

# The Silenced Voice: Marginalized Characters in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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**Abstract:** *The article examines how Mahesh Dattani, an English-language playwright who won the Sahitya Akademi Award, portrays marginalized identities and the "invisible" person through his theatrical performances. The research demonstrates that Dattani uses domestic spaces to create both his Indian middle-class characters' oppressive environment and their secret acts of resistance. The research uses a comparative study of three important plays, Tara (1990) and Bravely Fought the Queen (1991) and Seven Steps Around the Fire (1998), to examine how gender discrimination and disability interact with the marginalization of LGBTQ+ and Hijra communities.*

*Dattani establishes his primary analytical framework through his creative implementation of spatial boundaries. The article examines how he employs multi-level sets and "invisible" stagecraft to symbolize the psychological isolation of characters who are physically present but socially erased. The study further investigates how Dattani dismantles the "mask" of urban sophistication to reveal the deep-seated prejudices that continue to govern the contemporary Indian household. The article demonstrates that Dattani's theatrical work serves as an essential demonstration of "vocal reclamation" which requires audiences to engage in active discomfort while recognizing their role in silencing those who belong to the "other" group. Dattani's work ensures that "invisible issues" receive public attention which demonstrates the ongoing fight for human dignity in modern India's divided territories..*

**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani, Marginalization, LGBTQ+ Drama, Disability Studies, Gender Politics, Hijra Community

## I. THE DRAMATURGY OF THE INVISIBLE – INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani established a unique position in Indian English drama through his work which brought visibility to the "invisible individual.[5] "Dattani examined the urban English-speaking middle class because his predecessors preferred to study historical epics and rural folk traditions and the active political changes which followed India's independence[14]. The author examines this social group through his research because he wants to explore its hidden social practices. Dattani uses his theatrical work to express hidden truths about society while he defends his right to express himself through artistic storytelling methods which show different perspectives about life[7]. Dattani defines his subjects as "invisible" because they occupy the peripheral spaces of the social imagination[8]. The dining table in a contemporary Indian family serves as a physical space which shows who exists there but their actual needs and emotional pain and personal identity remain hidden from view. Dattani uses the proscenium stage as a social restriction which people experience in society. Dattani creates an "uncanny" atmosphere through his choice of living room as the space where he places "taboo" subjects because his audience members will recognize their personal shameful secrets. Dattani considers stage performance to be a political act because his character gets recognition from society through his performance[1].

The introductory chapter establishes the theoretical framework which underpins "intersectional marginality." Dattani recognizes that silence is not a monolith; the silence of a transgender woman in Seven Steps Around the Fire is qualitatively different from the silence of a disabled girl in Tara[11]. The two characters represent a social system which determines human value through its assessment of what constitutes "normalcy[4]. " Dattani uses split-level sets which enable the audience to observe events taking place in concealed areas of a house to create a theatrical experience that reveals how multiple forms of oppression interact[2]. He asserts that all people who exist outside mainstream

society should be considered part of the population which experiences social neglect including those who reside in their homes. The chapter provides an introduction to Dattani's plays which he uses as "vocal reclamation" to transform middle class secrets into powerful theatrical demonstrations[12].

## **II. THE GENDERED SCAPEGOAT – TARA**

Dattani uses Tara (1990) to show how Indian middle class people hold hidden biases which lead to their practice of excluding women from their societies[2]. The play centers on the tragic life of Tara, a young girl who was born as a conjoined twin to her brother, Chandan. The city medical and technological progress enables their separation, but the play shows that patriarchal "virus" has taken control of scientific research[1]. The chapter demonstrates that Tara exists as a double subaltern because her physical disability and gender identity together make her Dattani's most silent character [11].

### **The Medicalized Betrayal**

The main disagreement in the play centers on a historical medical choice about the twins' three shared legs because their parents and doctor decided to give Chandan the third leg which medically matched Tara's body. The purpose of this decision was to provide the male child with improved prospects for achieving a "normal" and successful existence. Dattani uses this medical betrayal to protest the commodification of the female body [12]. Tara's existence gets used as a sacrifice to fulfill her grandfather's patriarchal needs and her parents' shared guilt. Tara has to use a prosthetic leg and experiences a "limp" which affects her bodily movement and her social and psychological existence. She serves as an unending proof of a wrongdoing which people committed to honor "tradition" and male superiority [13].

### **Disability as a Social Barrier**

Dattani's treatment of disability shows a complete departure from the standard Indian media representation which shows disabled people as objects of pity [8]. He uses Tara's disability to show how society excludes her from social interactions. Society expects Chandan to pursue his studies while Tara must remain at home [11]. She uses her lively personality and sharp intelligence to fight against the enforced silence that surrounds her. Dattani claims that people develop a "blindness" toward disabled individuals because they want to protect their fragile existence. Tara experiences complete social exclusion because she discovers that her mother uses guilt to create excessive protective behavior which takes away Tara's independence. The prosthetic leg becomes a symbol of the "artificial" identity the family tries to force upon her to mask their own shame [6].

### **The Silence of the Grave**

The play uses a non-linear storytelling approach which shows an older Chandan who now goes by Dan watching his past from his frigid and isolated London chamber [2]. The structure shows how Tara's forced silence resulted in the complete spiritual collapse of her family. The medical problems that Tara suffers from lead to her death because she understands that her core being was rejected. Dattani protests against urban families who consider themselves educated and progressive while they maintain their ancient belief that daughters represent financial loss and sons bring economic value [10]. Through Tara's deathly silence at the end of the play, Dattani leaves the audience with a profound sense of loss—protesting a world where the "quality of life" is determined by gender rather than humanity [15].

## **III. THE SUBALTERN THIRD GENDER – SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE**

Dattani moves the action of his story away from home settings to display the life which exists beyond mainstream society to show how Hijra people live. Dattani uses murder mystery as a storytelling method which forces middle-class readers to recognize the humanity of a community that they see at traffic signals yet choose to treat as nonhuman [7]. The chapter presents Dattani's use of detective tropes to uncover social hypocrisy which shows that actual "criminals" exist outside the law while those who use legal systems to create an image of "purity" are the real offenders [11].

### **The Ritual of Exclusion**

The title refers to the Saptapadi, the seven steps taken by a bride and groom around a sacred fire—the ritual which excludes members of the Hijra community from participation. Dattani protests this ritualistic marginalization [8]. The Indian cultural imagination sees Hijras in a contradictory position because people consider them sacred beings who bring blessings to newborns and weddings yet treat them as monsters or deviants when the ceremony concludes [1].

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The character of Kamala, a beautiful Hijra who is murdered for daring to love and marry a minister's son, embodies the "forbidden voice." Her existence poses a threat to the political and social purity which maintains upper-class hierarchy control. Kamala experiences dual silencing through her murder because social exclusion serves as one form of silencing while physical erasure functions as the second method of silencing [13].

#### **Humanizing the "Other"**

Dattani's protest in this play shows his deep understanding of others [3]. The Hijras Anarkali and Champa together with other characters demonstrate their emotional complexity which exceeds the typical Indian media roles of "comic relief" and "villainous" characters [4]. The audience learns about Hijra "gharanas" through the character Nun Rao who studies sociology and serves as the Vice-Chancellor's daughter. Dattani presents a hidden society which operates under its own legal system and social structure and self-protective mechanisms because the world denies them basic human rights [15]. The "silenced voice" here is collective; it is the voice of an entire community that has been pushed into the shadows of the "Seven Steps."

#### **The Power of the Gaze**

The play effectively uses the concept of the "gaze." Dattani allows the Hijras to look back at society which views them with both fearful and curious eyes [7]. Anarkali's defiance in the prison cell and her weary wisdom challenge Uma's (and the audience's) academic detachment. Dattani shows that third gender people experience marginalization because it serves as a "convenient" silence for the patriarchal state [6]. The entire social structure which the state establishes through "male" and "female" categories starts to collapse when the minister's son falls in love with a Hijra. Through her investigation Uma learns that the "truth" exists as something the state will execute people to protect. Dattani shows the audience that people become "invisible" because we choose not to recognize the "visible" people who possess blood on their hands [12].

### **IV. THE DOMESTIC BATTLEFIELD – BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN**

Dattani uses the urban household as his study site to show how women experience life limitations and how middle-class men face hidden discrimination. The play shows the three-act structure through its depiction of a Bangalore business family's life which moves from the Women's Room to the Men's Room and ends at a place with broken actualities [3]. Dattani uses home environments as battlefields in which people lose their true personal identities according to this chapter [12].

#### **The Bonsai Metaphor**

Dattani uses the Bonsai plant as a metaphor to explain how the sisters Dolly and Alka experience life. The women's lives have been restricted through "pruning" and "stunting" which results from their husband and mother-in-law expectations [11]. They experience social exclusion because their home environment forces them to live as consumers who pretend to be happy while suffering domestic abuse and emotional abandonment [12]. Dattani uses this section to demonstrate his objection against the "mask of the happy family." The wealthy environment around the women creates a silencing effect because their material comfort acts as a golden cage which stops them from discussing their husband's cheating and their own repressed needs. The women demonstrate their courage through their daily survival of life as "marginalized" people instead of through their participation in major public demonstrations.

#### **Repression and the "Other"**

The play shows that women face social exclusion because society demands men to hide their homosexual orientation [8]. The characters Jiten and Nitin demonstrate toxic masculinity which develops from their concealed personal identities [6]. Nitin's failure to accept his sexual orientation results in his wife Alka becoming more isolated because he treats her with both guilt and cruelty. Dattani demonstrates that the "silence" of a patriarchal society creates victims from all social groups. The men must assume "kings" and "warriors" roles which they cannot fulfill, so they direct their aggression toward the women who hold the title of "queens" [1]. Dattani uses Nitin's hidden existence to demonstrate how society forces heterosexual partners to confine themselves at home due to the social exclusion of queer people.

#### **The Breakdown of the Mask**

The final act starts with all "silenced" voices unleashing their screams. The women reach their final confrontation with the men through their struggles with alcoholism and their psychological breakdowns [13]. Dattani demonstrates the

destruction of home through his use of theatrical expressionism which combines musical fragments with changing light patterns and the tangible existence of the "other" woman who serves as both mistress and mother [7]. The protest here is against the "bravery" required just to survive a day in a traditional household where one is constantly gaslit. The "Queen" (which refers to the Rani of Jhansi) develops into a character who represents tragic endurance instead of triumph by the conclusion of the story[11]. Dattani states that middle-class homes will continue as silent battlegrounds until people address the hidden realities which involve sexual matters and violent conduct [15].

#### **V. SPATIAL MARGINALITY – DATTANI'S STAGECRAFT**

Theatrical mastery and script-writing expertise exist together in Mahesh Dattani's artistic abilities. Theatrical spaces become his protest against voice suppression which he demonstrates through his creative spatial designs [5]. The chapter demonstrates how his stage design elements create visual proof showing social exclusion which turns the theater space into a tool for diagnosing the divided mental state of Indian society [13].

##### **Multi-Level Sets and Social Hierarchy**

Dattani uses split-level and multi-level sets to show social class divisions and hidden mental states of his characters [6]. The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Tara* features multiple scenes that occur at the same time across various stage locations [2]. The setup enables viewers to observe the "marginalized" character Tara who occupies her room and the women who work in the kitchen while "mainstream" characters take over the living room space. The visual element demonstrates that a character stays present in one space even if their vocal expression gets subdued by the other room's atmosphere [8].

Dattani creates a "monolith" of middle-class life by using multiple performance spaces instead of one fixed space [12]. The stage functions as an exclusionary map which depicts patriarchal power through its upper levels and public facades while its lower levels and back areas show hidden aspects of gender identity and sexual orientation and disability status [11].

##### **The Invisible Made Visible**

Dattani uses lighting and sound to create his main characters' "shadows" which they occupy throughout the story [7]. The police station presents a sterile bright environment which directly opposes the dynamic dark spaces of Hijra gharana thus showing how government institutions separate themselves from marginalized groups. His off-stage voice techniques together with his character design who remain unheard by other characters create a distance between the audience and the show which forces them to feel the pain of being silenced [4]. The technology of this performance produces a physical demonstration which enables the audience to experience marginality instead of hearing about it as a story [15]. Dattani frequently instructs his performers to use stage corners and edges which he calls "negative space" to show their characters' social separation from others [13]. The audience must confront these "invisible" problems because the show presents them through definite proof which they cannot ignore.

#### **VI. CONCLUSION – THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION**

The marginalized community "silence" according to Mahesh Dattani's plays represents a shared societal downfall instead of an individual tragedy. His creation presents audiences with enduring discomfort which differs from the immediate emotional release found in traditional melodramatic works. Dattani uses the proscenium spotlight to show "others" which include queer people trans people disabled people and suppressed women because this causes Indian middle class people to reevaluate their definition of "normal." Dattani's powerful storytelling requires viewers to examine their existing beliefs because he uses his narratives to challenge societal standards. His plays reflect the complex nature of Indian society which urges people to challenge their existing beliefs while they work toward creating an understanding and compassionate society.

The research shows that Dattani uses vocal reclamation as his main method of protest. Tara uses his protest against society's gender-based expectations which force disabled people to make sacrifices while *Seven Steps* shows the state-sanctioned discrimination faced by a whole community. Urban domestic spaces suffer from domestic violence and sexual suppression which he reveals as the core issues that destroy its foundations. He established the first authentic Indian theater which recognizes that society's well-being depends on its treatment of people it tries to silence. Dattani

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uses his thought-provoking plays to challenge social conventions while he brings attention to the experiences of marginalized groups. He uses his platform to bring attention to underrepresented groups because this helps people recognize difficult realities which must be solved to create a more equitable and kind society.

Dattani's plays invite audiences to listen to his work. The "silenced voice" people think is silent because it has nothing to express needs to be understood as existing only because our biasing walls block its ability to be heard. Dattani's work establishes itself as an essential element of modern global theater because his local Bangalore home secrets create international human rights violations which show their impact on human dignity and justice. Dattani uses his storytelling power to challenge us because we need to remove these obstacles which prevent us from hearing the experiences of marginalized people. His plays demonstrate that people need empathy and understanding to build a society which treats everyone fairly and creates an environment of peace.

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