

CONFLICT OF PASSION AND PAIN: AN INTERPRETATION OF NAZIA IN DATTANI'S WHERE DID I LEAVE MY PURDAH?

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Abstract

Nazia Sahiba, the protagonist of Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, is an extremely passionate woman who suffers from her troubled past. She cannot forget the murder of her sister Zarine by Pakistani Muslims and her own gang-rape by Indian Hindus. However, she does not lose interest in life. She comes back to normal day to day life by dint of her passion for theatre. Through her performance Nazia seeks to attain an ideal world. Her passion for life enables her to overcome her personal pains.

Mahesh Dattani is best known for his sympathetic treatment of certain unconventional and taboo themes in his plays. His plays have successfully incorporated diverse themes like hijra marriage, gay relationship, extra-marital affairs, and communal disharmony. He has mainly focused on those contemporary issues which remain 'invisible' to general eyes. In his 'Preface' to *Collected Plays*, Dattani confesses:

I know that I am an artist. I don't need to underline it in my works. I write for my plays to be performed and appreciated by as wide a section of the society that my plays seek to and are about. . . . I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my times, place and socio-economic background. (XIII-XV)

Dattani's insight into human nature and human relationships has startled his audience and readers alike. Rightly does Professor Bijoy Kumar Das point out:

Dattani's plays deal with contemporary situations with a rare touch of honesty, sincerity and objectivity. He presents situations, and events authentically to re-create the characters as they are seen in the contemporary society. . . .

Dattani's themes strike us for two reasons—novelty and authenticity. There in lies his strength and the hallmark of his achievement. (59-60)

Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, the last one of the trilogy beginning with the play *Dance Like a Man* and the screen play *Morning Raga*, is a rare addition to his artistic exploration of human nature. Dattani has persistently treated his women characters with immense sympathy. In an interview with Sachidananda Mohanty, he proclaims:

I relate to Tennessee Williams because he writes about vulnerable women in a very violent society. I think I tend to do that as well, although I don't see my woman as vulnerable, in the sense that they do fight their battles. (*Collected Plays* 173)

Nazia, the protagonist of *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, is that sort of a woman who desperately hankers after winning the battle of life. From a cursory look Nazia appears to be eccentric, whimsical, hypocritical and selfish woman. She perennially bears an indifference and detachment for everything and everyone surrounding her. However, with the gradual unfolding of the play we come to understand her true nature. Under the veneer of rationality and detachment, Nazia is extremely passionate. Her love for Suhel, feelings for her sister Zarine and hatred for her own self are of humungous stature. She is quite obsessive of her drama company and dramatic performance. For Nazia, “the company is the most important thing” (79) and to her, “the role is everything! Worth dying for!” (88). In spite of being an octogenarian, Nazia seeks to achieve an ideal life. Her quest has been artistically delineated by Dattani with the help of the dance metaphor. Dattani has clarified that dancing stands for him as a means of leading an ideal life. Regarding the dance metaphor in *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani comments: “Dancing, in the play, represents the ideal world, almost impossible to attain in one lifetime” (39). Though impossible, Nazia desires to chase this ideal life to give meaning to her existence.

Nazia has a disturbing past. She was compelled to migrate to India from Lahore. The Pakistani Muslims murdered the Hindu passengers of the train on which Nazia with her lover Suhel and sister Zarine was coming to India. Nazia forgot to bring her burqa and Zarine gave her own burqa to Nazia to protect her. Without the burqa the Pakistani Muslims took Zarine to be a Hindu and murdered her. Nazia made herself responsible for Zarine’s premature death. Later on the same day Nazia was gang-raped by Indian Hindus. Her daughter Rubiba was the outcome of that brutal gang-rape. What makes Nazia different from others is her indomitable spirit and her passion for life. She was not devastated by the incident. She uplifted herself from the initial torpor through her drama company and dramatic performances. Nazia’s effort to cleanse her past is symbolically represented by Dattani. She is intermittently found to remove cobweb. Cobweb works as a powerful metaphor for Nazia’s troubled past. She emphatically pronounces: “Cobwebs! I hate cobwebs. . .” (69). Despite her efforts, her past always returns to torture her present: “(*Pulling at a cobweb*) Look at these cobwebs! No matter how often I clean them all, they keep coming back” (107). Even if Nazia fails to forget her past, she never succumbs to her past. She believes in going ahead in life. Past can hardly chain her flight.

Nazia has been gifted with passion, a rare virtue of human life. Her passion for theatre has guided her all through her sufferings. She is engaged in a pursuit of ideal life. A few unfortunate experiences can hardly dent Nazia’s spirit. She is unstoppable and indomitable as she is passionate to live life to the fullest. Even when she is on her wheelchair, she pronounces:

NAZIA. (*She begins to sway and clap*) Dance away! And act like life is one big performance with a standing ovation waiting at the end of it! Spin me around! Oh this wheelchair is too small for all the life that’s left in me. (141-142)

Watching her mother’s passion for life, Rubiba says: "Proud of you, Mother! I am so proud of you!" (142). We readers too are proud of her. In fact, Nazia embodies the true identity of a MAN. She does not bow in front of pains. Rather, she possesses the spirit to overcome her sufferings and to construct a new identity for herself. To conclude, we can quote Lillete Dubey:

And so was spun the story of the irrepressible, irreverent, iconoclastic and utterly human Nazia, who is inspired by a legion of Amazonian legends that have blazed across the stage, living, loving and even sacrificing all for their art. (48)

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