



Mahesh Dattani: the Valiant Voice for the Voiceless

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani is an eminent playwright, director and writer. He has enormous contribution in Indian English literature. He is well known for his straightforward approach of writing and boldness in selecting subject matters for his plays. Dattani deals with the contemporary issues, the conflict between tradition and modernity. He is awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for his play the Final Solutions and Other Plays. He speaks for the marginalized people. He has raised his strong voice against the oppressive patriarchal systems and gender discrimination. He speaks openly about gender and LGBTQ issues. The themes and subject matters of Dattani's works are very relevant in the modern times, these are authentic that's why his works are well accepted to the readers. He shows courage in dealing with the taboo things of the society. His straightforward approach and daring attitude towards dealing with these sensitive issues give him more popularity in Indian English Literature. Dattani has enriched Indian drama by choosing prohibited subjects like homosexuality, marginalization, communal dispute, fragility of human relationships, child abuse, gender discrimination and marginalization of women in family and society. In this paper there will be a detailed discussion of some of his works which are precious literary pieces in Indian English drama and Literature.

Keywords: sensitive, Indian, drama, torture, discrimination, social, malicious, taboo, marginalized, oppression, subjugation

1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani deals with poignant societal issues with the mastery of his language and writing style. His use of fractured and non-linear narratives, symbolism, his timing, silence and use of chorus enhance his dramas and much more acceptable to his audience. He combines English with Hindi and colloquial languages which make his Indian English dramas more comfortable for the readers. All the characters are portrayed vividly and authentically. Their psychological conditions are skillfully presented to the audience. Through his sympathetic and sensible mindset the marginalized section of the society get voice to express their suppressed emotions and hidden invisible issues of the society become exposed to the public eye. His expertise in the stage craft makes his writing visual, vibrant and ready for performance. His dexterous writing enriches modern Indian English drama to a great extent.

2. Literature Review

- **Dance like a Man (1989):** the drama deals with the theme of gender bias and the compelling of the performance of gender roles in the patriarchal Indian society. Jairaj is the protagonist of the drama who is devoted to Bharatnatyam, a popular Indian dance form performed by the

Devdasis to worship God. Jairaj's father Amritlal Parekh is a strict patriarch who never allows Jairaj to involve in this performing art. He tries his utmost to demoralize Jairaj to leave this womanly act. He even conspires with Ratna, his daughter –in –law to demoralize her husband to stop dancing. Jairaj wants to grow his hair like Guruji to act Abhinayamore appealing but Amritlal rebukes him for such womanly gesture. Ratna also supports her father in-law for her own profit. She is an ambitious dancer. Here in this drama Jairaj is not a failure dancer but it is the oppressive patriarchal society which fails to flourish the inner talent of a gifted human being. The narrow mindset of the patriarchal society judges and dictates its merciless rules and regulations only by the external identity of a human being not by his or her inner potentials. Such society cannot produce a well developed human resource rather it through its dictatorship can produce depressed traumatized human being like Jairaj Parekh who is the innocent victim of the cruel conspiracy of his own dominant and domineering father and envious life partner. In the tyrannical patriarchal society not only women but men are also brutally subjugated if they are not fit to follow the certain codes of conduct of the power lust dictators of the male dominant society. It also displays excessive parental control over the children which hinder their healthy progress as fully developed human beings.

- **Tara: A Play in Two Acts (1990):** Dattani's Tara is an Indian English drama dealing with the theme of gender discrimination in a society which strictly follows the biased patriarchal mindset. Tara and Chandan are twins born with a third leg. The family has decided to provide Chandan with the third leg although Tara had more claim of this leg as the blood flows to the leg directly from her body. The family, the doctor and the mother Bharati all have participated in the heinous crime and deprive Tara from her own limb and fundamental right only to get a healthy male child. Not only by men but patriarchal brutal concepts become stronger with the support of some women who actively participate in the execution of the ideals. Female body or Tara's body is controlled and dominated and objectified in this drama. From her birth she is a victim of domestic violence and patriarchal dominating mindset. The word Tara means vibrant, shining and vivacious. Tara in the play is full of optimism and emotionally strong despite her physical disability. The male dominated society decides a girl child's existence. Tara's untimely death is due to the relentless activity on her existence by her own people. Chandan suffers from lifelong guilt for his sister. "Twinkle Tara: a Play in Two Acts," is a play frantically outlined by Chandan as a tribute to his diseased sister, Tara. Both the siblings live with incompleteness of their existences – Chandan lacks emotional wholeness while Tara suffers from physical incompleteness, denied basic right. Both of them live fragmented, cursed lives without fulfillment. Denying from leg to Tara also symbolizes denying female progression and freedom by the society and to make her disable, dependent and to compel her to remain in the domestic sphere and to live a life devoid of out worldly communication or empower her with her self- identity. It reflects the vivid picture of women subjugation in the Indian society. Here in this play Chandan escapes London to run away from conscience but fails deadly. His memory and guilt consciousness do not leave him even in the foreign country. The parents embody the hypocrisy of the educated society who in the modern time also discriminate between son and daughter and prefers male child. These parents are not a peaceful shelter and immense source of love and affection for their children rather they are curse for any child's life and it is better to be orphan rather than have any parent like them. They fail completely to provide their children happiness, peace, love and completeness. They make their existences life in death, miserable and hellish. Bharati protects Tara but destroys her .Later

becomes guilt conscious, remorseful and mentally unstable on the contrary her husband remains distant and silent acknowledging the whole truth. The drama also questions unethical medical practices while doing the surgery. When science and technology disregard conscience and ethics it becomes horrible for the human society.

- **Bravely Fought the Queen (1991):** This is a powerful literary piece of work written by the renowned Indian dramatist, Mahesh Dattani. It deals with several social malicious issues like patriarchal control, gender discrimination, Oedipus complex, homosexuality, marginalization of women etc which pathetically disrupt human lives. Baa is the old matriarch of the family who herself is the victim of patriarchal dominance. Her husband used to torture her and had prevented her from singing. She spent most of her life with her two children Jiten and Nitin. Baa prefers Nitin more and they have a more affectionate bond than normal mother son bonding. Both of them have similarities and psychological attachment. Baa keeps distance from Jiten as he bears resemblance of her cruel husband. She uses to control both her sons to such an extent that it hinders their marital lives. Dolly, Jiten's wife is an innocent victim of the patriarchal cruelty. Jiten has no regards for her rather he uses to beat her for no matter. Dolly has to stay in a stressful marital life. Jiten takes Dolly as granted and treats her as an object for sensual gratification. He himself is disloyal towards his wife and having multiple affairs outside. She delivers a premature girl- child Daksha who is both mentally and physically disabled. Baa and Jiten both are responsible for this mishap. Jiten beats Dolly mercilessly doubting her chastity and Baa provokes him. Both Dolly and Daksha are the miserable victims of Baa and Jiten's cruelty and inhumane treatment. Dolly's mother also had to experience such tragic incident in her life and was insulted as a whore by her second spouse. Alka, Nitin's wife is more vulnerable victim of Nitin and Praful's conspiracy. Her step brother Praful and her husband have homosexual relationship with each other. Praful has willingly fixed the marriage for his own shrewd motive. Baa knows about Nitin's physical orientation and she has advised her favorite, Nitin not to be a parent. So, Alka is childless. Alka is treated as a commodity by her husband and is maltreated by both Jiten and Nitin. Nitin can leave her for the sake of his family. Her present state is the outcome of the constipation and manipulation of the narcissist relatives. Realizing all the facts and betrayal Alka uses to intoxicate herself to escape from the real pathetic condition and the unbearable torment. Her marriage and her life is as if a joke to the society. Both the sisters are entangled in respect less and trustless marriages. They are surviving life- in- death situations. Their lives are cursed and existences become valueless. Praful is a power lusty and lustful person in the drama who with his shrewdness arranges marriages of his two step sisters to the Tridevi family hiding his father's real identity. He becomes the trustee of Tridevi family's handicap heir, Daksha. He goes to the extreme for his material and physical gain playing psychological games and manipulations to other people and gaining their trust for his own profit.
- **On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998):** is a brilliant drama written by Dattani. It deals with the theme of homosexuality, hypocrisy, revelation existential crisis of the homoerotic people. The play articulates about a homosexual community of Mumbai. The host Kamlesh with some of his prosperous gay friends in his flat in Mumbai discloses a personal secret truth of his life. He has a homosexual relationship with Prakash(Ed) but after their break up Prakash is going to marry Kamlesh's sister, Kiran. Prakash is willing to carry on the relationship under the disguise of a heterosexual husband of Kiran. The play exposes the hypocrisy, the fragility of

human emotions and the existential crisis of the homosexual people in Indian society, their constant humiliation and no acceptance in the society. Bunny and Ranjit are two other homoerotic friends who are dealing with the same difficulties in life; they are also entangled in double standard existences. The society mocks them as pervert and abnormal. The homosexual people often go for heterosexual marriages to hoodwink the people about their true nature and therefore perpetually bind in loveless marriages. They experience psychological alienation, guilt-consciousness and staying with constant emotional conflict with a person of different sexual orientation, thus, making lives terrible for both of them. Only in the drama, Sharad is bold enough to reveal his gay identity and Deepali is also confident with her lesbian orientation and both of them can express their truth fearlessly to the world. There is a wedding ceremony held outside their flat which clearly presents the stark contrast in the Indian society where the heterosexual relationships are celebrated majestically on the contrary homoerotic relationships are condemned ruthlessly.

- **30/Thirty Days in September (2001):** reveals the harsh truth of incest, sexual molestation, and a brutal incident of child abuse of Mala Khatri. She is abused physically by her maternal uncle. It is the mother's silence which has destroyed her own child. Mahesh Dattani says to Anitha Santhanam : **"It's the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like in this case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It's the silence that makes the abused feel betrayed."** Shanta uses to get financial gain from her brother which has shut her mouth so tightly. She is like a pimp being bribed by the customer to make her own child a vulnerable sex object for her brother's lust. Dattani expresses to Lakshmi Subramanian: **"Though sexual abuse is at the core of my play, the mother-daughter relationship is equally important. The main protagonist, who has suffered at the hands of her uncle, feels a deep sense of betrayal that her mother did not stop the abuse and failed in her role as protector"** (133). Mala is not physically molested by her uncle but also psychologically and emotionally raped by her mother. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri has aptly points out : **"Child sexual abuse spans a range of problems, but it is this complicity of the family through silence and a lack of protest that is the ultimate betrayal for the abused"** (73).
- **Seven Steps around the Fire (1998):** is another striking creation of Dattani. The drama discusses the pitiful plight of the Eunuchs or Hijras in Indian society. Dattani here questions the sole idolatry of the stereotypical heterosexual marriage. Eunuchs are looked down upon by the society. Their existences are cursed and wretched. The eunuchs are called "dogs", "castrated degenerate men" (Dattani,10). Marriage and child birth are exclusively denied to them on the contrary their blessings showered to others on these occasions are considered highly auspicious by the society. The plot revolves around Kamala, a young beautiful eunuch who is murdered brutally after her secret marriage to Subbu, the son of Mr. Sharma, a dominant political minister. Uma Rao, the daughter of the Vice Chancellor of the Bangalore University and the wife of the Chief Superintendent Suresh Rao, investigates the heinous crime done to Kamala. Mr. Sharma is the main culprit of Kamala's assassination but the police arrest Anarkali, an innocent hijra as a suspect although knowing the real truth. Anarkali and Champa remain silent out of fear—"They have no voice." (Dattani,42) . Anarkali is severely maltreated in the jail and being beaten up violently. The power politics suppressed the innocent victims. The eunuchs are doubly ostracized one by nature and the other by human beings. The

transgenders belong to the segregated minority community and they have to struggle a lot to regain their self-esteem in the violent society.

- **Final Solutions (1993):** is about the Hindu –Muslim communal riot in the 1990s in India. The setting is a Gujrati family. The drama is rich in narrative, use of memory and flash backs, non-linear storyline. In the ongoing communal riot of Gujrat two Muslim young men, Javed and Bobby trespass the house of Ramnik and Aruna. Their daughter Smita is talking to Tasneem over the telephone about the bombing in her hostel. Ramnik gives shelter to Bobby and Javed from the enraged Hindu mob. Despite the Hindus' hostile behavior to him due to protecting the Muslims, Ramnik talks to the two youths politely and treats them with hospitality. Smita knows these young men. Bobby is her ex-lover but because of their caste differences they have not continued the relationship. Javed, Tasneem's brother is involved with a Muslim terrorist organization and posses a very rude behavior. Daksha/Hardila, Ramnik's mother was very fond of singing in her youth and had a cordial friendship with Zareen, a Muslim girl with the same passion but unfortunately their ways parted due to societal and religious restraints. Bobby, Tasneem's fiancé now speaks of communal harmony holding a Hindu God in the temple despite Smita's objection.

3. Methodology

This research undergoes qualitative textual analysis and close reading of all the texts. The interpretative, descriptive- analytical approach helps to keenly comprehend the unique features of the plays. The interdisciplinary research methodology amalgamating feminist, queer, psychological, trauma, postcolonial, and subaltern theoretical perspectives have been used to scrutinize the demonstrations of hegemony and marginalization of a deprived section of people in the society in the selected plays of the appealing modern Indian English dramatist Mahesh Dattani. The secondary sources like critical essays, scholarly articles and interviews on Dattani and his dramas adjoin more enrichment and value of this research work.

4. Theoretical Approaches

- **FEMINIST THEORY:** This theory is used in Dattani's plays to show the marginalization of women, suppression of their desires and dreams. The patriarchal society dominates their existences making them silent and voiceless. Gender discrimination is the most common theme practiced in the patriarchal society where male child always get priority and girls negligence – **Tara**. Forcefully confine them in the household and objectifying them and sometimes insulting them for their failure to bear child (Alka).
- **Queer Theory:** Homosexuality is condemned and hetero sexuality is celebrated in the society. Therefore marginalizing the homoerotic people and treat them as pervert or abnormal and bestow them forced shameful existences- this malicious practice of the society is shown in **30/Thirty Days in September** and **Bravely Fought the Queen**.
- **Subaltern Studies / Marginality Theory:** Eunuchs and Muslims are treated as minority section of the society and they never come in the mainstream discourse therefore making them Subaltern-**Seven Steps around the Fire** and **Final Solutions**.
- **Postcolonial Theory:** Post partition communalism, communal riots and the activities and violence of the religious fanatics are shown vividly in **Final Solutions**.

- **Trauma Theory:** Unexpressed trauma, silence, withdrawal and muteness are shown in the marginalized characters' psychological state and behavioral expressions.
- **Disability Studies:** **Tara** is an innocent victim of the patriarchal atrocity and her physical disability and subsequent psychological trauma is the consequence of the inhumane torture executed on her by the strict followers of patriarchy. Daksha in **Bravely Fought the Queen** is also a physically and mentally disabled child.

5. Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani through his vivid picturization of the predominant, invisible and malicious social issues makes his readers aware of these social injustices. He with his expertise in characterization and masterful stagecraft techniques make the dramas real like and authentic. His indomitable voice and courageous spirit have proficiently deal with the sensitive, taboo things of the society making the oppressed, marginalized people aware of their fundamental rights and have inspired them to live in the world with dignity.

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