

Depiction of Contemporary India in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

Dr. Reema Kharabe

Mahila Mahavidyalaya,
Nagpur.

HHH

Abstract

Sahitya Academy Awardee Mahesh Dattani points out the grave issues India is currently dealing with. The delicate matters of communal disharmony, child abuse, gender- discrimination, patriarchy, homosexuality, issues of eunuchs, women's subjugation and many more are bared open in Dattani's play empathetically. The plays are living document of Indian society.

Keywords: disharmony, child abuse, discrimination, homosexuality, subjugation

Mahesh Dattani is the most acknowledged dramatist when it comes to the portrayal of contemporary India in English literature. Dattani has taken the pen to point out the grave issues India has been currently dealing with. His efforts have been honoured by bestowing on him the prestigious 'The Sahitya Academy Award' for his Final Solutions and Other Plays in 1998. He has touched many sensitive issues, which have not been handled by any other dramatist. Dattani has bared open the delicate matters of communal disharmony, child abuse, gender- discrimination, patriarchy, homosexuality, issues of eunuchs, women's subjugation and many more empathetically. Dattani's plays are living document of Indian society where we cross these issues every now and then.

In an interview with Anita Nair, Dattani says, "Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe" (Nair: n.p). Dattani further says, "I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium" (Nair: n.p). Dattani takes the platform of Indian English Drama to stage the follies and problems of contemporary Indian society and makes people introspect and change the mindset regarding the invisible issues to make this society a better place to live and prosper. Dattani in the Preface to Collected Plays says, "I know that I have a lot to say and am probably not saying it well enough. But my characters have a lot to say too, and they seem to be doing rather well at having their say" (Dattani: xi). By employing his voice to speak to the miseries of people John McRae says, "Dattani is the voice of India now" (MacRae: 58)

Dattani's first play, *Where There's a Will* emphasizes the impact of patriarchal domination in Indian upper class

family. The patriarch, headstrong Hasmukh Mehta is a business tycoon who tries to control the fate of his family members by keeping them out of inheritance of money and property in his death-will, which is revealed after his death. His family consists of a useless son Ajit, cunning daughter-in-law Preeti, docile wife Sonal and Mistress Kiran. His mistress is the trustee of his money and she plays an important role in uniting the family by sorting out their problems. The remarks about Hasmukh by the family members annoy his ghost, which creates humour in the play. The play projects the themes of patriarchal domination, adultery of man, subjugation and self-assertion of women.

Dance Like a Man is a play of two Bharatnatyam dancers Jairaj and Ratna. The aristocratic patriarch father Amirtlal Parekh devastates Jairaj's career. Amritlal Parekh helps Ratna to promote her career on the condition of destroying Jairaj's dancing career. Jairaj is victim of gender stereotype and Ratna of her own ambition and the patriarchal social set up. Their marital and professional life is destroyed by the norms and codes of conduct of the society. They devote their life for the art of dancing and on this path they have martyred their first child Shankar and now they are trying to build their own daughter's Lata's career. The play projects the themes of patriarchal domination and assertion of women.

Tara is a play of discriminative life of a girl child in Indian society. Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins, Surgically separated after birth giving the third leg to the boy child making Tara crippled for life. Tara's mother Bharti and grandfather with the mute agreement of her father Mr. Patel make this decision. Tara fights till the end for asserting her identity but dies gradually when she comes to know the reality that the source of discrimination is her mother. The major themes in this play are gender discrimination, girl child neglect and male domination in the patriarchal social setup.

Bravely Fought the Queen depicts the three generations of women as the victim of patriarchy. Baa is the victim of her husband's cruel intentions. Dolly and Alka are the subjugated and oppressed wives of Jiten and Nitin, where

Jiten is cruel and adulterous, Nitin is a homosexual, Both Jiten and Nitin, deceive their wives. Daksha is a spastic daughter of Dolly and Jiten, born prematurely due to physical beating by Jiten on the womb of Dolly. The play deals with the themes of male domination, victimization of women and homosexuality.

Final Solutions is a play on the backdrop of communal violence. It is a play where we find traditionality vs modernity, communalism vs rationalism. We find the Gandhi family in the midst of the chaos of past and a quest to emerge out of it with clarity of thoughts and resolved prejudices. The family of Ramnik Gandhi gives shelter to the Muslim boys Babban and Javed when there is riot outside and they are the accused. The liberal minded Ramnik who at last unveils the misdeed done by their forefathers transforms hatred of the Muslims in the mind of Hardika, his mother. Hardika is an oppressed wife of Hari and is subjected to physical tyranny by her husband. Aruna, wife of Ramnik is a staunch religious women and Smita is modern girl of liberal ideology and friend of Babban and Javed. The play projects the cultural difference, practices and prejudices from past and present which reveals the tension among the two communities and questions whether the wrongs done by both the communities can ever be reinstated. The themes of male domination, communalism, riots, religious conservative attitude are prominent in the play.

Do the Needful is a radio play for BBC, as Sally Avens puts it as an "unconventional romantic comedy" (Avens: 115), is a play accounting the middle way of the modern couple breaking the norms of traditional marriage and molding it to their convenience. Alpesh, a Gujrati boy loves Trilok and Lata, a Kannada Brahmin girl, loves a Muslim boy, who is also a terrorist-Salim, which is totally unacceptable to their respective family. Both develop a plan to satisfy their needs by marrying each other. The play depicts the homosexual traits of Alpesh and his identity crisis in this homophobic world. He finds perfect veil to hide his identity in guise of marriage with Lata shunning the institution of marriage of this patriarchal social set up. The play projects the themes of homosexuality, patriarchal domination, and women's assertion.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is a play on the theme of homosexuality. The play is about a gay couple Kamlesh and Prakash where Kamlesh has accepted his identity as a homosexual whereas Prakash has not come out and wants to move out of the relationship to project himself as a straight man. He gets engaged to Kamlesh's sister Kiran and is planning to marry her. There are other characters

like Deepali who is a lesbian, Sharad and Ranjit who have accepted themselves as a homosexuals and Bunny who is a gay but has a family for the outside world. In the climax the real Prakash and the relationship between Kamlesh and Prakash is revealed to Kiran and Prakash becomes victim of his own uncertain identity. This play is a bold in theme and raises the issue of acceptance of homosexuality as a normal identity.

Seven Steps Around the Fire is a play first aired as Seven Circles Around the Fire for BBC radio, is a story of Uma who is the protagonist of the play and also a research scholar. Her research was about the gender related violence and during her investigations, she finds herself into the whirlpool of murder mystery of a beautiful hijra Kamla, which she solves in the end. Kamla had been burnt alive by the order of minister Mr. Sharma as his son Subbu had married Kamla, a 'hijra', secretly. A fellow eunuch Anarkali was charged of the crime. But at last at the marriage ceremony of Subbu, he himself discloses the matter and shoots himself with the gun. Eunuchs faced the victimization at the hands of society, police and jurisdiction, and are denied justice during their life and even after their death. Thus, the play portrays the miserable life, problems and expectations of Hijra community. The theme of victimization of eunuchs, identity crisis and assertion of women are main themes in this play.

Thirty Days in September is a play, which addresses the reality of childhood sexual abuse in the Indian society. This play was commissioned by RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest) a support group. It is based on the real-life experiences of the victims of child sexual abuse. It is the story of Mala and her mother Shanta, both are the victims of child sexual abuse by the same person who happens to be the real brother of Shanta. The play is shrouded by the silence, which is maintained to cover the victimization due to the stigma attached to it. With the help of Deepak Mala's boyfriend and the psychotherapy, Mala comes out of her traumatic past and fights against her oppressor, supports her mother after her revelation of abused past and regains her normal life.

Dattani's dramas are the sheer portrayal of Indian society, reflecting it with the authenticity as it is. The adherence to express the difficulties and miseries of people and their overall strength to combat the oppression against the societal norms become the theme of all his plays. The issues are appropriately addressed and impactfully conveyed through his plays. Alka Tyagi expresses Dattani's art of writing by saying, "Naturalism is the expression that comes to mind when one reflects on the

plays of Mahesh Dattani. The subjects of his plays not only reflect life but they deal with life head on. Gay relations, communal violence, human relations and the ordinary, untouched, untaught conflicts between son and father, husband and wife, lovers etc are tackled with a skilled frankness..." (Tyagi: 119).

Dattani does not provide a remedy to the problems faced by the people but instead makes them aware of the problems, which are covered under the canopy of social norms and acceptability. He uncovers the social unrest and taboo issues and puts them in front of people to decide and change their attitudes and bring about a change in social acceptance and equality leading towards a peaceful life. Jeremy Mortimer observes that, "Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions. And by revealing the complexity, he makes the world a richer place for all of us" (Mortimer: viii).

Dattani through his drama has painted the dreadful picture of India. The authentic portrayal of women, homosexuals, eunuchs and small children's life is aptly portrayed through his social plays. Dattani portrays the subjugated condition of women and their will power to assert their identity, the identity crisis of homosexuals

and eunuchs and their unequal status in the society. Dattani also portrays the abused life of small children especially a girl child who is discriminated and sexually, emotionally abused in the society. Dattani through his plays exposes the reality of this marginalized group in the society and compels us to think about the gloomy situation of the society and introspect our codes of conduct, which needs amendment for the secure future of the mankind.

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