

## MARGINAL THEMES IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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### Abstract

Apart from being a versatile playwright, Mahesh Dattani is a nice actor, director, screen playwright, film maker, teacher and a man of multiple aspects, creativities and identities. His writing is the projection of the 'here and now' of modern contemporary Indian society, of his own life and of others too. The present paper is a brief analysis of the major plays of Mahesh Dattani. Here my attempt is to highlight the latent issues i.e. homosexuality, gender issues, taboo relationship, child sexual abuse and the plight of hijra community etc which have been brought forth very candidly only by Dattani in his plays. The themes of taboo relationship and homosexuality are the central motives of the plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful*. *Tara and Dance Like a Man* deal with Dattani's unconventional approach in gender issues. *Seven Steps Around the fire* is a play which throws light on the plight of hijra people. And *Thirty Days in September* is the best example of the play which deals with child sexual abuse. Having all these themes and ideas into focus, in this paper my attempt is to analyze the plays of Dattani in the light of latent issues.

**Key Words:** Gender theory, homosexuality, masculinity, feminism, gay and lesbian criticism, queer theory.

### Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is one of the India's most daring, creative, innovative and remarkable playwrights in Indian English Literature. In his plays he deals with conventional themes with several new and innovative perspectives. His plays often explore the boundaries between the sphere of the intimate and the social, the personal and the public.

One of the important aspects of Dattani's plays is that they address the 'marginal themes' or 'invisible issues' of the contemporary Indian society. For instance, as Vijay Kumar Das says:

"The branching out of feminism into same sex love relationship like homosexuality and lesbianism which are unacceptable to the Indian society even today, find a proper place in Dattani's plays. Gender relationship and the plight of hijras (eunuchs), who are neither male nor

female, but wanting to be both, are artistically as well as realistically presented in his plays.” (2008 8-9)

Dattani in his plays often deals with sensational issues like unusual relationship, homosexual relationship, incest, child sexual abuse, women’s exploitation and communal disharmony. Pranav Joshipura says that Dattani’s plays:

“... principally deal with humanism in general and injustice to marginalized section of society such as homosexuals, hijras and women, in particular. In all of them, he provokes our thinking, compels us to think afresh about the problems ... and to change our conventional attitudes and assumptions about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil.” (Joshipura 2009).

Among Dattani’s critics, the themes of gay relationship and alternate sexuality have been one of the interesting areas of discourse. But most of his plays which are based on these themes, have tried to project him as the champion of gay literary movement in Indian drama. Santosh Chakraborty puts her ideas on Dattani by saying that, “Dattani is remarkable not only for his wide spectrum of interest in contemporary socio-political problems, but for his bold treatment of taboo subjects in his plays (2009 41).

Some of the other themes of Dattani’s plays are political subjects, hypocrisy relevant in the society, crimes of people and the failure of law and order. If Girish Karnad deals with myth and history in his plays, Dattani deals with contemporary reality in his plays. Dattani deals with marginal issues in order to unmask the society of its hypocrisy. These themes remained latent and suppressed so far which have been brought forth by Dattani through his plays. Asha Kuthari Chaudhary put her ideas on this concept in the following words:

“The preoccupation with ‘fringe issues’ forms an important element in Dattani’s work-issues that remain latent and suppressed, or are pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage- quite literally. With Dattani, this becomes the only way to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence.” (Chaudhary 2008 47)

Erin B. Mee with Mahesh Dattani points out that:

“...you can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can’t talk about gay issues because that’s not Indian, that doesn’t happen here. You can’t talk about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having sex with a cook or actually having a sex life that isn’t Indian either- that’s confrontational even if it is Indian.”(1997 24-25)

Mahesh Dattani believes that majority of people in the society lives in a state of ‘forced harmony’. To live the life in harmony is something which refers to the life which is being enjoyed naturally, as you are naturally, nothing is imposed upon you to be slaved in. This is called to live a harmonious life. But in the plays of Mahesh Dattani, we observe that almost all the characters (except few) live in a state of ‘forced harmony’. They are trying to become what they are not, or in other words we can say that they are trying to represent themselves as what they are not. And sometimes the society forced them to do so. Under the terms and conditions of society the people are forced to live disharmonious lives. And here Dattani tries to bring awareness among the people and points out that gays and lesbians are the part of our society but they are not given their proper social status and rights. The society puts them at margin. In this very light by referring to the plays of Dattani in this paper my attempt would be to highlight the

latent issues which show the plight of these marginalized people and also to project how their plight and suffering has been ignored in our society of which they are a part.

These are some of the latent issues highlighted by Dattani in his plays:

- 1-Homosexuality: *On a muggy night in Mumbai* and *Do the needful*
- 2-Exploitation of Hijra community: *Seven Steps Around the Fire*
- 3-Gender discrimination: *Tara* and *Dance like a man*
- 4-Child sexual abuse: *Thirty Days in September*

### **1-Homosexuality: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the needful***

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful* deal with the themes of taboo relationship and homosexuality or alternate sexuality. The play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* begins with the homosexual scene. When the play opens, the audience witnesses the tender moment of love. In the room the lights were dim and gradually it grows brighter and then the audience is able to see the face of the person (Kamlesh) but the other person was still hidden. After sometime the other person is also made visible and the audience witnesses that the other person was a middle class man, a security guard who was being paid for sex.

The setting of this play is set into a living room of Kamlesh, a well known fashion designer who was living in Mumbai.. He invites all his friends to short out his problem. He admits before his friends that he is still in love with Prakash (Ed) who has betrayed him by apparently moving on ‘straight’.

Most of the friends of Kamlesh were gays and they represent the different faces of the homosexual community. Sharad is such a gay who cares very little about how the world views him; Bunny, his antithesis, is very much shy of his sexuality who plays a happily married father on a television screen as well as in real life; and Dipali seems to be very sound in her understanding regarding her sexuality.

As the narrative proceeds we come to know that Kiran, the sister of Kamlesh is going to be married with Prakash who is a gay friend of Kamlesh. Kamlesh is not able to disclose the reality about his and Ed’s homosexual relationship before Kiran because he does not want to make her sad. Since Kiran was not happy by her first marriage and got divorced, Kamlesh does not want to hurt her again by revealing the fact that the man with whom she is going to marry is a hypocrite person who apparently trying to be straight and at the same time betrayed him also. Kamlesh could not disclose the secret that this is the same person due to whom he is suffering a lot. But finally the sexually unambiguous photo of Kamlesh and Prakash is disclosed before everyone. It was unbearable for Ed and he tries to commit suicide and it leads the play to its climax: the mask he which he wore is now ripped apart.

It is often considered that gay literature has unhappy endings. Gays and lesbians move towards death, isolation or a sham heterosexual marriage as Ed and Kiran are heading towards in this play. But this play ends on a luminous note. About this play Asha Kuthari Chaudhary comments:

“This is the first play in Indian theatre to openly deal with gay themes of love, affiliation, trust and betrayal, raising serious ‘closet’ issues that remain generally invisible. The primary audience comprised both gay and ‘straight’ people; mostly middle class. Curiously enough, a play as ‘daring’ as this actually proved to be an enormous commercial success in Mumbai and later on, everywhere that it was later performed.” (2008 51)

### **Do the Needful:**

*Do the needful* is another play of Mahesh Dattani which deals with the same theme i.e. gender and alternate sexuality. In this play Dattani has incorporated the same stereotype which he has very clearly rejected in the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, to subvert the existing structures. In the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani argues that gay people should not try to be hypocrite to live their lives. In other words we can say that gay should not try to become what they are not. Ed by marrying Kiran, tries to become 'straight' apparently. Bunny is also such a character who gets married and tries to show that he is a happily married father on a television screen as well as in real life. This marriage is like a curtain behind which he continues to have homosexual relationship with other men. But here in the play *Do the Needful*, Dattani rejects this notion. Asha Kuthari points out about the theme of this play in the following words:

“Originally the play *Do the needful*, a radio play, is apparently a romantic comedy set around the theme of the Indian system of arranged marriages. It begins with a montage of sounds that juxtapose all the major characters and locate them in heterogeneous setting at Mumbai and Bangalore, as also in terms of their orientation. Two sets of families, one Gujrati (the Patels), the other Kannadigas (the Gowdas) are negotiating a match between their offspring. Alpesh Patel is 'thirty-plus and divorced' and Lata Gowda is twenty-four and notorious.” (Chaudhary 2008 60).

While reading this play one can point out that these two families belong to different communities and highly skeptical of each other but still they get ready for inter caste marriage of their children because of social pressure. Alpesh is a gay man and he was not able to live a harmonious life with a girl that's why his first wife gave him divorce. Lata has a deep longing for Salim, a terrorist. Therefore their families are desperate to make them 'straight'.

To this problem Mahesh Dattani has given a very remarkable solution. Finally Lata decided to run away from home because at that time she was not getting any prospect to fulfill her desire. But when she discovers Alpesh with Mali in cowshed in a love making situation, she quits her decision of escaping. At first she shows her disgust on it but then she realizes that it is not only the solution of her problem but also of Alpesh's. If she marries Alpesh, she would not have to make sexual relationship with him because he is gay. Both of them will provide each other enough space and freedom to do the things whatever they like. In this way along with their happiness, they will also maintain the happiness of their families and society. This mutual agreement is known as in Hindi proverb (as Dattani writes) 'Teri Bhi Chup, Meri Bhi Chup'(Dattani 2000 142).

### **2- Exploitation of Hijra community: Seven Steps Around the Fire**

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* points out the latent theme i.e. the exploitation of hijra community. This theme is also considered as a fringe issue which has not yet been dealt overtly by any Indian writer except Dattani. The play describes about the social as well as psychological crisis of this third gender people. It also highlights the conflict, insecurities, fear, anguish, dilemmas and other kinds of frustration with which these people are suffering.

Anarkali, a hijra, was arrested by the police who was accused of murder of Kamla (another Hijra). She was physically, mentally, verbally and sexually abused in the jail by the police and also by the journalists. There was no one who bothers about her pathetic condition. Some of the journalists and social workers have come over there, not to solace her, rather to get a different kind of news for their newspaper and journals.

Apparently the play is about the murder investigation of a hijra namely Kamla but it also highlights their social and psychological suffering and social set up where a hijra cannot do anything to fulfill his desire, feelings and emotions beyond the norms of society. A research scholar in sociology, Uma who is a wife of the Superintendent of police Suresh Rao, and the daughter of vice chancellor, is researching on the community of eunuchs. She is analyzing the murder case of Kamla, a hijra. We observe that not only hijra community is being marginalized in our society but their investigations and researches which are being done against their injustices and sufferings are also marginalized. These topics of research and case studies are being put on margins. Constable Munswamy who is assisting Uma by the order of high command, very politely suggests that a lady like her, should perhaps look at more acceptable cases. He says, “There are so many other cases. All murder cases. Man killing wife, wife killing man’s lover, brother killing brother... dowry death cases.”(Dattani 2000 7). Munswamy just wanted to point out that it would be very problematic and controversial to work on such a case and therefore, she should work on the mainstream crime cases as it would be simpler and honorable for her.

This society never allows any hijra to fulfill his desire, the craving for love. These people have to pay even the caste of their lives in order to get their desires and emotions fulfilled. kamla, a beautiful eunuch and Subbu, the son of a minister were in love with each other. But since Kamla is a eunuch, she cannot be accepted as legal wife to Subbu and therefore, she was murdered at the commands of the minister. This much of injustice to her was not enough, that her murderer was not arrested even though the policemen know who the culprit is.

The social status of hijra people is very pathetic. They have no voice of their own. At the end of the play Uma comments:

“They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and not even reported in the newspaper. Champa was right. The people made no arrest...” (Dattani 2000 42).

Uma describes the social status of hijras as:

“...the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable-marriage and birth- ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding men and women in matrimony, or the blessing of ‘May you be the mother of a hundred sons.’”(Dattani 2000 11)

Thus we see in the play that everyone has a pre-established notion and hatred for hijra and they do not want to change their notion. Only Uma is such a character who has sympathy for them or rather she empathizes with them. Their pathetic condition become more intense when we observe that they have become used to of this hatred expressed towards them and have accepted and compromised with the plight of their lot.

### **3-Gender discrimination: *Tara and Dance Like a man***

Dattani in his play *Tara* tries to present a rigid sense of gender discrimination practiced by patriarchal society. It is a pathetic and dramatic representation of the pain and suffering of two Siamese twins. Sachidanand Mohanty in an interview with Mahesh Dattani points that:

“Tara is about a boy and a girl, Siamese twins. I have taken medical liberty over here because Siamese twins are invariably of the same sex and



they are surgically separated at birth. It was important for their survival and the play deals with emotional separation.”(Sachidanand 171)

In this play Dattani takes on what he calls the invisible issues of Indian society. Tara centers on emotions separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their mother and grandfather to favor the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara). A feisty girl who isn't given the opportunities given to her brother (although she may be smarter) eventually wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes to London, changes his name as Dan and attempts to represent the repress the guilt he feels over his sister's death by living without a personal history. (From A Note on the Play).

Dattani has very aptly depicted gender discrimination in this play. Right from the beginning we can see the discrimination between male and female. For example-in one of the scenes when Bharti( the mother of Tara) has finished her pooja and Patel (the father of Tara) is getting ready to go to work. These are stereotypical gender roles in our Indian society. It is Tara's observation that the “the men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to hunting while the women looked after the cave.”( Dattani 2000 328). Here we can explicitly see the Indian gender perspective that man works for taking care of the family by working out whereas women has to work only in home.

Again we can see gender discrimination when Patel (representative of the male dominated society) says to Chandan to join the office, not to Tara. He thinks that it is good for Tara to work at home or help her mother. Thus it is quite obvious that Patel wants his son, Chandan to grow up to be a man! However, Chandan, the artist one, interested in music and writing (Prasad 2007 137). Mr. Patel always thinks about the future plans for Chandan. He never thinks of Tara's future. In our Indian family, people always think about boys' future, firstly because people give more importance to boys than girls. A girl is supposed to learn how to cook, how to look after house, how to behave with others etc. if she does not do all these things she becomes the victim of people's criticism.

As far as the boy is concerned, he has to learn business and follow the steps of his father. These are the parameters in which a boy and a girl have to believe. And this case is very much similar to Chandan and Tara.

Gender discrimination can be observed when the operation is going to take place and it has been confirmed by the doctor that a major quantity of blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. At that time Bharti and her father took the decision that they would like to give both legs to the boys instead of girl.

Like Tara, Bharti is also victimized by the male dominated society because she did as her father told her to do during the operation. Bharti took the decision in favor of Chandan but it does not mean that she does not love her daughter. In the beginning of the play we see Bharti convincing Tara to drink the milk and later on we observe that she bribes Roopa to become a friend of Tara so that she may not feel alone. Not only this, she has stopped socializing herself because she cannot endure when people would ask about Tara. All these things show the love of Bharti to Tara.

### ***Dance Like a Man***

This play, too, highlights the theme of gender differences. About this play Beena Agarwal says:

“The social convention of gender binary spoiling the grace of life both for male and female, is the focal point of the play *Dance Like a Man*. The dramatic structure of the play evolves round the idea that individual will

have make struggle against social conventions. The issue of gender discrimination is not only a socio-cultural phenomenon but it is also integrated in human consciousness and is closely associated with individual choices, self development and self identity. It is a strong determinant of human personality and its suppression is bound to lead to terrible consequences. The role models, professional achievements, habits, dresses, and morality, are expressed in terms of gender bias.” (2008 97).

Dattani himself says, “I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatnatyam in my mid twenties... a play about a young man wanting a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women...” (Ayyar 2004).

Mahesh Dattani in this play again tries to represent the idea of gender discrimination. After reading this play one can assert the idea that individual talent can never flourish under the domination of patriarchal family. For example Ratna gives up her desire of being celebrity. Through the character like Chenni Amma, a devdasi, Dattani tries to project that how the biased society does not respond to the call of humanity and acknowledge the true art. Despite being a social reformer, Amritlal does not like his daughter in law, Ratna’s association with a devdasi and learning art of dance at her house because he was afraid that his reputation in the society will be spoiled. Basically the play describes the theme of career after marriage and women’s place in patriarchal society. Amritlal weaves a conspiracy against his son so that he gives up his desire of being a dancer. He tries to convince Ratna for the condition that if she wants go ahead in dancing career, she has to discourage Jairaj from his passion of being a dancer and help him being a ‘manly man’. To describe the consciousness of Amritlal, Asha Kuthari remarks: “The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him ‘womanly’-an effeminate man- the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned.” (Chaudhary 2008 68)

This play not only talks about the domination of female gender under the hands of patriarchy but also of male one. It was Jairaj who has been used as an escape goat by Ratna to achieve her dreams although not fulfilled. His life is shaped and reshaped according to the dreams and desires of other people. Ratna applies her own method to give a shape of manhood to Jairaj whereas his father, Amritlal attempts to shape him according to what he, himself thinks a man should be. Jairaj has been a victim of parental authority and suffered a lot that’s why he feels lonely and depressed. There is a kind of conflict in his heart: external conflict with his father and internal conflict with his wife, Ratna. The masculine self of Jairaj could not bear the victory of femininity either as an artist or as a husband.

Thus we see that Dattani through this play tries to convey his idea that under the power of patriarchy and of wealth, the talent of a man and his identity is always denied (for example Amritlal forbids Ratna and Jairaj from dancing because he was a wealthy man and had the power and they were under his care) and one has to fight back to the so called traditions of society otherwise one will undergo perpetual suffering and subjugation.

#### **4- Child Sexual Abuse: Thirty days in September**

The play *Thirty days in September* deals with the theme of child incest and also projects lights on the fatal effect of the forced sexual relationship on individual’s mind which gets intensified with due course of time. Dattani portrays the issue of incest through mother ( Shanta) and daughter ( Mala). In their childhood both the women are molested by the same person who was no one else but the brother of Shanta. The dramatist argues that this sexual molestation affects these two women differently. The mother, Shanta bears it silently whereas the daughter, Mala revolts

against it. Shanta becomes indifferent to pain and pleasure whereas Mala always feels craving for sexual satisfaction. Mala always feels a kind of distance from her mother and thinks that she has failed in playing the role of a mother. She became the victim at the hands of her uncle and for this she thinks that her mother was responsible. She accuses her mother that she could not protect her. Mala becomes contemptuous due to the lack of communication with her mother.

At the end of the play we see that Vinay gifted her mother a house of their own. At this Mala cries out “He bought silence so that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter” (Dattani 2010 133). In this way not only her body is molested but also her soul. Thus Dattani has tried to focus that the forced physical relationship which indicates man’s victory over woman can spoil her life completely.

Dattani makes extensive use of monologues in the play to intensify the empathy of the audience with Mala, the victim who is slowly recovering from her tortured and abused past. Notably, Dattani sets his milieu in the upper middle class, despite the general perception about the prevalence of child abuse predominantly in the working classes, choosing this setting because he did not want them to shrug of child sexual abuse as something that did not happen to people like them. In a sense, he has recurrently used subjects that touched upon the zones of experience that the ‘normal’ middle class society would rather sweep under the carpet and happily imagine did not exist. This is exactly how Dattani would penetrate below the surface, subvert complacent beliefs that everyday reality is constructed with, and make visible and invisible issues that haunt so many of his plays (Chaudhary 2008 74).

### **Conclusion**

To sum up the paper it can be said that Mahesh Dattani, a versatile playwright, have produced about fifteen plays of different categories-stage play, radio play, screen play and dance drama. The conflict between individual and social convention is the central motif of his plays. The relevance of his dramatic art lies in the fact that he deals with radical issues- which can be easily seen in our society but still are not brought forth into public. Dattani dares enough not only to bring these issues forth but also to arouse a kind of awareness in people regarding its pros and cons.

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