

# Breaking the Silence: A Study of Subaltern Issues in The Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Divya Priya, C.

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**C. Divya Priya**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English*

*M.M.E.S Women's Art and Science College, Melvisharam*

## Abstract

*This paper focuses on Subaltern issues and Marginalized voices in contemporary Indian Literature. On a different basis, the Subaltern and Marginalized community peoples were discriminated. This concept has replaced old-fashioned ideas and literary writers turned their writings toward the suppressed voices of society. Indian writers re-scripted their narratives to reflect the people's suffering who are subjugated and neglected by the elite community. This study focuses on renowned writer Mahesh Dattani from Indian Literature and scrutinizes from the perspectives of the Subaltern community. He is one of the well-known writers who served as a powerful medium to stand for the subaltern community through their writings. His plays stand as a medium to convey and challenge the socio-cultural hierarchies that have been submerged in Indian society long before. Finding solutions and instilling awareness among the readers was the main focus of Dattani's works. Ultimately, his plays give voice to the voiceless while transforming them to push from the margin towards the center.*

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Marginalized, Socio-Cultural Hierarchies.

This paper embedded analysis on discrimination against the Subalterns and mainly to break the silence of the voiceless. Mahesh Dattani is one of the most comprehensive dramatists and innovative playwrights in English Literature. He is the first playwright in English to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1998 and is regarded as a pioneer of Indian English theatre for his bold exploration of contemporary social issues. He breaks down the taboos and creates characters, using the stage, space and times that suit the subject he treats. Under the weight of culture, tradition, gender and repressed desire his characters fight for freedom and happiness. His plays depict marginalized identities of society, people who are considered misfits in a society where stereotyped attitudes. Mahesh Dattani quotes that “I take great pride in projecting issues that have remained invisible and unheard in Indian society”. Subalterns and marginalized communities are those sub-sects of the society in which they were suppressed by dominant ruling classes. Literature plays a major role in raising the question of suffering against social supremacy.

The term Marginalization refers to an unspecified group of people who were disempowered in our society. And on the other side, taking up the awareness level among the marginalized people plays a very pivotal role. But, the serious question that haunts the country is

‘whether the subaltern speaks’? Gayatri Spivak has correctly elaborated on the issue through her epoch-making postcolonial converse in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). This is evident in the works of Bhabani Bhattacharya, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and many others. One of the well-known pens, Mahesh Dattani, in his dramatic dialogues, attempts to give voice to the voiceless while letting them push from the margin towards the center. The present study emphasizes his selected play in which he explores the subaltern and marginalized community people.

In *Dance Like a Man* (1989) a powerful drama that provides an insight into the contemporary Indian social society. The dramatic structure of the play revolves around the idea that individuals will have to struggle against social obligations. The protagonist of this play Jairaj having a passion for dance is ready to challenge all the strong opposition imposed on him by his father Amritlal, an embodiment of patriarchal authority. His wife Ratna is interested in the dancing profession but opposed by her father-in-law. He had thought that the temple dancer was traditionally looked down upon as a prostitute in society. This play displays how social conditions and chauvinism obstruct the individual’s choices and deprive them of the path of possible growth and development. Through these characters, Dattani tries to clarify how the younger generation’s desires were opposed to the traditional values and how prejudiced society fails to respond to the call of humanity and acknowledgment of true art.

His play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (2013) is one of the most widely read plays by Mahesh Dattani, which carries more messages than the central issues. The plight of Hija in our society is deplorable. Dattani here tried to present the condition of the third gender in comparison with normal genders and their longing for acceptance in our society. The story centers on the love affair between the characters Subbu and Kamala and the impossibility of marriage between a eunuch and a man in our Indian society. He takes the play beyond the familiar track of family drama. The issue of the transgendered is no more a marginal issue but becomes a mainstream concern. By deliberately bringing the plight of the transgendered to the center, Dattani hopes to have their voices heard. Letting the subaltern speak, Dattani deliberately foregrounds the transgender. He does not pity them nor does he present them in a demeaning fashion. He endows them with self-dignity, inner strength and the courage to endure their pains and struggles.

Dattani mainly focuses his attention on the complexities of the urban Indian middle-class or upper-class families in his plays. His *Bravely Fought the Queen* (2003) raises certain issues that are often not acknowledged by average Indian families. One such important issue that is highlighted in this play is patriarchal domination or domination of men over women, which is often hidden behind the beauty masks of many Indian women. Dattani himself is aware of the hypocrisy existing in Indian society and makes it blatant in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Here the dramatist highlights the collision between a conventional mindset and modern culture resulting in a newer landscape. It should be noted that they are not passive sufferers. They do suffer but when it goes beyond endurance, they fight back to free themselves from the burden of Subalternity.

The play *Clearing the Rubble* (2013) is a heart-rending story of the victim of the earthquake in Gujarat (Bhuj). Dattani takes a dig at the people and society for discrimination against the poor and minorities. Through the humiliating experiences of Salim and his sister Mumtaz, Dattani successfully displayed the humiliating lives they have lived because of poverty, caste and minority status. He says that caste and religion should not be the cause of humiliation imposed on innocent people. The title of the play not only suggests clearing the rubble from the village but also clearing the rubble of evil and discrimination from our minds.

In *Tara* (1990) is a play in which Mahesh Dattani picks up an issue that is glaring in our society and itches an Indian female in every walk of life. It provides bitter commentary upon gender discrimination and forces of social apathy towards the injustice done to even a girl babe under the cloak of gender dichotomy. It presents how women are marginalized to the extent of distorting

themselves. The play is, in a broader sense, a ghastly tale of injustice done to a woman by the patriarchal society. The play shows how the devil of gender discrimination kills all other bonds of family relationships and how socio-cultural myths and conventions control and construct the course of human life. The play *Tara* is not just the story of the girl Tara, but it is the story of every girl child born in an Indian family who continues to suffer the chain of marginalization, gender discrimination and identity crisis. Education and economic independence have been fruitful in empowering women, but to overcome these problem women need to know their rights.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (2013) is one of the bold theatrical experiments on the theme of homosexuality. It is understood that the set rules of society do not allow an individual to create his own designs and own space unless conforming to them. It strikes at the root concept of the continuity of civilization through the promotion of the idea of the centrality of heterosexual relationships in society, where gays are subjected to exclusion and contempt. The play speaks about how heterosexual societies marginalize gays. Longing for social approval and freedom is lurking in the hearts of most of the characters in the play. It also shows how society creates patterns of behavior and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates. Here Dattani takes a plunge into the inner recess of the characters, who desire to be gay. It appears that the gays are puzzled about their identity in society. If they fulfill their longing to be a gay, it will damage their identities and recognition in society which disapproves of gay relationships and promotes marriage between heterosexuals. Their sexuality is endangered and engulfed by the rules and regulations of the society.

The play *Thirty Days in September* (2000) is a tragic tale of a child's sexual abuse. It depicts the raw emotion of the character and the naked realities covered beneath the cloaks of hypocrisy of our society. Shanta observed silence against the molestation of her daughter, Mala by her brother Vinay. She put on a cloak of silence to avoid the protest for the injustice. In a vain attempt to defend her, Shanta holds Mala responsible for the tragedy. This play vividly dramatizes the fractures of familial relationships which is the characteristic feature of modern Indian urban society. They live under the same roof but share different views and ideas about life and the world. The play depicts the issue which involves psychological and sociological speculations along with philosophical and moral musings over things.

Thus, this paper aims to unearth the dramatist's views and attitudes towards the marginalized people in Indian society. Mahesh Dattani holds a mirror to society, portraying reality as it was but at the time moving through the causes and reason for a gradual positive change. It may be caste, class division, gay/lesbian, gender discrimination or women and voiceless people. It seriously questions the injustice meted out to the marginalized and the hypocrisy of the so-called urban India. Here Mahesh Dattani is a staunch supporter of the underprivileged and he tries to foreground the hue and cry of the subalterns. By pulling out taboo subjects from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the construction of Indian traditional society.

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