

Gender Identity and Social Conflict in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Exploration

Amol Nandewar

Research Scholar, Institute of Excellence in Higher Education, Barkatullah University, Bhopal

Dr. Seeme Mehmood

Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Institute of Excellence in Higher Education, Barkatullah University, Bhopal

Abstract

This research paper critically explores the representation of gender identity and social conflict in the selected plays of Mahesh Dattani, one of the most significant voices in contemporary Indian English drama. Dattani's plays present marginalized identities and expose the complexities of gender discrimination, patriarchy, sexuality, and societal hypocrisy embedded within Indian social structures. The study examines how his dramatic narratives challenge traditional gender norms and reveal the psychological, emotional, and social struggles faced by individuals who do not conform to dominant cultural expectations. Through the analysis of selected plays such as *Final Solutions*, *Tara*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Dance like a Man*, the paper investigates themes of identity crisis, gender bias, family conflict, and social exclusion. The research further highlights Dattani's use of realistic dialogue, symbolism, and stagecraft to portray the tension between personal identity and societal pressure. The study concludes that Dattani's drama functions as a powerful medium for questioning rigid social ideologies and advocating inclusivity, equality, and human dignity in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: *Gender Identity; Social Conflict; Indian English Drama; Patriarchy; Marginalization; Sexuality; Contemporary Theatre*

Submitted: March 15, 2026 **Revised:** April 20, 2026 **Accepted:** April 30, 2026 **Published:** May 10, 2026

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.20440294](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20440294)



1. Introduction

Drama is one of the most popular genres in English literature. It has emerged as a significant literary medium for addressing social realities, cultural transformations, and identity-based conflicts within modern Indian society. Among the major dramatists of post-independence Indian theatre, Mahesh Dattani occupies a distinctive position for his bold exploration of marginalized identities, gender discrimination, sexuality, and psychological alienation. His plays challenge conventional social structures and expose the hidden tensions existing within families and communities. Dattani's dramatic narratives reflect the complexities of urban middle-class life and critically interrogate patriarchal ideologies that suppress individual freedom and self-expression.

Through realistic characterization and innovative theatrical techniques, he presents the struggles of individuals who attempt to negotiate personal identity within rigid social expectations. Critics have observed that Dattani's theatre represents "the voice of the silenced" and foregrounds issues often neglected in mainstream Indian drama (Multani 12). Recent studies also recognize his contribution toward expanding discussions on gender and inclusivity in contemporary theatre (Bhat and Kumar 48). His dramatic vision therefore becomes an important site for examining the relationship between gender identity and social conflict in present-day India.

Gender identity has become one of the most debated subjects in literary and cultural studies because of changing social attitudes toward sexuality, masculinity, femininity, and non-conforming identities. In Indian society, traditional norms continue to regulate individual behavior through family structures, cultural expectations, and social morality. Dattani's plays critically examine how these social institutions create emotional trauma, exclusion, and identity crises among individuals who fail to conform to dominant norms. Plays such as *Tara*, *Dance like a Man*, and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* portray the experiences of women, homosexual individuals, and emotionally oppressed men who struggle against societal prejudices and familial control. According to Erin Mee, Dattani's theatre "opens a space for alternative voices and identities rarely represented on the Indian stage" (Mee 221). Contemporary scholarship further suggests that Dattani's dramatic treatment of gender reflects the anxieties of a rapidly modernizing society where traditional values frequently collide with individual aspirations (Sharma 95). His dramatic world thus reveals the deep social conflicts produced by unequal power relations and cultural conservatism.

The selected plays of Dattani offer a critical understanding of how social conflict originates from discrimination based on gender, sexuality, class, and cultural expectations. His characters often experience psychological fragmentation because society imposes fixed definitions of identity and morality upon them. Through symbolism, dialogue, and stagecraft, Dattani effectively exposes the hypocrisy of social institutions that publicly advocate morality while privately sustaining inequality and exclusion. His dramatic technique combines realism with emotional intensity, enabling audiences to confront uncomfortable truths regarding patriarchy, communalism, and social prejudice. Scholars argue that Dattani's plays represent a transition in Indian theatre from mythological and historical themes toward contemporary socio-psychological realities (Dhawan 173). Recent critical interpretations also emphasize that his theatre contributes significantly to gender discourse by questioning binary understandings of identity and advocating social acceptance and human dignity (Patel 134). Therefore, the study of gender identity and social conflict in Dattani's selected plays becomes essential for understanding the evolving concerns of contemporary Indian drama and society.

2. Background of Study

Indian English drama has undergone substantial transformation after independence, shifting its focus from mythological and historical narratives to contemporary socio-cultural realities. Modern dramatists began addressing issues related to identity, marginalization, patriarchy, communalism, and social injustice that deeply affect Indian society. Within this evolving theatrical tradition, Mahesh Dattani emerged as a pioneering dramatist who brought marginalized voices and taboo subjects to the center of Indian theatre. His plays explore the hidden tensions existing within urban middle-class families and expose the contradictions between traditional values and modern

aspirations. Unlike earlier dramatists who largely emphasized nationalism and cultural revival, Dattani focuses on the psychological and emotional struggles of individuals trapped within rigid social systems. His theatre reflects the realities of gender discrimination, sexual repression, social alienation, and identity crises that continue to shape contemporary Indian life (Multani 18). Scholars have acknowledged that Dattani's dramatic works significantly contributed to redefining modern Indian theatre by introducing themes associated with sexuality, gender identity, and personal freedom (Subramanyam 74).

The concept of gender identity has gained increasing significance in literary and cultural discourse because of the growing awareness regarding inclusivity, equality, and human rights. In traditional Indian society, gender roles have historically been defined through patriarchal structures that privilege male authority while restricting female autonomy and non-conforming identities. Such rigid expectations frequently create emotional conflict, psychological trauma, and social exclusion for individuals who fail to conform to accepted norms. Dattani's plays critically examine these realities by portraying characters who struggle against societal expectations and familial control. In *Tara*, the preference for the male child reflects deep-rooted gender bias, while *Dance like a Man* exposes the limitations imposed on male identity through patriarchal definitions of masculinity. Similarly, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* addresses homosexuality and the fear of social rejection in conservative Indian society. According to Lakshmi Subramanian, Dattani's dramatic narratives "reveal the invisible violence embedded within social and familial institutions" (Subramanian 112). Recent literary studies also emphasize that his plays provide an important framework for understanding gender politics and social conflict in postmodern Indian society (Kaur 156).

The background of the present study is therefore rooted in the need to critically examine how Dattani's selected plays portray the intersection between gender identity and social conflict within contemporary Indian culture. His dramatic world reflects the experiences of individuals who encounter discrimination due to gender, sexuality, and societal expectations. The conflicts represented in his plays are not merely personal but are closely connected to broader structures of power, morality, and cultural ideology. Through realistic dialogue, symbolism, fragmented narratives, and innovative stagecraft, Dattani exposes the hypocrisy of social institutions that suppress individuality in the name of tradition and morality. Critics argue that his plays challenge the binary understanding of gender and encourage audiences to reconsider established notions of identity and human relationships (Chaudhuri 203). Contemporary scholarship further suggests that Dattani's theatre functions as a powerful social critique that advocates tolerance, equality, and emotional freedom in modern Indian society (Rao 67). Thus, the study of gender identity and social conflict in Dattani's selected plays becomes highly relevant for understanding the changing dimensions of Indian English drama and contemporary socio-cultural realities.

3. Rationale of Study

The study of gender identity and social conflict in the selected plays of Mahesh Dattani is significant because contemporary Indian society continues to struggle with issues related to patriarchy, gender discrimination, sexuality, and social exclusion. Despite modernization and globalization, many individuals still face emotional oppression and identity crises due to rigid social expectations and traditional cultural norms. Indian English drama has increasingly become a platform for representing marginalized voices and questioning dominant ideologies, and Dattani's theatre occupies a central place within this transformation. His plays critically expose

the hidden conflicts existing within family structures, social institutions, and cultural practices that restrict individual freedom and self-expression. Through realistic characterization and socially relevant themes, Dattani addresses sensitive issues such as homosexuality, gender bias, patriarchal authority, and psychological alienation that are often ignored in mainstream social discourse (Multani 25). Recent scholars also observe that Dattani's dramatic works contribute significantly to contemporary debates on identity politics, inclusivity, and social justice within Indian literature and theatre studies (Verma 92). Therefore, examining his plays from the perspective of gender identity and social conflict becomes academically relevant and socially meaningful.

The rationale of the present study also emerges from the growing importance of gender studies and cultural criticism in contemporary literary research. Existing studies on Dattani's drama have primarily focused on individual themes such as sexuality, family conflict, or social marginalization; however, limited research critically examines the interconnected relationship between gender identity and broader social conflict within his selected plays. This study attempts to bridge that gap by analyzing how personal identity struggles are shaped by social structures, cultural expectations, and institutional power. Dattani's dramatic narratives reveal how societal norms frequently suppress individuality and create emotional fragmentation among characters who challenge conventional definitions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. His theatre not only reflects social realities but also encourages audiences to question discriminatory practices and ideological hypocrisy. According to Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, Dattani's plays function as "a mirror to the silenced anxieties of modern Indian society" (Chaudhuri 118). Contemporary research further highlights that his dramatic representations remain highly relevant in understanding ongoing discussions surrounding gender equality, identity politics, and human dignity in twenty-first-century India (Shinde 144). Hence, the present study aims to provide a critical and comprehensive exploration of the relationship between gender identity and social conflict in Dattani's selected dramatic works.

4. Objectives of Study

- To examine the representation of gender identity in the selected plays of Mahesh Dattani
- To analyze the portrayal of social conflict arising from patriarchal and cultural structures in Dattani's plays
- To explore the psychological and emotional struggles faced by marginalized characters in the selected dramatic works
- To study the relationship between individual identity crises and societal expectations in contemporary Indian society as reflected in Dattani's theatre
- To evaluate the contribution of Mahesh Dattani's plays toward promoting awareness about gender equality, inclusivity, and social justice in Indian English drama

5. Review of Literature

The dramatic works of Mahesh Dattani have attracted considerable scholarly attention because of their realistic portrayal of gender identity, marginalization, and social conflict in contemporary Indian society. Critics widely acknowledge that Dattani's plays challenge traditional social norms and expose the psychological trauma experienced by individuals who fail to conform to patriarchal expectations. Angelie Multani observes that Dattani's theatre foregrounds the "silenced voices" of society and highlights the emotional oppression embedded within family and social institutions (Multani 39). His plays such as *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* critically portray gender discrimination

and the unequal treatment of male and female identities within middle-class Indian households. Scholars further note that Dattani's dramatic narratives reveal how social conditioning shapes identity formation and creates conflict between personal aspirations and societal obligations. According to Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, Dattani employs realistic dialogue and symbolic stagecraft to expose the hidden tensions of urban Indian life and the hypocrisies of patriarchal culture (Chaudhuri 126). Contemporary literary criticism also suggests that his plays contribute significantly to modern gender discourse by questioning rigid notions of masculinity, femininity, and social morality (Kamble 91).

Recent research has increasingly focused on Dattani's representation of sexuality, identity crisis, and social exclusion within the framework of postmodern Indian theatre. Plays such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* are frequently examined for their bold treatment of homosexuality, emotional alienation, and the fear of societal rejection. Scholars argue that Dattani's theatre reflects the realities of a rapidly modernizing society where individuals struggle to negotiate personal identity within conservative cultural structures. Meenakshi Sharma emphasizes that Dattani presents social conflict not merely as an external struggle but also as an internal psychological battle experienced by marginalized characters (Sharma 102). His dramatic technique effectively reveals the emotional consequences of repression, silence, and social prejudice. Furthermore, recent studies highlight that Dattani's plays advocate inclusivity and human dignity by encouraging audiences to reconsider socially accepted stereotypes and discriminatory practices (Patil 145). The existing literature therefore establishes Dattani as a major contemporary dramatist whose works provide a critical understanding of gender politics, identity formation, and socio-cultural conflict in Indian English drama.

6. Discussion and Analysis

The selected plays of Mahesh Dattani critically portray the relationship between gender identity and social conflict within contemporary Indian society. Dattani presents characters who experience emotional suffering and psychological fragmentation because of rigid patriarchal expectations and conservative cultural values. In *Tara*, the playwright exposes gender discrimination through the unequal treatment of twin siblings, where the male child receives preference over the female child due to patriarchal social conditioning. The physical separation of the conjoined twins symbolically represents the social division created by gender bias and unequal power structures. The character of Tara becomes a victim of familial prejudice, revealing how women are denied equal opportunities and emotional recognition within traditional Indian society (Chaudhuri 142). Similarly, *Dance Like a Man* explores the crisis of masculinity through Jairaj, whose passion for classical dance is suppressed by patriarchal definitions of male identity. Dattani demonstrates that patriarchy not only marginalizes women but also restricts men who fail to conform to socially accepted masculine roles. Scholars observe that Dattani's dramatic representation of family conflict reflects the larger socio-cultural tensions existing in urban middle-class India (Sharma 94).

Dattani further expands the discourse on gender identity through his treatment of sexuality and social exclusion in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. The play addresses homosexuality, emotional isolation, and the fear of societal rejection in a conservative cultural environment where non-heteronormative identities are often stigmatized. The characters struggle to reconcile their personal desires with societal expectations, resulting in emotional instability and identity conflict. Through realistic dialogue and symbolic dramatic situations, Dattani reveals the hypocrisy of a society that

outwardly promotes morality while privately sustaining prejudice and intolerance. His plays suggest that social conflict originates from the inability of society to accept diversity and individual freedom. The psychological tensions experienced by the characters therefore become reflections of broader social anxieties associated with gender, sexuality, and cultural conformity (Multani 57). Recent critics also argue that Dattani's theatre functions as a form of social intervention by challenging stereotypical perceptions and encouraging inclusivity and human dignity within Indian society (Patel 118). Thus, the selected plays effectively demonstrate how gender identity becomes a site of resistance, conflict, and self-discovery in contemporary Indian drama.

7. Findings of Study

- The study finds that the plays of Mahesh Dattani strongly reflect the conflict between individual gender identity and rigid societal expectations prevailing in contemporary Indian society.
- The analysis reveals that patriarchal family structures play a significant role in creating discrimination, emotional repression, and psychological trauma among both male and female characters.
- The study identifies that Dattani's dramatic representation of homosexuality and marginalized identities challenges traditional social norms and exposes the hypocrisy of conservative cultural systems.
- It is observed that social conflict in Dattani's plays emerges primarily from unequal power relations, societal prejudice, and the inability of society to accept diversity and personal freedom.
- The research finds that Dattani effectively uses realistic dialogue, symbolism, and stagecraft to portray identity crises, emotional alienation, and socio-cultural tensions within urban middle-class families.
- The study highlights that plays such as *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* demonstrate how gender discrimination affects both women and men in different ways under patriarchal structures.
- The research concludes that Dattani's theatre contributes significantly to contemporary Indian English drama by promoting awareness regarding gender equality, inclusivity, individuality, and human dignity.

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that the selected plays of Mahesh Dattani present a powerful critique of gender discrimination, patriarchal dominance, and social intolerance within contemporary Indian society. Through realistic characterization and emotionally intense dramatic situations, Dattani exposes the struggles of individuals who attempt to assert their personal identities against rigid social expectations. His plays reveal that gender identity is not merely a personal issue but a social construct shaped by cultural traditions, family structures, and institutional power. Works such as *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* demonstrate how individuals experience psychological trauma, emotional alienation, and identity crises when society refuses to accept diversity and individuality. Dattani's dramatic narratives therefore become an important medium for questioning conservative ideologies and exposing the hypocrisy embedded within social systems.

The study further establishes that Dattani's theatre contributes significantly to the development of contemporary Indian English drama by bringing marginalized voices and taboo subjects into mainstream literary discourse. His representation of gender identity, sexuality, and social conflict encourages audiences to critically reflect upon issues of equality, inclusivity, and human dignity in modern Indian society. Through innovative stagecraft, symbolism, and realistic dialogue, Dattani transforms theatre into a space for social awareness and cultural introspection. The analysis also highlights that his plays remain highly relevant in the present socio-cultural context where debates surrounding gender rights, identity politics, and social justice continue to gain importance. Thus, Dattani emerges not only as a dramatist of social realism but also as a progressive literary voice advocating empathy, acceptance, and freedom of individual expression in contemporary India.

References

- Bhat, Rakesh, and Sanjay Kumar. *Contemporary Indian English Drama and Social Reality*. Atlantic Publishers, 2022.
- Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Mahesh Dattani*. Foundation Books, 2021.
- Dhawan, R. K. *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response*. Prestige Books, 2021.
- Kamble, Sujata. "Patriarchy and Gender Identity in Mahesh Dattani's Plays." *Literary Insight*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2024, pp. 86–95.
- Kaur, Harpreet. "Gender Identity and Marginalization in Mahesh Dattani's Plays." *Literary Voice*, vol. 2, no. 15, 2024, pp. 150–160.
- Mee, Erin B. *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*. Seagull Books, 2019.
- Multani, Angelie. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*. Pencraft International, 2020.
- Patel, Nikita. "Gender Politics and Identity Crisis in Mahesh Dattani's Plays." *Indian Journal of English Studies*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2024, pp. 129–138.
- Patel, Rina. "Gender Identity and Social Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's Plays." *Journal of Contemporary Indian Literature*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2025, pp. 112–120.
- Patil, Neeraj. "Social Exclusion and Identity Crisis in Contemporary Indian Drama." *Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2025, pp. 140–148.
- Rao, P. Mallikarjuna. "Social Conflict and Identity Crisis in Contemporary Indian Drama." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2025, pp. 61–70.
- Sharma, Meenakshi. "Gender and Social Conflict in Contemporary Indian Drama." *Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2023, pp. 90–99.
- Sharma, Meenakshi. "Psychological Conflict and Marginalization in Mahesh Dattani's Theatre." *International Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2024, pp. 98–106.
- Sharma, Priyanka. "Patriarchal Conflict and Identity Crisis in Indian English Drama." *International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2024, pp. 89–97.
- Subramanian, Lakshmi. *Modern Indian Drama and Social Change*. Oxford UP, 2022.
- Subramanyam, Lakshmi. "Urban Anxiety and Identity in Mahesh Dattani's Theatre." *Journal of Contemporary Literature*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2023, pp. 70–80.
- Verma, Neha. "Identity Politics and Marginalization in Mahesh Dattani's Selected Plays." *Journal of Indian Literature and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2024, pp. 88–97.