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## “WE” IN THE INDIAN MILIEU

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**Abstract:** The role of women in collective Indian psyche is an endless source of debates and discussions. Nevertheless, there is a yawning gap between perception and reality when it comes to the global image of Indian women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper strives to bring out general perception about women, their plight and struggle, their potential to emerge as the triumphant one through two genres: The first one the Radio play of Mahesh Dattani *Seven Steps Round the Fire* and the second one a film, Gauri Shinde’s (directorial) debut *English Vinglish*. The movie revolves around two distinct themes intrinsically woven together: the challenge confronted by the protagonist of the film Shashi, an ordinary Indian woman to balance between her different roles and facing disrespect for not being conversant in English. English, a language which the British Colonial masters have left as their legacy endangers Shashi’s image and self – respect. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a radio play first broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 9 January 1999, and performed later that year at the Museum Theatre at Chennai on 6 August, he puts the spotlight on yet another ‘invisible’ group, the hijras. The heroine of his play, Uma, finds her fate embroiled with the hijra community while investigating a murder. And while on the surface it may appear that they have very little in common, given that Uma belongs to the upper echelons of society, the play shows how hijras and women are not treated so very differently.

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The last few decades have witnessed a rapid transformation in Indian women. The change is obvious in all walks of their life. The Indian women are no longer the socio-economic prisoner leading a life of subjugation bound by their domestic obligations. They have come out of the shadows of their male counterparts with confidence. Of course time has changed, the societal values have changed, with which changed the need of the hour for Indian woman to face the world in her own terms. However, it remains to be seen whether our overall outlook towards women have really changed or the male domination continues to rule the roost in its different facades and facets.

Mahesh Dattani has been heralded as a beacon of hope for modern Indian theatre in English. Though very different from playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad in terms of thematic and formal considerations, Dattani shares with them a concern for the marginalized groups of society, be they women, children or homosexuals. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari observes that Dattani’s theatre deals with taboo subjects that should ideally not be heard or spoken about in traditional Indian families, highlighting such “fringe issues” in play after play (47), a fact the playwright has himself admitted: “I’m strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leitmotifs of my plays.” (Das 159). In the present paper, I shall try to look at the Woman as portrayed by Dattani in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*.

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* has its female protagonist, Uma Rao, a Sociology teacher at Bangalore University, investigating a murder in the hijra community. Being the wife of the Superintendent and daughter-in-law of the Deputy

Commissioner gives her hassle free access to the prison where Anarkali, a hijra, has been imprisoned for the murder of her ‘sister’ Kamala, a fellow hijra. Uma’s quest for the truth (the identity of the real murderer) is of course the pivotal point of the plot but Dattani is concerned with sensitizing his viewers to the abominable condition of the hijras, an objective realized through Uma’s voiceover which intersperses the narrative at regular intervals.

Uma, researching on caste and gender-based violence, allows herself to be object of Suresh’s whims, for an interesting though tragic irony. She lets herself be treated as a sex object, and does little to resist his attempts to control every aspect of her life, including deciding what lingerie she should wear to please him. But we must not be fooled by Uma’s submissive nature to Suresh’s blatant attempts at appropriating her personhood, for she has learnt to gain sanction to what she wants by giving in to the otherwise disappropriate whims of Suresh. She has thus learnt the rules of the game and the ways to use them to her advantage. For instance, she secures Suresh’s approval in pursuing her career by making him believe that she is at his mercy. She does not resist his attempts to dominate her but looks for the little gaps through which she can sneak in and fulfill her needs. Uma, then, is an interesting combination of docility and assertiveness as she plays the dual roles of victim and victimiser, of a woman who knows she is powerless but who uses every trick in the book to appropriate power when she can. A street-smart survivor, she pragmatically accepts the downside of being married to a man like Suresh in exchange for the social advantages of being his wife, advantages she never hesitates to use. The Uma we see in the confined space of her bedroom is not the Uma we see outside it, at the prison, at Champa’s house, at Mr.

Sharma's home or at Subbu's wedding ceremony. And yet, for all her privileged background, her scholarly pursuits, or even her attempt at playing detective, Uma is a powerless individual, particularly disadvantaged as a 'barren' woman. We are given to understand that it is her husband who is most likely the cause of their childlessness but she is unable to convince her husband to get a sperm count done, or prevent herself from being dragged to the doctor by her mother-in-law.

For Uma and Anarkali, their gender becomes their nemesis as the rather striking parallels between their lives show. In the opening scene of the play, when Uma visits Anarkali in prison the first time, Anarkali is mercilessly thrashed for being rude to Uma. The very next scene takes place in Uma's bedroom where she discusses her prison visit with Suresh. Uma may not be beaten up or forced to 'service' the inmates and policemen like Anarkali in prison but the immediate shift to the scene in her bedroom where her husband coldly dictates what she must wear underscores the similarity between the positions of the two women. The clever use of "A Hindi movie fight scene blaring from a TV set in the next room." (Dattani 9) in the background while Uma quietly consents to her husband's desires is suggestive of a violence of its own kind, a violence that completely erases a woman's right to choose, whether it is something as important as when she wants to make love or something as basic as the clothes she must wear to arouse her husband's desire. The bedroom, and by extension, her marriage itself, then is just another kind of prison, where Uma must 'service' her husband whenever he wants her to. So much for being a Sociology teacher at the university and the wife of a police superintendent, or for pursuing a "...paper on class-and-gender related violence"! (Dattani 12) Dattani's plays are always critical of the institution of marriage as illustrative of the fact that "It is within heterosexual relationships (prototypically, within marriage) that men's power over women has been most directly affirmed by the law as well as by custom and practice." (Cameron and Kulick 45), and Uma's marriage reinforces this observation brilliantly.

We see then that Uma, by virtue of being (labeled as) a childless woman, and Anarkali by virtue of her 'confused' gender as a hijra, shares a similar fate. While we might admire Uma's spunk and drive, even her status as an educated woman from a privileged socio-economic class cannot prevent her from being treated much the same as a 'hijra', as much as 'it' as the Anarkali she tried to distance herself from. She too must dance to the tunes of male authority when required, just as hijras are expected to sing, clap and

dance at the behest of respectable society, and then shunned at every turn.

In the end, there seems no hope for either of the two women given that Uma is not ready to turn her back on her marriage to free herself, let alone liberate the Anarkalis of the world. She remains firmly ensconced within her luxurious world where she is at least "allowed" to work and study, no matter if she must behave like a puppet to satisfy her husband's status and ego. As a woman, who is now labelled as 'barren', Uma is perhaps far more marginalized than the hijras Anarkali and Kamala. The duality in her attitude makes it impossible for her to achieve a feminist utopia where she will join hands with hijras like Anarkali through the institution of 'sisterhood' to challenge the men who relegate their status as human beings, as individuals, to that of a 'this thing' or an 'it'.

In the recent past the Indian Film Industry as a whole have moved away from the Bollywood stereotypes; the mushy storyline, group dance, singing and dancing around the trees. The directors have presented to the audience a range of versatile themes and many untold stories that have been till date kept as a taboo. And in this revolutionary change we cannot but acknowledge the contribution of the feminist directors of our country like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi, Gurinder Chadha and many more. The hard-hitting topics like domestic violence, atrocities on women, women trafficking, honour killing, suppressed sexuality, conditions of Indian widows, rights of women have been vividly dealt by stalwart filmmakers. Even the new generation directors are pacing up with women centric movies where the beautiful female leads do not need a muscular hero to be their bodyguard. Herein lies Gauri Shindhe's uniqueness. Her directorial debut *English Vinglish* takes the audience to the world of an ordinary Indian housewife Shashi and makes them the witness of her extraordinary journey in which she overcomes all the obstacles and eventually comes out as the winner. The issues like oppression of women, their real plight in their own family, and also the post colonial discrimination on the basis of English language literacy are so subtly touched upon in this film that it proved to be a highly acclaimed one by critics and was also able to win the hearts of millions of Indians.

Shashi, the protagonist of the film is seen to be very happy in her daily life. Her life centers round her husband Satish and her children. She plays all the conventional roles: that of a dutiful wife, of a devoted mother who accomplishes all the responsibilities from cooking to raising her children perfectly. But in between her days work she hardly finds any time for herself. As a part of a male dominating society Shashi

never questions any offensive behaviour she receives either from her husband or from her daughter. She accepts submissively her husband's expectations that she will wake up early in the morning to do all the household chores from making breakfast to make her children ready and after the whole day's hard work she will be equally willing to warm her husband's bed. She is continuously and openly criticised by her daughter and husband for not knowing how to speak English. The only individuality that she can express is her culinary proficiency by operating a small scale business of making and selling an Indian sweet called 'Laddoo.' This is the only thing she is appreciated for. However, Satish does not pay any attention to Shashi's success or appreciation that she receives for preparing such excellent sweets. He never becomes a part of her glory. When Shashi enthusiastically wants to share her happiness about the business, Satish curtly replies 'I'm busy right now...can we talk later please?' Are not these women oppression typical of all Indian societies where women are expected to sacrifice their dreams, their passions and ambitions for the whimsicality of their husbands, in-laws or for their family, as if giving up one's career or passion has never been an extraordinary task for a woman. Such sacrifices being so commonly practised by our women folk are now not at all treated as a coercive action. With this theme of oppression of women Gauri Shinde weaves very artistically another theme that is obsession of speaking English. Here the lens of kaleidoscope starts turning and with changing design the different facades of oppression is shown. Shashi gets continuously humiliated at every turn for not knowing English. Especially Satish openly teases Shashi for her linguistic incompetence and also Sapna's (Shashi's Daughter) unforgivable curtness in repetitively correcting her wrong pronunciation. For instances from the movie: 'Mom it is not jhaaz dance ..-it is jazz dance'. With this incessant harping on the same fact, it becomes a not so secret thing of shame for Shashi. Sapna feels immensely uncomfortable before her friend's mother and class teacher to present Shashi. In this context the young director and storywriter has shown us how still in this era of decolonization the legacy of speaking English creates difference among us. Indian people fought with their all might to get the freedom from the British but got shackled in British divide and rule policy in which only a Language played the most pivotal role. English Language has been able to divide Indian society in two linguistic communities: one who can speak in English and the others who cannot. Speaking English has become the symbol of cultural elitism. Here, the word 'culture' (notably one of whose most important components is 'communication') has been used in the sense as described in Edward Said's words.

'..."culture" means two things in particular. First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure.' (Edmund Said, pg xii)

To understand the pertinence of this scenario one can stride back to Indian History to find that how the British imperialism that entered the Indian soil in the disguise of merchants and fraudulently seized the power of monarchy to exploit our motherland as one of their colonies. The British invaders not only invaded the geographical territories of India but also the Indian psyche. Consequently the two hundred years of subjugation has resulted into cultural servility. In the name of intellectual uplifting of the 'natives' the colonial masters were able to sow the seeds of hatred among its own community on the basis of borrowed British culture. Those who could adopt this artificial culture were treated as the cream of the crop and others as the backward and not so presentable in their own society. The underlined conflict that emerges out of these conditions gives birth to the two linguistic communities. One that enjoys the superiority and feels that they have got the right to (if not intentionally) correct others or make fun of them for their linguistic shortcomings. The other community naturally suffers from the inferiority complex and feels themselves cornered and a misfit in the so-called aristocratic society. The set parameters of that so-called society force Sapna to refuse to take Shashi at the PTA. Similarly in the movie in context, the purported idea of cultural elitism has become so deep-rooted that even a daughter fails to behave respectfully with her mother. Instead of coming out of the shadow of the colonial masters the Indians fall prey to their glitterati. We cannot forget that Shashi lives in a society where all the important talks happen only in English. When Shashi asks her husband the reason of marrying a not so educated a girl like her, Satish admits that it is her physical beauty that hooked him. Satish is the prototype of those men who prefers physical bonding over sharing feelings or emotions. He overlooks Shashi's emotional need of a friend with whom she can share her feelings. Shashi in dejection retorts 'Talking to me is not important right? Oh I forget...' 'important talks' happen only in English' and Satish thinks 'Why waste time talking?'. So without wasting time Satish enjoys his marital rights of sexuality that is even on his own terms ignoring the fact that Shashi is too fatigued after the day's hard work.

The setting changes from the India to abroad .Shashi have to go, all alone, to New York to help her sister

for the marriage ceremony of her niece. After getting humiliated for her vain attempts to communicate in the foreign country she once noticed a billboard on bus advertising for an English course that guarantees fluency within four weeks. Shashi makes up her mind to join the class. There Shashi gets the exposure to a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment where all the people comes from different strata with only common interest to learn the English as the language that has become a global lingua franca. The constant humiliation from her family helps Shashi to tighten her jaws and also strengthens her determination to show the world her capabilities. Away from her family, away from the native land and away from her mundane daily duties Shashi for the first time gets the time to spare for herself only. She starts thinking about herself. She learns to reflect and to listen to her heart's content. While learning interpersonal communication she also learns the 'intrapersonal communication' (Minakshi Raman, pg 10) .She introspection transforms her into a new personality .The beautiful background score aptly hints us about the transition of an ordinary, submissive housewife to a confident, carefree and a determined one:

'What a feeling! / I walk carefree! / Don't ask me to stop / Just let me go on/I have no fear / I have no worry / I hope I don't lose my way / If I do...may the road find me! / Don't make me stop! / I've changed my point of view / Everything around is new /... Extraordinary!/ This passion!/ Morning noon!/ Extraordinary!/ This passion!'

The learning English here becomes the magic wand with which she becomes the Cinderella on her own terms. Shashi surprises her family members and the

assembled guests with her short speech on marriage fully in English just like Cinderella astonished everyone in the Royal Castle with her charming beauty and vivacious performance. With her brief but lucid speech she gives an important lesson to the world that married couple should help each other to feel equal.

'Sometimes...married couple don't even know how the other is feeling.... It means marriage is finished? /No That is the time you have to help yourself / Nobody can help you better than you. / If you do that...you will return back feeling equal. /Your friendship will return back...your life will be beautiful/.....Family...never be judgmental!'

A lesson indeed! This self-explanatory speech is at first a lesson to the male dominating society to tell them if women are not superior to them they are not inferior also and definitely at par. On the other hand it is a tight slap on the chauvinist ego of her husband. Satish realizes his mistakes and regretfully asks if she still loves him. Our fairy tale advances towards the happy ending hinting at the reunion of lead pair. Shashi emerges triumphantly earning respect from all around her as a doting mother and loving wife. Like a phoenix, from the queen of hearth Shashi evolves to be the queen of millions hearts. **English Vinglish** truly turns to be a vivid kaleidoscopic vision where the oppression of women and obsession for English merge in an intrinsic pattern leaving scopes for more debates and discussions for the eons to come.

Thus, in Uma and Sashi we find a woman who finds their liberation within the confinements of marriage and yet attain liberation in their own terms.

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