
Combating Gender Violence by Shifting the Focus back on Males: Approaching Dattani's Plays *Tara* and *Ek Alag Mausam* from Masculinity Studies Perspective

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Abstract

*All though masculinity studies framework has all the potentiality to initiate an effective discourse for combating gender violence and women emancipation as a substantiation to already existing feminist discourse, the critics/scholars have not considerably used it, especially in the context of Indians English writings. This paper aims at analyzing the main male characters of Mahesh Dattani's two plays *Tara* and *Ek Alag Mausam* (screenplay) by using the framework of masculinity studies to discuss how, in stead of fitting themselves into the orbit of hegemonic masculinity, these characters reflect the traits of more inclusive alternative masculinity thereby elucidating Dattani's noble attempt to destabilize and subvert the domination of violent and aggressive hegemonic masculinity.*

Keywords: *masculinity studies, gender violence, emancipation, hegemonic, alternative, inclusive.*

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Manliness consists not in bluff, bravado or loneliness. It consists in daring to do the right thing and facing consequences whether it is in matters social, political or other. It consists in deeds not words (Mahatma Gandhi).

Masculinity is often wrongly associated with unwanted aggression and possession of power which is, more often than not, used as a tool to exercise an unhealthy domination over women. There are many ways to express masculinity which do not rely upon aggression or violence at all. But the form of hegemonic masculinity, within which aggression and domination are imbibed, only 'recognizes that one masculinity norm dominates multiple masculinities' (Dowd 418) and has been celebrated in such a way that many men engage themselves in the pursuit of fitting themselves into that orbit of hegemonic masculinity.

John Beynon stated in his book *Masculinities and Culture* that "Men are not born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up; rather it is something into which they are acculturated and which is composed of social codes of behavior which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways"(2). The patriarchal structure of our society often creates the necessity of transforming this masculinity into a hegemonic one which inevitably finds its expression in the aggressive domination over women and their subjugation. It is this patriarchal construction of our world which plays a decisive role to pave the way for the circulation of hegemonic masculinity by sidelining all the other forms of subordinated masculinity. What is more unfortunate about hegemonic masculinity is that in spite of its being unhealthy, it has become a way in which many males establish themselves as "perfect" or "true" men. It becomes clear when Connell and Messerschmidt, in their article

Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept, argue:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (832).

As understood from John Beynon's argument, masculinity in general and hegemonic masculinity in particular, are not biological phenomenon rather they are the end-products of culture, cultural assimilation and historical context. It varies in accordance with different axes like specific social setting, cultural setup, race and age and it is reflected in Connell and Messerschmidt's words when he states that "Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of the individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (Connell & Messerschmidt 832).

Hegemonic masculinity is not at all a biological entitlement to male bodies rather it is a pattern followed by men to attain a desired social status. It has nothing to do with the biological man and is only a way followed by men as a means of grasping a certain dynamic within the social process. As far as Indian society is concerned, the concept of masculinity reigns in its hegemonic form that seduces many men to exercise sheer domination over women, to lead a life which must vary from the life lead by a woman and to restrict women from entering into their field, that is, their work places. Dibyabibho Roy rightly argues that in Indian context that "Be it in literature or in visual art forms, men are positioned invariably at the zenith of power and hegemony. The women, needless to say, have always remained in the background, either as moral support to their men or as confidante, with very rare exceptions" (198).

Indian men, placed within a patriarchal structure, often find it difficult to get themselves out of the clutch of this hegemonic masculinity though modern times may have changed the socio-cultural context in many ways. In this regard Nandita Dasgupta remarks that "She may have got rid of her meow, but he's stuck with his alpha roar. For men there seems to be no other way to be. Sure he may wax his chest and do the washing up today, but he is still trapped by patriarchal stereotypes and continues to play protector, procreator and provider" (qtd. in Ray 4).

It is true that this is the naked reality of Indian society but it is also true that there is very little attempt made in the vast arena of Indian English Literature to expose the myth of hegemonic masculinity through the representation of an alternative kind of masculinity which does not need to be expressed through domination and does not need to be adhered to the fanatic craze for unhealthy power. However, Dattani's plays offer us a range of such characters who are attractive because of the ways in which they subvert hegemonic masculinity.

Being a child of culture, hegemonic masculinity has never been a static phenomenon as it continues to change according to different cultural as well as temporal setups. John Beynon again remarks:

Hegemonic masculinities therefore came into existence in specific circumstances and were

open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones. [...] It was perhaps possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies (833).

Though Mahesh Dattani, a contemporary Indian English Dramatist and Shahitya Akademi award winner extensively deals with the familiar issue of gender violence and as well as with few radical and less represented issues like the plight of the people with alternative sexual orientation and with physical disabilities, his plays have hardly been approached from the point of view of masculinity studies which can effectively substantiate existing feminist discourse aimed at encountering gender violence and women emancipation. For that matter hardly any Indian English composition, across genres, has tried to encounter the patriarchal suppression by shifting the focus back on males.

This paper aims at highlighting how Dattani, in his two plays *Ek Alag Mausam* (screen play) and *Tara*, has represent few male characters who, in order to express their masculinity, don't take recourse to domination and lust for power; rather they choose to express their masculinity by doing the right thing at right time thereby making a novel attempt to problematize and to destabilize the notion of hegemonic masculinity.

In this regard, Dibyabibho Roy, who has studied 'manliness' in two different plays of Dattani - *Where There is a Will* and *Dance Like a Man* aptly remarks:

Dattani treats men as victims of their own fates, shows them as powerful authoritative pillars of the family and at the same time, he creates other male characters that question the normative role of men or become social deviants, raising questions on the hegemonic social structure and in a way subvert the socially constructed stereotypes (198).

In the play *Tara* the idea of alternative masculinity, which is distantly different from the idea of traditional or hegemonic masculinity, comes to the fore in the character of Chandan. Chandan embodies a gender-sensitive male who always stands by his sister who has been deprived of better life and career chances because of certain decisions taken by the older members of the family. Chandan's character also challenges certain normative notions about what men should do. In the opening section of the play it has been shown that Chandan, when requested by his father, Patel, to join the family business and to join the office. In response, Chandan tells his father to take Tara to the office. Patel ignores his response and insists that Chandan go to the office with him but when Chandan retorts that they both, that is, Tara and him would go to the office, their father responds with an emphatic 'no'. Instantly, one gets a sense of the familial context and the gendered mindset of the family that makes Chandan think and respond the way he does.

It is indicative of the fact that Chandan, in spite of being a male, does not hesitate to admit that his sister does possess better business acumen than him. In a society, which is obsessed with and governed by patriarchal norms it is far from being normal to consider himself less efficient than a girl for a boy. Chandan does not only do that but he also dares to suggest to his father, who acts as the embodiment of stern patriarchal norms, to give Tara the opportunity to excel in the field of business which is considered as almost natural and reserved for the male in a male dominated Indian society. This scene also serves as a reminder that Chandan's own wishes to not belong in the profession of business are suppressed in such a family. His wishes are sacrificed to the norms within such a family

where the son of the house has to take up the business of the father.

Now these traits of alternative masculinity or the whole concept of alternative masculinity becomes more prominent with the presence of the characters like Patel who acts as the embodiment of patriarchal rules and hegemonic masculinity and who does not tolerate the fact that his son is willing to stay back at home and doing small house works or his son helping his mother in knitting or the unwillingness of his son to go to the college without his sister. Patel also even does not want to give his daughter Tara an opportunity to handle the office works. It has also been depicted that Patel always forces her decision upon his wife- Bharati. The level of his domination over his wife is such that he does not allow her to donate her kidney to their daughter- Tara. Such kind of character, acting as the binary opposition, perfectly serves to highlight the effectiveness of alternative masculinity in propagating gender equality and in proclaiming the need for liberation of the males from the clutch of traditional, aggressive and hegemonic masculinity which, more often than not, restrict them from expressing their true humanistic nature and soft-heartedness.

In a society which is ruled by patriarchal norms and by the practice of traditional hegemonic masculinity, it is almost an unwritten law that men must go out for working in order to earn the livelihood for the family while women should be preferred to stay back at home and take the charge of daily household chores. In such kind of scenario, it is often considered as womanly for a man who prefers to stay back at home and that too by admitting the fact that he does not possess the necessary efficiency to work outside. But Chandan, without fearing the prospect of being labelled as womanly, openly says that he will prefer to stay back at home:

ROOPA (*Falsely*). Sorry! Hello Uncle .Sorry! I'm I disturbing you?

TARA. Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave.

CHANDAN. I have not decided yet. (*Looks at Patel*) I might stay back in the cave and do my jigsaw puzzle (Dattani 328).

Chandan is the only person in the play who is confident about Tara's potential and always believes that Tara's life is not aimless and not worth for nothing which is reflected through his words:

BHARATI. It's time Tara decide what she wants to be. Women have to do that as well these days .She must have a career.

CHANDAN. She can do whatever she wants. Grandfather's trust will leave us both money, isn't it?

BHARATI. Yes. But she must have something to do! She can't be . . . aimless all her life.

CHANDAN. There is nothing aimless about Tara's life (Dattani 348).

It shows that Chandan here expresses himself as a male who breaks the shackles of traditional and hegemonic masculinity with case for standing by the side of his sister who has to face unhealthy discrimination only because of her being a girl. Chandan helps her mother in knitting and when his father started to rebuke his mother (Bharati) for letting Chandan to do so, Chandan stands by the side of his mother and directly tells his father Patel that he is doing it out of his own interest (Dattani 351). Further Chandan refuses to go

to college until unless Tara also will not be allowed to go the college with him and for this to happen he even argues with his father:

PATEL. You will come with me to the office until you college starts.

CHANDAN. I don't want to go to college! (*Fighting his tears*) Not without Tara! It she is going in for surgery, I will miss a year too!

PATEL. You will not. I won't allow it.

CHANDAN (*shouting*) .Well, that's too bad! (*Backs to his room.*) That's just too bad! (*Exits*) (Dattani 351-352).

Chandan thinks of Tara and him as one person. Just because they have been surgically separated, it does not mean that their beings or minds have been separated. Throughout the play it has been shown that Chandan never considers himself as complete without Tara. It is a debatable topic whether such kind of feelings in Chandan's mind arises just because of the fact that they came into this world as conjoined twins. Towards the very end of the play it has been indicated that Tara has died and in order to get rid from the sense of guilt, Chandan has fled to England with the aim of becoming a writer and changed his name to Dan. But Chandan says at this point also that he wants to be a writer only to capture the pain of her dead sister in words. Erin Mee in her note on the play in the volume of collected plays, states that for Dattani this is "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'" (Dattani 320). If we consider the fact that Dattani uses the fictitious concept of male-female conjoined twins as his protagonist/s, we can see that his choice has been deliberate. The fact that in reality this is not possible, for male-female conjoined twins to be born, is adopted in the play to convey the idea that in reality every man can have a feminine side that he must keep hidden and that every woman may have a masculine side that cannot be revealed. Tara does not survive whereas Chandan does – this could be a symbolic way of saying that a man has to let his feminine side die in order to be accepted in this world. The fact that Chandan cannot forgive himself for the death of his sister, become clear through his last long and emotionally charged dialogue:

DAN. Thank you very much, Dr Thakkar! It has been areal pleasure. Now go, just . . . go away. (*Breaks down.*) Get out of my mind, you horrible creature! You are ugly and I don't want ugly people in my memories! [. ..] Forgive me Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy (Dattani 379-380).

When it comes to alternative masculinity in Dattani's plays, one cannot overlook the screenplay, *Ek Alag Mausam* This particular play tells the love story of two HIV affected persons- George and Aparna. Aparna became HIV infected through her husband Suresh and in this moment of crisis when she needed the help of her husband Suresh most, he not only failed to help her but also left her permanently. In this situation Aparna decides to work in an organization named 'Jeevan Jyoti' run by Dr Machado. At this juncture she does not disclose to anybody except her mother that she is HIV positive. But George, another volunteer of the organization falls in love with her in spite of knowing that she is HIV positive. He approaches Aparna to express his love but Aparna refuses him because of two reasons: first, she thought that George, as a truck driver, might get the infection from having unprotected sex with prostitutes, second, she does not want to get involved in any kind of relationship with anyone as she thinks that life has closed all doors in her face as soon as she

became HIV+. It is in this context, that George emerges as an important instance of embodiment of alternative masculinity.

In spite of being HIV+, George is full of positive energy which he successfully spreads to the children who live in Jeevan Jyoti, some of whom are HIV+ and some of whom are there because they are orphans of parents who were HIV+. George's optimism is evident in the scene with Suraj, a little boy who is HIV+:

GEORGE (*casual*). Oh Suraj .You spoilt our fun and I told you not to do that.

APARNA (*Furious*). How can you be so uncaring? (Picking up Suraj) I will take him to doctor.

GEORGE (*asking Suraj from her*). What will Dr Machado do? He is not God. (*Going the truck*) Here Suraj. I have something for you. (*Taking out a wooden soldier*) I made it for you .Soldier .You wanted to be a soldier? This is you. Now show me how you can fight. You will fight? Yes? (Dattani, Vol. II 503).

It shows that George tries to impart a masculine vigour within Suraj but not to exercise any sort of domination over others rather to free his mind from the fear of impending doom. King-KoK Cheung in his article "Art, Spirituality, and the Ethic of care: Alternative Masculinities in Chinese American Literature", claims in his analysis of a memoir, *The Winged Seed*, that true masculinity can not be expressed through violence or domination, rather it should be expressed through love, care, patience and creativity. Ba, the protagonist of *The Winged Seed*, expressed his masculinity and energy of masculinity by preparing a model of Solomon's Temple with utmost care for presenting it to his little daughter (271-276). Similarly in this play also George prepares a wooden soldier with utmost care and love for Suraj for inspiring him in his fight against HIV/AIDS. George blends his masculine energy with love and care and tries to inspire Suraj not to submit his will to live in front to a fatal disease and says "Arre forget about all this medicine. He will go when he has to go. But he won't go without putting up a fight. Right? (*Punching Suraj lightly*) Come on, fight" (Dattani, Vol. II 504).

George has also been presented as rescuing a prostitute, Rita who has also been infected by HIV and comes under attack by several people who have been trying to drive her away from her home along with her little girl Paro. At this time, George does not think of what society will think of him for rescuing a prostitute and his daughter, that he may be suspected of having relations with prostitutes and so on. He rescues Rita and Paro and takes them to Jeevan Jyoti by proving himself as a different kind of man who does not direct his masculine vigour for exercising any sort of dominance or assertiveness over women, rather he uses it to rescue them and to stand beside them. In spite of being HIV positive, George is not worried about his impending doom. He tries to impart his positive attitude within Aparna also. But Aparna repeatedly refuses to imbibe his positive attitude to life. But this does not run George out of patience or make him hopeless. In spite of Aparna's refusal of his love proposal, he does loose his patience and continues his attempt to pursue her to marry him:

GEORGE. You have branded yourself. Aids, Aids, Aids! You have put a big red stamp on yourself .I thought only on uncaring, unfeeling society would do that to us .But no. We don't have to worry about society. We are doing it to ourselves! I refuse to brand myself. All I know is that I love you and I want to marry you (Dattani, Vol. II 533).

Aparna not only refuses George's proposal but she goes on to insult him:

APARNA. Oh come on George! You are a truck driver and very hart how you got infected! How can I marry you knowing that you have been infected by other women? That you have in turn infected several others. Why do you think my husband left me? Because he couldn't face me after I knew the truth. But you are even more shameless than him. You dare to ask me to marry you? (Dattani, Vol. II 534).

Even after such kind of insult George does not counter-attack Aparna. He remains patient and continues his effort to pursue her in spite of the fact that he actually got the virus while giving blood to Dr Machado's son who was infected by the HIV virus. This again shows that in spite of possessing all masculine energy and vigour, George does not show any trace of anger or aggressiveness. It is also important to note that AIDS which could be considered as an emasculating disease because it can be sexually transmitted, George is never daunted by this social stigma that is attached to the disease.

In an attempt to save Jeevan Jyoti, which is at the danger of closing down as the landlord refuses to renew the land deal; George decides to sell all his trucks. On the other hand Aparna also arranges a show for raising funds in the same effort which is never going to be enough. But George requests Dr.Machado to let her do that because he wants her to get the feeling that because of her show Jeevan Jyoti has been saved. In order to make Aparna happy George, without least hesitation, becomes ready to hide his own credit though Aparna, out of anger, insults him in very bad way.

Towards the very end of the play it has been shown that Aparna ultimately comes to George and accepts his love. This is indicative of the fact that by remaining patient George not only wins his love ultimately but also gives Aparna the much needed happiness in her shortened life which was till then elusive to her.

Another character in the play, Dr. Machado also serves as an important instance of alternative masculinity. He undoubtedly appears as a man of authority as he is in charge of Jeevan Jyoti but never tries to utilize his authoritative power in exercising any sort of dominance over any one. Rather when it comes to the helping of poor, helpless HIV patients, the softness of his heart comes to the fore. When the possibility of the closing down of Jeevan Jyoti arises, he cannot help but expresses his restlessness to George. Like George, he also tries to inspire the HIV infected people to fight against their impending doom so that they don't die figuratively even before the real death. And it becomes obvious through his first speech in the play:

DR. MACHADO (*moving around*). You are not alone in this world .There are hundreds of thousands of people like you suffering in silence. Why? Because they all think that they are going to die. Of course they will die. Of course you will die. We will die one day. Who is to say when? Then why this fear of dying? What is important is that we are alive today .We are alive right now! Am I right or am I wrong?
[...]

Come on! Say it. I am alive. This moment, this day: Come on. I... (Dattani, Vol. II 486).

Throughout the play Machado has been shown as a very sympathetic man who always loves and cares for his patients living in Jeevan Jyoti. Dr.Machado used his energy to inspire the HIV patients and his tenderness again comes to the fore through his last speech,

delivered on the occasion of world aids Day:

DR.MACHADO: On world Aids day, Let us remember the lives of those who died of the virus and respect the dignity of those who died of the virus and respect the dignity of those who are living with HIV.

[...]

While waiting for that cure to be invented or discovered, let us not forget that miracles are known to happen (Dattani, Vol. II 557).

As in the other play, in this screenplay also Dattani has introduced few male characters in the presence of whom the worthiness of alternative masculinity becomes more visible. The men who were beating Rita, the prostitute girl, never thought that they also have to be blamed for Rita's predicament. Rather they exercise violence to beat her and to drive her away which is the trait of harmful hegemonic masculinity. The shop-keeper whom Rita approaches for buying a dress for her daughter, also exploits her sexually in exchange for a little money which again is also considered as the trait of hegemonic masculinity directed toward the soulless exploitation of women. Suresh, Aparna's husband is also an instance of normative masculinity – the minute he finds out that Aparna's baby has been infected by the HIV that he passed on to her, he abandons the family and escapes. His apology to Aparna is half-hearted and he is never to be heard of later in the play. When we put the characters of George and Dr.Machado beside these sorts of characters the relevance and effectiveness of alternative masculinity is bound to be reaffirmed.

To conclude it can be said that Dattani has admirably portrayed the main male characters of these two plays with the traits of alternative masculinity thereby sending a strong message that the longstanding menace of gender violence in Indian society can be tackled by advocating the potentiality of a different sort of masculinity that questions and in away discard the practices of hegemonic masculinity. And everyone knows that in recent time when both the public and private sphere are dominated and controlled by hegemonic form of masculinity, this sort of adoption of alternative masculinity by male member of the society can usher a joyous and deserving future for the women who still continue to be the other half of world population.

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