



Volume: 2, Issue: 8, 388-390
Aug 2015
www.allsubjectjournal.com
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979
Impact Factor: 3.762

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Gender Bigotry and Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian drama has made use of innovations and experiments both in terms of themes and techniques. On the one hand, it has used history, myth, folklore and philosophies (such as existentialism and absurdism); on the other hand, it has employed shifting temporal settings, dream sequences, masks and voice-overs. It has not only assimilated the elements of Indian theatre tradition but also borrowed from the modern western dramatists such as Bertolt Brecht, Jean Paul Satre, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. Thus it has emerged as an innovative phenomenon. It has also attracted considerable critical attention and as a result a good deal of work has been done on it. The critical scholarship as of now leaves, however, a lot to be desired, as there are many gaps yet to be filled. Critics and scholars have generally looked at Indian drama from conventional points of view. But Indian drama in its present shape and output calls for fresh critical analysis in the light of modern literary theory.

Keywords: Transgender Hajira Cultural Violence Prejudice Homosexuality

1. Introduction

Drama is a display of emotions, a representation of relationships and the portrayal of the different phases of human life. It sketches different personalities and represents a wide variety of emotions through the different characters. Drama offers an opportunity to the dramatist to have a direct communication with the audience who used to give immediate response after watching a live performance on stage. Through the form of drama, human sensibility, socio-political issues, family concerns, historical incidents and much more can be presented in an effective manner. This genre is considered as a most entertaining and enlightening sources from ages.

We must definitely add the name of Mahesh Dattani in the Indian English drama as it attained its independent identity with the plays of Dattani who originally writes in English only. He became the first Indian playwright in English to receive the Sahitya Academy Award in 1988. His works has been divided into Stage plays, Radio plays and Screen plays. This paper focuses on the gender bigotry revealed in most of his plays.

In general, womanhood is crowned in two ways that is as motherhood and wifehood but men look at this crown not as a boon but as a curse. Mostly women are the suffers in the hands of custom which says that women are inferior to men or subordinate to men in terms of father, brother, husband and son. Women are treated as pawns in the hands of men and they consider women to be an inanimate object and name the object as subordinate. Sonal is the only character in the play *Where There is a Will* and she is suppressed and dominated throughout the play by her husband. Hasmukh hates his wife from his core of heart whereas Sonal consider her husband as a living and take care of him. The helplessness of a girl child in Indian society is depicted in the play *Tara*. Dattani has shown it clearly that whenever the choice comes between male and female, it is the male who is chosen and women play second fiddle to man. Women oppression is not only found on lower level but also to the women in rich families. Women are trapped by birth. She is traditionally bound, organized and manipulated by patriarchal in all age. The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* dramatizes the emptiness and shame in the lives of its cloistered women and self-indulgent' unscrupulous men, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception and hypocrisies.

Dattani not only talks about the suppressed women but also women of modern times who are becoming more and more free spoken and willing to express their inclination openly as we can see in the play *Where There is a Will*. Preeti is a modern woman with negative thoughts who wants emancipation and money in her hands to lead a life according to her own desire. Whereas we have Kiran the other 'new women' in this play with positive thoughts. She is the mistress of Hasmukh who is an educated, smart, shrewd, calculating, worldly wise and a sharp business executive in Hasmukh's company. Uma in the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* is the mouthpiece of Dattani who dominates the whole play. Dattani perfectly present his modern

woman Uma who perfectly manages her family, relationship, studies and also voluntarily comes forward to fight for the justice for the transgender for whom not even a single soul comes forward for their rescue speaks to her husband when he fails to co-operate and fulfill the dreams in her dance life.

In modern India the minds of people has been set with the false believe that homosexuality is a modern phenomenon. The increase in number of homosexuals is viewed as a modern decline. Homosexuality is a romantic fantasy as one can say it is a sexual attraction between the members of the same-sex or gender. The view about homosexuality as sin, crime and pathology has been shifted to a normal sexuality in the late 20th century. Gay faces many hurdles as compare to the normal person. They have to be very conscious in the outside world, difficult to do what they want, problem of maintaining their relation openly etc. It is only Dattani who brings a drastic change in the Indian English drama by openly talking about Homosexuals in his plays *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful* depicts the pathetic gay characters who suffer throughout their life.

Dattani is a writer who always pushes the invisible issues forward so that it can be visible to the people and they must face this horrifying reality and agree that such issues are taking place in their own country. Existence of homosexuals in nook and corner continues for many centuries. Initially they hid themselves and felt ashamed of being born as gay. Later on they started moving outside and make their own group where they encourage each other and boost up themselves to lead their own life. Such things have been exposed fabulously by Dattani with the help of his effective weapon that is theatre. He introduces the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* which is the first play to portray a homosexual in a sympathetic role. Dattani consider Nitin as just a start and keep on discussing about such people in his many plays with the hope that among his hundred viewers at least ten will turn back and see the root cause of gay people's suffering and change their views about them.

Dattani introduces the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* where he only talks about gays and lesbians feeling and pressure that they undergo in the society. This is Dattani's one of the best and most loved by him. Each and every character wants to be totally free from the suffocation, frustration and isolation. Though they display themselves euphoric outwardly, yet inwardly they are hollow and fed up with this sort of life. As Ed expresses his desire to live and says "Where do I begin? How do I begin to live? Will you help me? What makes a Man a Man (MNM ACT I 12). It recalls Virginia Woolf's famous lines 'Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged but a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope. In this drama also, we rarely see the truth in the beginning of the play later in the 'face' and the 'dress' of the characters speak about themselves. Dattani through this character explains the truth to the audience that how the norms of society for the mankind are strong and when the homosexuals are unable to adopt it they decide to kill themselves.

It is not only the society but also the deity places like church where they won't allow them inside as they consider them as carnal. Dattani raise his voice for them and urges the people to change their ideas and join hands with him to give a better world for the gay people to survive. *Do the needful* is a radio play and an unconventional romantic comedy where the hero of the play is a homosexual and has a strong relationship with Trilok and which is not even known to his parents.

Homosexuals always has a conflict between an individual self and the collective (society) self. The individual self has a lot of inclination and tries to come out from the vicious circle of the collective self to fulfill it. All humans are blessed with free will but the society stands as a barrier to make this possible. This sort of feeling is felt by the character Alpesh also in this play.

Dattani is the first or the only one to write a play which fully deals with the life of eunuch community and their culture from the beginning to end. Through this play, Dattani manifests the conflict, anguish, insecurities, fear, frustration and pain of the hijras that they have to face in the society. Eunuchs are a segregated community who has built up their own cosmos because they know that there is no life for them in a common social ambience. They are deprived of education that is considered as the basic need of everyone because society would not allow them to get education in common school. They are treated as unwanted and people look at them in an irritating manner as if they committed sin and that's why they became hijra's.

Eunuchs become as a laughing stock in front of others and even bear the indigestible words spoken to them in order to hurt their community. Through the character of Uma, Dattani attempts to raise the compassion of human beings towards hijra community. The hijras live in such a society where they are denied the dignity of human. Anarkali is kept in the male jail without thinking for her protection from the sexual harassment. The Shocking fact is that there is not even a single complaint from other hijras against Munswamy and Suresh in the police station who could fight for the agony of Anarkali. This not shows that other hijras don't care or have love for each other rather it reveals the fear and jeopardy that they have in their heart for the high class people.

Each and every hijra in this play has a quest to live and love. It is Uma who tires her best to articulate the voice of subaltern by overcoming all the trials and tribulations. Although she saves Anarkali from the mouth of death, she feels herself as a failure as she cannot punish the murderer of Kamla. Dattani ends his play by showing his exasperation on Indian society where money and power has the strength to do anything. But he has trust in justice and hard work which gives him strength to write and stage his plays to give social awareness to the people about the pathetic life of transgender and request his audience to treat transgender as a human being. This is the only way to help them and make their birth a meaningful one.

Dattani's way of projecting the language (Dialogues), performance (employs bodies, motions, space, affect, image etc), of women, transgender, and homosexuals characters is different that too touches the heart and soul of the viewers as well as the readers. He projects female images that are not weak or nervous but are aware and confident to retaliate against the wrong doers. Mahesh Dattani has always been very particular about the correct portrayal of his women characters and he has no biases against them. He says to Lakshmi Subramanyam.

They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I focus on is the powerlessness of these people...And I am not going to change my sensibilities for political correctness either. My only defense is to say that I am not biased against women (131).

Gay face is undeniably real. It is like too much pursing of the lips or something and too much squinting of the eyes. Dattani makes full use of bold words in the dialogues of this play. Such words are not used in a conservative Indian society that

too publically. One doesn't have to look for gay connotations between the lines. Dattani makes the characters speak loud, open and long of their sexual desires and experiences in the play without any sort of hesitation. There are quick exchanges between the characters and sometimes long monologues are used wherever and whenever necessary. Dattani successfully recreates the characters when he allows them to mix their Hindi words with English- that makes their performance real and appealing. The code mixing goes in the play along with the movements.

Transgender too have their own way of speaking to others, actions, gestures, body movement which is totally different from the other genders. They are forced to live in cloistered groups, on the fringes of society and in extreme poverty. That's why they have developed this language called *Gupti* (the secret), as a weapon to defend themselves against any infringement in their cocoons. Dattani has beautifully depicted the sociological, sexual, psychological, cultural violence faced by the Transgender community in the play *Seven Steps around the Fire*.

The prejudice against the Transgender is reflected in the kind of language used for them. 'She' or 'He' is the pronoun uses for female and male, but there is no pronoun for the transgender. Although they have their own name, even then they are addresses by third person singular that is 'it' - the term which is uses for the inanimate object. The character of transgender is somewhat totally different. As sometime they behave like male and vice versa. When Anarkali is beaten up, she tried to attack herself like a male or one can describe this action as the reaction of resistance, but at last she is received in end like a female.

Dattani's characters play a prominent role in spreading his ideas and messages to his audience. The themes like child abuse, Patriarchal society, Homosexuality, problems of transgender etc kept in front of the viewers through the perfect acting of the performer. All his characters do their job as if they are the real victims and treat themselves as that character in reality. Kuthuri Chaudhuri says "If you look at my plays, you would find that each character, every character has, you know his or her place in the play, which an actor can develop". Dattani's plays don't idealize the world. They seek to realize it and if possible improve it. That's why; they are neither tragedies nor comedies. The uniqueness of his plays is that he portrays the downtrodden and marginalized people in a very sensitive and sympathetic manner.

Sex is the creation of God but the gender is not created by God as it is introduced by the patriarchal hegemony. It is men who consider themselves high and dominate women, transgender and gay people through oppression. Thus Mahesh Dattani shows how the people are dominated on the basis of sexuality. According to him all are the creatures of god from stone to mountain, so equal emancipation must be given to each and every individual. No matter whether they are women, gay transgender, downtrodden etc and what they need are comfort, encouragement, self-dignity, and self-respect from the society. Till now Mahesh Dattani has been trying his best in displaying the issues and problems of the contemporary society. This study has explored how Dattani has been constantly striving for the upliftment and exploring the position of the marginalized section of society that is women, homosexuals and transgender.

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