's confidante.

Here "women control the action of the play, and men are merely toys—helpless, used, defeated, impotent" (Meserve 424). Tara is seen as a force, albeit, destructive. She asserts her control over all. As David says, "It's just... that she forms a majority of one" (28).

To Joseph, old and lost in dreams, Tara becomes the naked Salome who taunts his impotence. Her extreme sensuality and insidious power also traduce the frustration of Sarah, as the playwright creates the image of a possessive and unsatisfied India from within the disturbing specter of the Indian woman, Tara. Surely evident in this highly theatrical work is the revelation of the modern woman as a commanding social and spiritual force in India. (Meserve 424)

In Malti and Tara, Currimbhoy presents two pictures of the Indian woman. She can be an artist, dedicated to her art. She is also the sensual woman who flaunts her sexuality and individuality. In either case, she demands attention.

Malini, in Dina Mehta's Brides Are Not for Burning, realizes the truth and meaning of her life at the end of the play. A college student, she is
Laxmi’s, the unfortunate bride’s, younger sister. The verdict at the inquest is that Laxmi’s sari caught fire from the stove in the kitchen. But the fact that the body was found in the living room and that the doctor had been summoned only three and a half hours after the incident, make Malini suspicious. She is the only one who wants to see justice done. While, Anil, her brother, is willing to let things be, Malini is not. She completes Anil’s sentence, “Let her go. She is beyond pain, beyond redress –”, with, “But not beyond retribution!” (18). She has no belief in the courts of law or the hope that the system of law will redress their grievance — “I spit on your law courts! Playthings in the hands of exploiters and reactionaries, they deal out one kind of justice to the rich, another to the poor” (18). Therefore, her ambition in life is to become a lawyer and work for women’s causes. She wants to help women break their chains (46). She laments the fact that the progress of women has not kept pace with the progress in science and technology. As she ironically asks, “What’s the use of living in the jet age if you have no money for the tickets?” (51). She is fed up with middle class morality and dreams of a life of fulfilment:

... I would rather live on unmade roads in a low huddle of mud and tin and old boards than midways in middle-class, finger-pointing respectability. There I’d think myself lucky to have food, shelter, sex — with perhaps a latrine as a bonus. But right here I feel I’m under seige! I must have breathing space and books and fun and ideas and love and beauty! (22)
These desires point to the woman’s need for the enrichment of her self beyond the basic desires stipulated in a patriarchal society. Marriage to Malini is not merely a power play: “The sexual act may be an occasion of conquest for the man, of surrender for the woman... But what I wanted most out of life was to know myself half of a true pair, certain of its integrity...” (86).

Her first clue in the mystery of her sister’s death is her lover, Sanjay’s, statement that Tarla’s husband had been reinstated after Laxmi’s husband, Vinod’s intervention. This explained why Tarla, an eye-witness to the burning, had refused to reveal anything against Vinod and his family. Malini’s resourcefulness can be seen in the detective work she does to uncover the whole truth. She talks to Kalu, the cook who tells her that the mother-in-law had not let him break down the door even though his shirt with a month’s salary in the pocket was hanging in the kitchen. She learns from Vinod’s brother, Arjun, the details of the incident. All fingers point towards Laxmi’s death being the result of harassment. Her mother-in-law used to taunt her saying that her father had not honoured his promises. Her two sisters-in-law used to make fun of her saying that though her name symbolized wealth, she had come to their house dressed like a servant. But Malini feels powerless against the system. This is what makes her take the escapist route via Sanjay.

Sanjay is a businessman interested only in profits. He has “a perfect measuring rod for everything: does it pay? — without a thought for the cost
in human terms” (19). She has a sexual relationship with him. Sex, to her, is a way of driving away other disturbing thoughts from her mind. Deep in her heart, she knows that the affair will lead nowhere. Sanjay will comply with the wishes of his father and marry into the right family—“... the pesticides prince will marry a textiles princess...” (50). Finally she breaks away from him.

Her frustration makes her fall into the trap laid by Roy. He gives her reactionary books to read. At his bequest, she hides firearms in her house. He tells her that mass murder is the chief means of historical development. The only remedy for the evils of society is total destruction and a new beginning. She believes Roy’s words that “anything is better than inaction, deadly passivity...” (89). Even Anil’s advice goes unheeded. What finally opens her eyes to reality is Prof. Palkar’s death.

Palkar’s complaint about a broken pipe in his ceiling had led the police to discover a cache of arms in the upstairs flat. Mistaking him to be an informer, Roy’s group manhandles him resulting in a fatal heart attack. Malini is on the point of leaving her home with Roy when she hears this news. That, and the fact that she realizes Roy does not understand her at all, make her change her mind. She realizes that Roy could desert her just like he has decided to leave his wife: “I see now that if I follow you I only exchange one servitude for another. The boot in the face for a place in the kitchen. Brides will not stop burning when you take over the world, Roy.
All I can learn from you are new dishonesties, so GO !” (94). Malini “appears to gain in stature” (94) as the final curtain falls.

Malini, thus, succeeds in her conflict with society and within herself. She realizes that in a patriarchal society “to be born a female . . . is to be born into servitude” (90). So she turns aside from the paths opened to her by men, and resolves to find her own path towards self-actualization.

Mehta’s “Getting Away with Murder” tells the journey of three friends, Mallika, Sonali and Raziya, as they deal with body blows like childhood sexual abuse, humiliation, infidelity and insecure relationships. When the play begins, Mallika is a successful business woman, used to getting her own way. As her friend, Sonali says, “I envy you all that ‘I paddle my own canoe, put my shoulder to the wheel and push like hell’ sort of thing. All that starched pride in assuming authority over your own affairs” (BB 59). She is economically independent. Though she is attracted to Sonali’s brother, Gopal, she shies away from marriage. As she says, “. . . I'm economically independent. I don't need security, so I don't sell myself” (61).

Mallika gets irritated at the condescending attitude of men to her success. Her partner, Pinglay never acknowledges her contribution towards the profitable food stuff agency they run. “I don't know what infuriates me more -- the fact that he's as devious as he's dim-witted, or that he insists on calling me Mallikaji—with that false deference to my womanhood that gets me so mad!” (61). He has the gall to suggest to her that women are best fitted for secretarial work, knowing fully well that she
runs the entire agency. Mallika, however, out-manoeuvres Pinglay and foils his attempt to blackmail a woman secretary to sleep with him.

She fights against the patriarchal notions of society. Sonali wants to get her female foetus aborted. Mallika finds it ironical that even female foeticide is being touted as a sign of liberation. “Mothers award the death sentence to their unborn daughters in the name of liberation. They thereby prove their woman-power! Their omnipotence! They play God!” (63). Women realize that to be born in a patriarchal society means servitude. So they try to foil the machinations of society by killing their unborn daughters. Mallika finds this self-defeating. She sees through the traditional paradox of Indian society—worship the woman as a deity and crush her spirit in reality—“... the greater the divergence between this goddess image of woman and her exploited human counterpart, the greater the fervour of her devotees ...” (81).

Mallika desires to have a meaningful relationship with Gopal. But she is not able to shed all the notions ingrained into her from childhood. The fact that she is six years older than Gopal makes her hesitate. Raziya tells her, “Stop assessing yourself through male eyes” (73). But Mallika does not want Gopal trapped into a marriage with her. She wants him to stay with her because he chooses to. She is broadminded enough to understand his brief affair with the tribal woman, Minzari. Later, when Minzari is beaten to death, Mallika gets ready to adopt her daughter. The play ends on an optimistic note — “Nothing can change overnight, I guess,
but we can be goddesses if we want it enough” (92). The play goes beyond “a narrow feminist agenda by encompassing in its feminist narrative a broader perspective in which the violence against women is countered not just by women, but also by women and men, fighting a patriarchal order of dominant males and complicitous females” (A. Singh 73).

Mallika is seen looking forward to a future with Gopal. She has never cared for the attitudes of society. But she takes time to overcome her socialized self which tells her that a man needs a younger woman to keep him happy. Both Malini and Mallika are the Indian women of the future. Malini, if she fulfils her aim of becoming a lawyer, will surely do her best to prevent the burning of brides. Mallika will get the ultimate for an Indian woman — a successful career and a happy domestic life. According to Mehta herself, in a postal correspondence with the researcher, “An independent woman is one who does her own thing despite ‘what people will say’. She is clear about what she wants, strong in will and purpose. Her norms are her own” (Appendix 1). Malini and Mallika epitomize this definition.

Padmini and Rani in Karnad’s plays, Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala, are two other female characters who epitomize the “deviant” woman in patriarchal society. Hayavadana tells the story of two friends, Kapila and Devadatta. Devadatta marries Padmini, who is later attracted towards Kapila due to the physical strength and grace of his body. While she is
pregnant, the three of them start out on a trip to Ujjain. On the way, they stop to rest and Padmini watches with hungry eyes as Kapila climbs a tree to get her flowers: "... what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back—like an ocean with muscles rippling across it—and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless" (25). Meanwhile, Devadatta, who becomes aware of his wife's fascination for his friend, makes the sacrifice of his own head at the forest temple of Kali. Filled with remorse, Kapila does the same. Padmini, who is about to follow suit, is granted a boon by the goddess. She needs just to fix the heads to the bodies to bring them back to life. She does so, and when Devadatta and Kapila spring to life, realizes that she had transposed the heads. She chooses to go with Devadatta's head on Kapila's body. She gives birth to a son and is quite happy for a while. Later, Kapila's body under the influence of the head, loses its hardness and toughness and becomes a brahmin's body. She goes off into the forest to find Kapila and stays with him for a few days. Devadatta comes in search; he and Kapila fight, and both die. Padmini commits "sati" and the son is brought up by the hunters in the forest.

As Kurtkoti says in his introduction to the play, among the characters in the play which deals with the theme of incompleteness, it is only Padmini who "has the capacity for complete experience" (vi). Right from the beginning, she is described as no ordinary mortal woman. Devadatta becomes besotted with her at first sight and Kapila, too, is wonderstruck by her pulchritude—"... she is Yakshini, Shakuntala,
Urvashi, Indumati—all rolled into one” (16). But he realizes she is not suitable for a gentle soul like Devadatta: “She is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel” (19). He realizes her inner strength. Later, it becomes clear that Devadatta and Padmini are mismatched. On one occasion, she remarks, “You are still a baby . . .!” (21). “It is clear that Devadatta is no match either for Padmini’s tongue or her clear thinking. Among Kapila, Devadatta and Padmini, Padmini is the most clear-headed” (Rane 58).

When Padmini becomes attracted towards Kapila, she doesn’t demur from admitting it to herself. She cannot resist him. Therefore, when she gets the chance to get the best of two worlds, she doesn’t hesitate. Guided by her subliminal consciousness, she fixes Devadatta’s head on Kapila’s body, and gets an intelligent being with a strong muscular body. She has no qualms about rejecting Kapila’s head on Devadatta’s body. As Kapila sadly says, “I know what you want, Padmini. Devadatta’s clever head and Kapila’s strong body . . .” (38). The transposition of the heads is, perhaps, a Freudian slip, which indicates her inner desire.

Unlike Devadatta and Kapila, she refuses to play the role others expect her to play. All through the play Padmini wants to be just herself. She refuses to play the role of a bashful bride on her wedding night. Both Devadatta and Kapila express, on different occasions, their concern for her condition (she is expecting a baby). But on all occasions, she firmly rebukes
their bookish concerns for her safety and insists on doing what she wants to do. Her uninhibited nature is established right at the beginning of the play through the song of the female chorus: 'Why should love stick to the sap of a single body?' (Raykar 182)

Freedom from sexual inhibitions is one of the marks of an independent, free-thinking woman. The notion that it is a male prerogative to fantasize about the female body and express sensual feelings, is here proved wrong. Padmini represents a liberated woman because she is uninhibited in her sexual desires and strives to get what she wants. She is not bound by the femininity of her sex. In a patriarchal culture, the sexuality of the woman is subsumed in her reproductive role. But the pregnant Padmini disobeys the strictures of society. Her "extraordinary situation helps Padmini to break out of the moral codes inflicted by society" (Bala 195). She makes her own destiny and has no regrets about it. Her selfishness and her sexuality are portrayed in her attempt to create a perfect partner — one who will match her in intellect and in body.

The goddess, Kali, grants her a boon because she had spoken the truth. She had wanted to kill herself only because of the stories that would haunt her when she got back:
And what shall I say when I get there! What shall I say happened? And who'll believe me? They'll all say the two fought and died for this whore. They're bound to say it. Then what'll happen to me? No, Mother Kali, no, — it's too horrible to think of. No! Kapila's gone — Devadatta's gone. Let me go with them. (31)

Kali appears and declares that She is pleased with Padmini. The men had lied while sacrificing themselves. They had claimed to be doing it for love and friendship. They had been hypocritical. The goddess realizes that it is Padmini's selfishness that makes her think of herself first. For a woman, to put herself first, in a patriarchal society, is unthinkable. This is what makes Padmini different.

Later, Padmini becomes disillusioned and longs for the "unwashed, sweaty smell Kapila had" (44). M.K. Naik suggests in "From the Horse's Mouth: A Study of Hayavadana", that "Padmini's plight suggests Woman's vain attempt to unite Man as intellect and as flesh in order to further her creative purpose" (196). She goes to seek Kapila and deliberately chooses to walk on the wrong road: "The wrong road stuck to my feet—wouldn't let me go" (54). Kapila is tormented by the memories of Padmini's body borne by his body, to which his mind is a foreigner. Padmini offers to let his mind also enjoy the same memories by spending a few days with him. After her "sati", she is elevated to the position of a "pativrata", a position which would certainly be denied to a woman who has led an
unconventional life in a conventional society. Karnad, thus, makes Padmini the symbol of a "female" woman who is truly liberated. She is "Shakti herself, who not only controls her own finite condition, but also that of her two men" (Sondhi n.pag).

Rani in *Naga-Mandala* evolves into a dominating character. Karnad depicts the peregrination of Rani from enslavement to empowerment. Persecuted and harassed, physically and mentally, by an insensitive husband, Rani is, at first, like any other child-bride. Confused at finding herself in a situation she is powerless to understand, Rani flounders helplessly. Later, when the root paste makes Naga her lover in the guise of Appanna, she gains confidence. Naga represents the tender and caring husband that every woman desires to have. The animus is the male factor in the psyche of a woman which is shaped by her relationship with her father and father surrogates. Here, Naga helps Rani discover her female sexuality. Her fear and ignorance of sex are overcome and the freedom from sexual repression leads to confidence. Patriarchal disapproval of sexual curiosity in women often leads to suppression in other areas too. The knowledge of her pregnancy gives Rani a self-assurance she had lacked earlier.

Advised by Naga, she chooses to undergo the snake ordeal. Holding the snake in her hand, she speaks the truth — that she has held only her husband and the snake. The snake spreads its hood like an umbrella over
her head and Rani is hailed by the villagers as a goddess. Appanna pleads for her forgiveness, and his mistress becomes her maid.

Rani, thus, becomes a happy woman. However, “Story” in the play reveals that Rani must have realized that her husband and Naga were two different beings. Later, Naga crawls into her hair and dies. Knowing the truth, Rani gets her son to perform the last rites. Still later, when she finds a baby snake in her hair, she hides it among her tresses and says, “This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss” (46).

With the emergence of the little live cobra after the death of the King Cobra, the whole play has to be re-read in a new light. The sexual colouring given to the conflict between Appanna and Rani itself becomes metaphorical. The conflict ceases to be limited to a sexual one and becomes a profounder one connoting all that stands between two irreconcilable opposites. . . . Thus the Naga and the tiny live cobra suddenly assume a wider significance than a sexual one. They grow into symbols for all those differences between the male and female principles. (S. Chandran 95)

Thus, when Rani volunteers to carry the tiny cobra in her hair and says, “You don’t know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?” (45), she succeeds in containing the tension between the male and
female principles. This “reveals the great sacrificial role played by the woman in our familial and hence cultural survival” (S. Chandran 95).

The evolution in Rani’s character is clear in her own words — “I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don’t you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me?” (32). Rani is thus symbolic of the feminine woman changing into the female. She now holds all the reins in her hands and can live as she wishes to. Karnad seems to suggest that the truth can set you free. One must have the courage to acknowledge the truth about oneself, who one is, what one wants. A woman who realizes her latent powers will have control over her destiny.

Both the plays celebrate female sexuality. Padmini and Rani represent modern Indian women who claim right over their own bodies. Even though, Padmini commits “sati”, she does so after living life on her own terms. She has fulfilled her desires as far as they could be fulfilled. Perhaps “... her assertion of independence depends on her self-destruction...” (Spacks 76-77). Rani, on the other hand, has just begun to live her own life. As mistress of all she surveys, the end of the play sees her as an embodiment of the female principle. The play shows how men are wary of women who are different. This is a manifestation of the age-old castration complex.
Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* tells the futuristic story of a family in a third world country which becomes the “donor” for a member of a first world country. Jaya, “passionate and spirited” (2) is the only strong character in the play. No other character, except Jaya, shows any development. The play begins with Jaya and her mother-in-law waiting for the arrival of Om, Jaya’s husband, who had gone to apply for a job. Om gets the job which means that he is now a donor of any organ in his body to a recipient who will compensate by keeping his family in comfort. Om’s brother, Jeetu, who works as a male prostitute is accidently taken away by the guards. His eyes are taken away first and then his body, to replace the ailing, aging body of Virgil, an American. Virgil now appears before Jaya via a contact module and beseeches her to agree to bear his child.

What characterizes Jaya is her boldness. She is the only one bold enough to ask questions during the installation of the contact module and the food supply. She puts up a resistance as her kitchen utensils are thrown away. Being dissatisfied with her marital life, she seeks distraction with Jeetu. She is aware of her sexual urges and finds fulfilment with him. Her compassion for him makes her take care of him when he comes back sick and covered with sores. Again, she is the only one to protest when Jeetu is taken away instead of Om.

It is in the final scene of the play that Jaya evolves into the towering figure. When Virgil appears before her as an illusion created by the contact module, in Jeetu’s body, Jaya realizes that Jeetu’s body has been used by
Virgil to prolong his life. Virgil had observed Jaya through the module and had grown to admire her spirited nature. He needs Jaya—"We’re interested in women where I live, Zhaya (sic). Childbearing women" (95). His country has lost the art of having children and is now in the process of getting bodies from poorer countries to populate it. He entices her with sweet words and with the promise of sensual pleasures to accept the implant which will make her insemination possible. However, though she wants to attain motherhood, she is not ready to get it by sacrificing her womanhood. She demands that if he needs her, he come to her in person. He refuses because her world would be a health hazard for him. She insists that she will not deal with a phantom any longer. Finally, she blackmails him by threatening him with suicide. The play ends with Jaya setting the terms and conditions. She will take pills for staying awake. If he does not come when she runs out of them, she will kill herself. "... I’ll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman. And I’ll get more pleasure out of that first moment of death than I’ve had in my entire life so far!" (102). In the meantime, she tells him to learn to pronounce her name correctly. Thus, "her spirit remains unconquered even in the face of insurmountable odds" (Molly 30). She fights for her rights as a woman and as a human being. The dramatist ends on a positive note "that hope still lies in this woman, a symbol of procreation" (Purohit 45).
Thus, Jaya emerges victorious in this power play between man and woman. She does not succumb to the panoptic gaze of the contact module. The reproductive power of women, often seen as a debilitating factor, is made by the dramatist into a trump card. She seems to stress the point that in this matter, women will always score over men. “Penis envy” is supplanted by “womb envy”.

In an interview with Sunita Paul, Manjula Padmanabhan says that the play talks of the power equation between the first world and the third world:

I hope it does try and address the duality of this relationship. It isn't purely first world-third world, power-powerless. The power equation does flow back and forth. There is a dependence of the first world on the third world which is unrecognised in real life. As people living in the third world we are encouraged to think that we have nothing to give, but in fact even today, we are actually giving our minds, our body and our labour to the first world all the time. (39)

If we replace the first world with man, and the third world with woman, we have here the relation between them. What needs to be acknowledged is the interdependence of man and woman. In the same interview, Padmanabhan stresses this point: “The Ardhanarishwar concept appeals to me greatly. The idea of a joined consciousness that borrows from both sides” (41).
Mahesh Dattani also seems to believe in such a consciousness and talks of the “feminine self” within him in his interview with Anjum Katyal (32). Dattani’s *Collected Plays* (2000) has eight plays in all. Most of them have resilient women characters. “Dattani’s is a post-modern world, without heroes and heroics” (Haider 25), but his women characters are more decisive than the male. The source of oppression in most of the plays is embodied in autocratic father figures.

Patriarchy is clearly the target. So does that mean Dattani is a feminist? You could call him one, since he has drawn his women with great sympathy, but they are by no means saintly victims. They are strong, egotistic, greedy, spunky, stupid, diffident, sly, cruel. And yet, or perhaps therefore, you find your heart going out to them. (Meena 8)

The first play in the collection is “Seven Steps Around the Fire”. Uma Rao is the protagonist of the play. A feisty heroine, she impresses the readers as an intelligent and courageous woman. She is the wife of the Chief Superintendent of Police, Suresh, and the daughter of the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University. A post-graduate student in Sociology, she is in the midst of the preparation of her thesis dealing with the class-gender-power implications in the hijra community.

Uma becomes interested in the murder case of a hijra called Kamala. The trail leads her to Anarkali, another hijra, imprisoned for the murder. She also meets Champa, the leader of the local hijras. On further
investigation, she discovers that Kamala had been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had had Kamala killed and had hastily arranged a marriage for his son. But, at the wedding, Subbu shoots himself to death.

Uma has the full co-operation of her husband in her investigation, though he does not take it seriously. His attitude is that of an indulgent adult catering to the whims of a child. While she is seriously discussing the case, he is more interested in the colour of her night-dress. But at the end, he is impressed by her resourcefulness. As is to be expected, he takes the credit for solving the case. The play ends with Uma’s voice commenting on the marginalization of hijras in conventional society. According to Jha, “Uma Rao, the sociology scholar, emerges as the most powerful character of the play, the mouthpiece of the playwright . . .” (“Dattani’s Exercise in Post-Colonialism” 36).

The shadow of patriarchal codes is seen when Uma refers to her visit to a doctor. She had been taken by her mother-in-law for a check up to find why she hadn’t conceived as yet. Uma says that the doctor had found nothing wrong with her and had wanted to see Suresh to check his sperm count. Suresh immediately becomes defensive and dismisses the idea. Similarly the funds for her investigation come from her father. Since she has no money of her own, she lies to her father that she needs to buy a wedding gift and gets the money. This shows how economic dependence
can restrict a woman. “Lacking masculine money, no feminine accomplishment has value” (Spacks 37).

Dattani’s focus is on the development of the plot and not on characterization. Hence, we get only a sketchy picture of Uma. However, the streak of independence in her, her compassion for the transsexuals and her persistent search for the truth, mark her out as a woman of the twenty first century.

It is such streaks of independence that mark the memorable women characters in Dattani’s plays. Lata in “Do the Needful” is “a fiercely spirited modern girl” (Avens 115). The play describes in a humorous manner the negotiations of an inter-caste arranged marriage. Lata, the daughter of Devraj Gowda, and Alpesh, the divorced son of Chandrakant Patel are the pawns in the negotiation. Lata has had a notorious pre-marital relationship which forces her parents to look for a boy outside their community. While the Gowdas and the Patels are fixing the alliance, Lata and Alpesh share their secrets. Lata is in love with Salim and Alpesh is a homosexual. They decide that the wise thing for them to do would be to get married, and then continue their secret lives. The play ends with them leaving their house together, and then going separate ways to meet their lovers. “Lata and Alpesh refreshingly come as — honest, young people of the new generation who are frank and open, with each other at least” (Tyagi 194). Dattani seems to say that the woman, just like the man, deserves to enjoy the sexual freedom to choose her partner.
The sensitive issue of communal tension forms the theme of “Final Solutions”. Smita, in the play, is not brainwashed by her mother’s religious notions. She is broadminded and is willing to befriend people from other communities, even in a volatile situation. At the same time, she is aware that her father could use her to isolate her mother: “How easy it would have been for us to join forces and make her feel she was wrong” (CP 213). She understands that this would be a patriarchal victory for her father. So though she agrees with her father on some issues, she is careful not to hurt her mother. She tells her father that she never openly agreed with him “because it would have been a triumph for you — over mummy” (CP 213).

The play begins when Bobby and Javed, two muslim youths, take shelter in Smita’s house during a communal riot. While her father, Ramnik, is tolerant and saves them from the mob’s wrath, it is later realized that he is only atoning for what was done by his family to a muslim family. He even offers Javed a job in his sari shop. It is Smita who reveals the truth about Javed. He is a hired hoodlum, a riot-rouser whose job is to create riots. He is hired to throw the first stone. But she is sympathetic towards him. The highlight of the play is Bobby holding the idol of Krishna in his palm and exclaiming, “He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated!” (CP 224). The play ends “with the redemptive power of Bobby whose touching of the idol cauterizes the wounds of a society divided by communal and religious violence” (Kanthan 33). The final solution seems to be a life proposed by
Smita and Bobby who possess a secular consciousness free of the stifling codes of religion.

The play examines "the prejudice and deeply held mistrust which lies just beneath the skin of our liberal, secular attitudes . . ." (Benegal 61). Smitha has to struggle against the hypocritical attitudes of her father and the strongly ingrained traditional notions of her mother, Aruna and her grandmother, Hardika. However, neither the bitter marital experiences of her grandmother, nor the submissiveness of her mother dishearten her. She says, "I think one can create one's own freedom wherever one may be" (CP 220).

Dattani's plays deal with disintegrating relationships within the family. In his plays, the Indian family is no longer the centre of nurture, comfort and supportive relationships. Stultifying bonds lead to pain and anguish. "Drunken husbands, dominating fathers, wife battering — these are common to his plays" (Kanthan 32). In Dattani's "Bravely Fought the Queen", where the characters are as bizarre as the bonsai plant which is a major symbol in the play, Lalitha stands out as a normal human being. She comes to Dolly's house to discuss a masked ball party to launch a new range of colour-co-ordinated nightwear for women. Her husband, Sridhar, works in the office of Jiten and Nitin Trivedi, married to the sisters Dolly and Alka. In Dattani's plays "the way the plot unfolds tends to follow a particular pattern. As often as not, matters proceed by the introduction of a stranger into a seemingly ordinary family setting. This catalyses a series of events" (Haider 24). Lalitha soon realizes the tension-laid atmosphere in
the house and becomes aware of the undercurrents in the lives of the sisters. The dominating influence of their mother-in-law Baa, the mystery of the cook Kanhaiya, the inconsiderate attitudes of the husbands, the fate of Daksha, Dolly’s daughter are all perceived through her eyes. Lalitha, thus, becomes the spectator within the play. She is the yardstick to measure the unnaturalness of the lives of the other characters.

However, Lalitha’s obsession with her bonsai plants points to a deep-rooted lack within herself. It could be the fact that she is childless. But she does not wallow in self-pity. She is able to persuade Sridhar to see her point of view. As she says, “I can be quite stubborn. Sridhar says it is typical of women to do exactly the opposite of what their husbands want, just to prove they are independent”(CP 252). This is not true of her. She drinks rum without attempting to disguise it as Alka does. While both Dolly and Alka want to be what they are not and fantasize about going to the ball as Jhansi ki Rani and a “tawaif”, Lalitha is quite content to be who she is.

Parent-child relationships form a major theme in many of Dattani’s plays. Tara, who dies an untimely death in the play “Tara”, leaves the readers wondering what she would have become if she had lived. In spite of being given a raw deal by nature and by her mother, she survives and strides ahead with confidence. Born as one of a pair of Siamese twins, conjoined to a brother from the waist down, she and Chandan are separated by a competent Dr. Thakkar. The twins shared three legs. The extra leg had most of its blood supply from Tara. But her mother and her grandfather
had asked the doctor to give the leg to Chandan. The result was that the leg had atrophied and had had to be amputated. Both the children had to be fitted with artificial Jaipur legs.

"Dattani sees Tara as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favors what is 'male'..." (Mee 320). The play begins with Chandan, now called Dan, in his apartment in London, trying to write a drama based on his life. As the scenes from their childhood unfurl, it becomes clear that Tara was the cleverer, more independent, resourceful twin. She is first seen winning at a game of cards. Her mother, Bharati, tries to assuage her guilt by pampering her. Tara doesn’t like her mother fussing over her. She describes herself as "Strong. Healthy. Beautiful" (CP 329).

Chandan’s bravado comes from her. When she is scheduled for a kidney transplant, he elects to opt out of college for a year. Tara says, "You are scared. You’re scared you’ll find out you can’t do very much on your own!" (CP 361). Tara has to go through several prostheses and other operations and still remains cheerful. It is not revealed how or when Tara dies. Dan narrates his mother’s mental illness, her subsequent death in a mental asylum and his father’s loneliness. The play ends with Dan begging Tara to forgive him.

Tara is strong enough to overcome the adversities in her life. She is a fighter. But she has to succumb to the manipulations of a patriarchal
society that deprive her of her rightful chance to survive. These circumstances lie beyond her control. But if she had lived, it is certain she would have lived life according to her terms.

"Where There's a Will" is a satirical play with a twist at the end. Hasmukh Mehta rules over his household like a tyrant. His wife, Sonal, son Ajit and daughter-in-law, Preeti are forced to live their lives according to his wishes. He suddenly dies one night. His will stipulates that all his wealth remain in a trust, the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, till Ajit is forty five years old. The family members will get a regular allowance from the trust. The trustee is Kiran Javeri, Mehta's mistress. The terms of the will stipulate that Ajit will work everyday in the office and that Kiran will stay with his family in their house. Mehta's ghost hovers around the house enjoying the discomfriture of his family. However, to his surprise, after the initial awkwardness, everyone settles down to a happy life. He thus finds his mistress joining forces with his widow to undermine his authoritarian dictates. It is also an undermining of patriarchal values.

Kiran in described by Mehta as "a shrewd, hardheaded marketing executive" (CP 473). She is an attractive woman with a commanding presence. She is intelligent and is made one of the directors of the company. Mehta arranges her marriage with a man who is happy with a bottle of whisky every day. He puts her up in a posh flat. Wanting to control the lives of all those closely associated with him even after death,
Mehta forces Kiran to move to his house. He expects them to add to each others’ misery.

But Kiran smoothly establishes herself in the house. Preeti is the only person who rebels. Kiran soon discovers that Preeti had hastened her father-in-law’s death by substituting his blood pressure pills with her vitamin pills. She, however, does not disclose this, but uses it to keep Preeti in check. The three women soon form a team. Sonal becomes courageous enough to break way from her sister, Minal’s influence. The play ends with the camaraderie among the women who have finally freed themselves from the control of the male species. The dramatist has described the play “as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. 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” (Raina 451).

Kiran “enters the scene as a protector of patriarchal values, but by the end of the play, she eliminates all forms of patriarchal oppression” (Brahma 64). She is familiar with the vicious circle in patriarchy:

Isn’t it strange how repetitive life is? My brothers. They have turned out to be like their father, going home with bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers. Beating up their wives. And I—I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard and I listened to his swearing. And I too have learnt to suffer silently. Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever? (CP 508)
Her experiences in life have made her understand the hollowness of the patriarch. She tells Sonal, “My father, your husband—they were weak men with false strength” (CP 508). While Hasmukh had thought that Kiran was impressed with his personality, she disillusioned him by saying, “He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision-maker. But I was” (CP 510). Finally, Hasmukh’s ghost concedes defeat and says, “No, I don’t think I can enter this house. It isn’t mine ... any more. I will rest permanently on the tamarind tree” (CP 515). But the decision of the family to cut down the tamarind tree symbolizes the total uprooting of the patriarchal system.

Mala in 30 Days in September is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Her traumatic experience is revealed in snatches in the course of the play. Mala, now an adult, has sessions with a counsellor, where she narrates her experiences. The play opens with Mala in her final session with the therapist, confident and articulate. In a flashback, the play moves back to her first session, where she speaks in an uncertain voice and refuses even to divulge her name. She feels she is to blame for what her uncle did to her: “It’s not anybody’s fault, except my own” (3). She is almost hostile to her mother, Shanta, who she feels, did nothing to help her during this traumatic period. She resents her mother turning to the portrait of Lord Krishna whenever she tries to talk about it. “Shanta tells her daughter to ‘forget, forget, forget’. Mala herself is torn by the conflicting desire to speak out and to stay silent—
pulled apart by self-blame and anger towards others, between certainty and terrifying doubts” (Gupta and Ailawadi xviii).

Paradoxically, as an adult, Mala seems to enjoy sexual encounters. She deliberately dresses provocatively, and invites sexual attention from men. She, however, ends each relationship in exactly thirty days and even marks the date beforehand in her calendar.

It is at this point the Deepak comes into her life. He loves her sincerely, and wants to unravel the secret in her life. He describes her as “talented, beautiful, intelligent, honest” (33). Meanwhile, the uncle comes to stay with his sister and his niece. Deepak meets him and confronts him with what had happened in Mala’s childhood. It is then that Shanta makes a shocking revelation. She, too, had been the victim of incest by her brother. That had made her powerless to react against him even when she had become aware of the havoc he was wreaking in her daughter’s life.

Mala, with the help of counselling and Deepak’s support, is now able to come to terms with, and bury the ghost from the past. In her final session with the counsellor, she is confident and self-assured: “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” (69). The day of her liberation symbolizes for her the death of her molester.

Her happiness at regaining the joys of childhood is seen in her words: “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. I want to see movies, taste ice-cream” (38). She is able to enjoy sex:

My whole body can feel! And for the first time I enjoyed sex.
Truly enjoyed it for its tactile pleasure. Not as 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. (38)

She now looks forward to a meaningful relationship with Deepak:

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 have a face at all. To wake up after many, many years as if from a coma . . . And to let the bandages come off . . . and suddenly discover a whole new face again. All, of a sudden you feel that you are — entitled to life. (37)

The play, thus, traces the slow and painful recovery of a victim of childhood sexual abuse. As Dattani tells Lakshmi Subramanyam, “In this play I wished to show that the impact of child sexual abuse is long term but not permanent” (“A Dialogue with Mahesh Dattani” 133).

In all these characters, Dattani presents the multi-faceted Indian woman. She is resourceful like Uma Rao, she wants to enjoy sexual freedom like Lata, she is broadminded and religiously tolerant like Smitha, she is smart like Lalitha, she is a fighter like Tara, she is shrewd like Kiran,
she can overcome the trauma of sexual abuse like Mala. Thus, the Indian woman can no longer be ignored and relegated to the background. In an email interview with the researcher, Dattani states: “I think the urban Indian woman is definitely more empowered in the twenty first century than she was in previous centuries” (Appendix 3).

All these women represent the twenty first century women who are characterized by authenticity, candour, assertion, independence and courage. They are not deterred by the discouraging attitude of society. They are not defeated by the conflicts within them. They “challenge master narratives about necessarily subordinate female lives, define these narratives as fictions, and refuse to live according to such fictions” (Barr 204). Most of these women are seen anticipating a change in the future. As Nalini (Ezekiel, “Nalini”) says, “I want to be on the side of change, the unpredictable, exploration, discovery, invention, in short, the future . . .” (TP 43).

The ultimate demise of the patriarchal type of nuclear family symbolized by the phrase ‘man and wife’, in which the man was ‘the head of the household’ and the wife was subservient and economically dependent, was evident by the middle of this century because of the ESE factor. This factor consists of three components: educational, sexual and economic freedom for women. (J. Williams 320)

Nalini, Malti, Mallika and Kiran are the women who possess all three components. The others have two of them and are on their way to acquiring the third. Such women “refuse to believe that they are the victims
of an original irretrievable domination” (Venkatarayappa 105). Exposure to education, improved self-respect, and an awareness of one’s own potential make them reject tradition and customs that restrict them, and emerge out of the cocoon built by a patriarchal society. They evolve different strategies, “not exactly to grab male space, but to assert their own individuality and act independently with a sense of freedom and conviction” (Gopalan 165).

The most important aspect of the transformation is the struggle for identity and the consequent assertiveness. The shift from the conventional image to the realistic image found in these plays can be found in the other literatures of India of the same period. One reason is that the liberated woman is to be found in urban areas all over India. The image is the same everywhere with local touches and variations. “The image of woman in modern literature differs not only in her realization of her individual identity and sense of equality with man but also in her recognition of her physical as well as psychological needs” (N. Murthy 71).

These characters prove that women can empower themselves by eschewing patriarchal power constructions and revising the definition of power. The struggle for equal status as a human being in a male-dominated society, has its own repercussions, both in the family and in the society. To break a new path, to create a new image, is always difficult. But one of the qualities of the liberated woman is courage, and a readiness to risk the unknown. She is determined to make her presence felt as an individual and is willing to undergo the difficulties that this may involve.
She knows that it is not easy to break out of the straitjacket of patriarchal binary thought. Women need not try to conform to the image of femininity held up by a patriarchal society. Doeuff calls this image a “fantasy-product” (196) and declares impassionately, “We will not talk pidgin to please the colonialists” (196). Women’s needs are almost identical with those of men’s:

Perhaps the balance may be different, but the substance is the same: for work and love, for independence and dependency, solitude and relationship, to enjoy community and value one’s specialness. All too often, though, these polarities present themselves to women as insoluble contradictions rather than paradoxes; because general assumption condones one set of goals for women to the exclusion of the other. Love, dependency, relationship, community: proper feminine goals. Their opposites are assumed to be of questionable value for a woman, and the woman who presumes to seek them — real woman or fictional projection... pays a price”. (Spacks 320)

The narratives of the women characters discussed in this chapter show that whatever be the price, the satisfaction of realizing one’s own potential is worth it. These women have realized that only by wilfully refusing to play their destined roles and making their own intellectual and sexual choices could they free themselves from the oppressive patriarchal system.