

SHATTERING INDIAN FAMILIES AND THEIR NO FUTURE WITH REFERENCE TO MAHESH DATTANI'S FAMILIES IN HIS SELECTED PLAYS

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Abstract

Freedom and family hardly go together. There is no niche for freedom in Indian families where the male dominated society hold the reins taut, and generally the women readily submit themselves to be ruled over mentally, physically, psychologically, economically and socially merely to 'keep it going'. As a bi-product of the class society, family does exhibit such domination of one individual over the other. This hidden truth hardly surfaces, and families maintain within its core the stinking and manipulative mechanism, well-hidden by the so-called bourgeoisie values and family pride in Indian societies. Adjustment usually by the womenfolk, become the only mantra for the bare survival of the Indian families. This is well depicted in the plays of Mahesh Dattani, a great playwright who has brought out the crux of gender crisis which Indian families face. This paper explains the birth of family, its inner ugliness, and how it barely manages to survive in Indian scenario, and its nil future.

“Lately it has become the fashionable to deny the existence of this initial stage in human sexual life. Humanity must be spared of this ‘shame’”.

-Frederick Engels

Freedom is a concept that can neither be explored nor constructed; it is always the concept of future. What is freedom in the present will be outdated in the future. It is neither stagnant nay streams. As Kobad Ghandy in his article “Questions of freedom and People’s Emancipation” says, “Yet FREEDOM... that much abused word. Freedom—around which hundreds of myths have been woven into beautiful-looking intricate webs waiting to entrap us”, the recent surveys by various newspapers prove that Indian families are the exact opposites to freedom. Someone in the family, mostly women, have their husbands breathing down their necks 24 hours a day. As the great teacher Karl Marx says, “Freedom is the consciousness of necessity”. The word is intrinsically related to humanism. The essence of naturalism is freedom. Naturalism, humanism and individuality, nay individualism are straightly connected with

freedom. The consciousness of human beings in general, and women in particular, strive for naturalism. The awareness of individuality increases when there is a constant development in the laws of nature and society. Withering the Chanakya syndrome, human beings long for their lost lively chirpy nature than the manifestations and manipulations of intellectual superiority, arrogance, ego, domination and authoritarianism. Apparently, class societies are fertile grounds of these complexities. Family, the byproduct of class society where women were defeated historically stands as the fertile ground for the above said complexities. Especially, Indian families started shattering mainly because of its nature of birth. When the superstructure of society demands freedom, it reflects the minds of the people as well. When the human beings in general and women in particular started working towards freedom, the class society and its byproducts started crumbling. The abstract concept of freedom that was buried under the concrete base of family is slowly but surely heading up. When the corpses turn in their graves, breakages are well expected. Nevertheless to say, Indian families are in great danger.

Family always stands out from deconstruction. No one in this world has the audacity to question this traditional and orthodox form of so-called culture. Such is the sacred and divine role that family plays in India. Before plunging deep into deconstruction of family, it is essential to understand its origin. Family has had its origin from the class society. Also, when one talks about family, one cannot forget the role of the surplus. Human beings lived as wanderers for the sake of food. But when the group's strength increased, there was a shortage of food and basic necessities. Thus with necessity being the mother of invention and exploring new possibilities, human beings started working towards further production. They concentrated on agriculture, animal husbandry, etc. Men and women went for hunting; pregnant women stayed back in their shelters. Similarly children, the main production, the productive force and tools of hunter gatherer society were identified by their mothers because of the herd system that prevailed in the pre communal society which is completely matriarchal. Women led the role by inventing all new inventions like fire and wheel, and that gave a form to men, the real civilized men. Women were the ones who found out the use of stones and iron that made hunting powerful and effective and increased the level of food production. There was born the surplus, the deciding factor of human beings' struggle. Surplus acted as the historian who registered the class history keenly after its birth. With the patriarchal family, the field of written history opens up.

In front of the classless human beings, surplus stood as the forbidden but a beloved apple. The men's greed devoured it with lots of lust and eager. When human beings got the surplus, the question raised before the common wealthy human beings is that as to who will be the share holders of the surplus. Those who are strong enough to participate well in hunting on a regular basis (here basically, women were wiped out from the scene due to their continuous pregnancy) become the real share holders of the surplus. At the same time, those men who have the surplus in their hands wished to pass this superiority to their heirs alone. For this sole reason they had to avoid polyandry in order to be clear of who fathered the child (since in matriarchal system, offspring were identified only after mothers). They imposed strict polygamy in which a man can marry many wives, whereas woman cannot do so. As the great teacher Frederick Engels says, "the overthrow of mother right was the first world historical defeat of the female sex". The men took command inside homes as well and women were degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument, a sexual tool, for the production of children. With the birth of monogamy, the family system is also born, and the children were identified after men. In order to protect their legitimacy and their heir's legitimacy, monogamy was

introduced and confined with women. After men created slaves, the society slowly took the form of the premature stage of state and gradually it became the real state with its all oppressing powers and forces. Such a form of family shows the transition of the pairing family to monogamy. In order to guarantee the wife's fidelity and therefore the paternity of the children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights.

Thus with the defeat of women, class history starts its course. In the beginning women became the slaves of men; gradually a majority of men became the slaves of the minority men who controlled the larger group of men with their muscle power and theological power, slowly identifying these as state machineries, religion, etc. So those who wish to revolutionize the family set up and make a radical family have to keep in mind the birth of family i.e. Family is not a divine form of human relationship but it is the very first product of human slavery. Unequal stages of men set its ball roll only with the birth of family. One could assess family only when they understand it as a non-radical form.

There are two contradictions in the history of contradictions; they are personal and impersonal. Normally, personal contradictions happen between like-minded people and those who do wish to depart from one another though they have petty problems between them. But impersonal contradictions have to be sorted out in the streets, with the intrusion of outsiders. These impersonal contradictions might end in reconciliation at times, but in most cases it is likely that it ends up in the departure of the two involved in such contradiction. When one considers family as a contradictory part where couples indulge in contradictions, there are no chances for them to have a second choice of impersonal contradiction i.e. if either the man or woman feels that they are suppressed. Surely the womenfolk are extremely excluded from this type of contradiction. All couples in India are advised to solve their problems with the mind set of living together, and especially Indian brides are given this common 'essential' advice before they move to their in-laws place. Even the legal procedures in the country, in the name of protecting the womenfolk do the same, so that the family remains intact and is protected. People and the self acclaimed vulture or Indian culture proudly claim that Indian families are known for their pride and heritage. They further go on to say that due to their Indian family setup Indian relationships are comparatively far better than relationships in other countries. Though Indian families have the touch of feudal relationship, security and quite a few things to be proud of, they slowly start breaking and crumble down gradually but steadily. In the name of human bonds and forceful petty bourgeoisie values and by legal means the Indian families manage to survive, but the core is slowly and definitely rotting. Adjustment alone makes every family survive. But this adjustment is also confined exclusively with and is expected from women. The so-called family pride and values, and circumstances in which women are brought up in the Indian society practice women for adjustment in their post marital lives.

Though the dangerous allegation may rise up in the minds of all that an alternative for the Indian marriages and families would be the western live-in relationships, this paper proposes just the contrary. But it has to be understood that marriage and family were the forms and side effects of the ugliest human relationships that emerged from the class society. So in that mindset alone, one has to understand and deconstruct marriage and family. To strengthen the point, a saying of Engels goes:

“Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opened the epoch that has lasted until today in which every

step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others". (75)

Women-Sided Silence and Adjustments save Mahesh Dattani's Families:

Mahesh Dattani, the foremost Indian English playwright is known for his various themes. He is the first and foremost playwright who has inculcated all varieties of themes in his writings. His themes are basically taken from the Indian middle class society and he portrays mainly the culture, lifestyle, gender and family relations of Indians in his plays. He reflects the day-to-day life of common people in his dramas. His employment of untouched subjects like homosexuality, gender identity and human relationships such as husband and wife, and parents and their children are well spoken of for their originality. Rozario Ignatius, in his article titled "Contemporary Social Issues in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani" opines: "A reading of Mahesh Dattani's plays brings to the fore many burning issues that beset the post- Independence Indian society"(106). He also talks about the usage of predominantly middle-class characters and their social concerns in Dattani's plays. Ignatius further says, "It can be stated that every one of these central thematic issues stem from the opposition between tradition and modernity in perception of matters relating to core human relationships like love, sex, marriage and even faith". (107). Dattani focuses on husband and wife relationship in day-to-day life. As Dattani spoke to the author of this paper, he said that he concentrated on the petty bourgeoisie class families from where he has emerged, and that he never tried his hands on the working class families.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Uma Rao, the daughter of a Vice Chancellor and wife of Deputy commissioner Suresh, was portrayed by Dattani as a woman emerged from petty bourgeoisie class but as an intellectual and also a radical one. Though she acts like a real revolutionary, she never tries her hand at anything inside her family. Inside her family she adjusts and adheres to her role as a wife to make the family survive. Here, the husband Suresh is portrayed as a man who is always sex centered, and by yielding to his desires, Uma achieves a few things for her own purpose, and also sometimes for the betterment of the subaltern transgender society. Though she has contradictions over Suresh's approach towards transgenders, she never tries to have a chat with her husband to change his ideas or to at least have mere discussion on these tabooed areas with him. She merely accepts the point of view of her husband without questioning, and also remains passive to her husband's criticism whenever she addresses transgenders in a respectful manner. Here it is very evident that men argue and impose their ideas, and in order to save the human bond and family setup women maintain their revered silence. The conversation between Suresh and Uma as follows:

"Interior. The bedroom of Suresh and Uma.

A Hindi movie fight scene blaring from a TV set in the next room.

Suresh. That is just the sort of name a hijra would fancy, (Chuckles.) Anarkali!

Uma. Why do they put her in male prison? Suresh. They are as strong as horses.

Wear the purple one.

Uma. I wore that last night.

Suresh. Again

Silence. Uma opens the wardrobe.

Good.

Uma. She is being beaten up by all the male prisoners.

...

Here, Uma addresses Kamla, a transgender and her sister Anarkali (also a transgender) by their names. When Suresh makes fun of it, sadly, there is no opposition or at least some reasoning from Uma's side.

“Uma. Yes. I know she is arrested for the murder of her sister, but...

Suresh chokes with laughter as he is gargling, and coughs.

Suresh (off). What's that you said? Sister? (Re –enters.) There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day, that Anarkali and...

Uma. Kamla.

Suresh. Look, it is one thing that I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don't feel any compassion for them. They will take advantage...Keep your soft heart for me.

Uma. What is the evidence against Anarkali?

Suresh. Come here.

Silence. Uma lies down on the bed. Suresh moans with pleasure as he kisses her.”(9-10)

Thus the above spoken conversation starts with the approach of a husband and wife. Though the wife tries to know certain things, the husband instead of giving her facts, keeps on insisting his own ideas about the transgender community. If Uma had wished to have discussion with Suresh about her views on transgenders, trying to make him sympathise with them, the scene would not have ended in their bedroom, but in a court room. Uma, the woman, the always-trodden, meant solely for adjustment, adjusts with her husband though she has contradictory views with her husband. Thus survives one Indian family of Dattani.

The next scene of this couple also happens in (deliberately?) their bedroom. In this play, most of the scenes between Uma and Suresh happen only in bedroom, as Dattani hints the audience that the Indian marital relationships survive largely due to their sexual relationships. When Uma tells Suresh about their childless condition, she tells him that she had gone to a hospital for a checkup and that the doctor wanted to see him for a normal sperm count. But Suresh refuses bluntly as he believes the reason for not begetting a child has nothing to do with him (or with men), but it is the prime concern of women, and the shudder in his speech proves that he believes the sperm count will mean that it is a checkup on his masculinity and it might prove to be a scar on his masculinity.

Pause.

Uma. I went to the doctor again. Your mother insisted she takes me

Suresh. What did they say?

Uma. Nothing...They want to say see you.

Suresh. I don't think so.

Uma. Just a test for your sperm count. Suresh. I don't have to go...

Uma. Would you like to go shopping with me?

Pause. (32)

Here again, when Uma was insisted on going to doctor to hospital, there arose no question of potency, but though the Doctor has insisted to bring in Suresh for a normal sperm count, he was not willing to oblige and go for the checkup. But Uma Rao remains silent to avoid the untoward situation between her husband and herself. So she cleverly diverts the topic to shopping, after which there is a pause in the dialogue. In that pause Dattani lets the Indian family

survive. Due to Uma's silence, once again a discussion was diverted to shopping and her silence saves the family from going astray.

In the hunter gatherer age, the women's control over all the productive tools was lost. Once they lost their control over these, they have lost their power and they stood at the mercy of men. Engels says,

"If now the economic considerations disappear which made women put up with the habitual infidelity of their husbands- concern for their own livelihood and still more for their children's future."(95).

Similarly, in this play, the wealth and material income of the family is controlled by Suresh. Though Uma Rao works as a lecturer in Bangalore University, she is at the mercy of her husband for her monetary needs. Suresh is quite lenient with his money is totally a different issue. The social reformer Dr. B.R. Ambedkar says, "right cannot be offered but be shared". So the money of the family is not in the control of both but in the control of Suresh where Uma is in a position to request or ask or demand from him as and when she needs money.

Suresh. Your father called.

Uma(stirs her cup). When?

Suresh. Yesterday some time, I can't remember when. He said something about money. (Puts down paper) Why do you need so much money?

Uma. I don't. It's for something else. I have it all with me right here in my bag. (Picks up bag and unzips it) See... (32)

...

Pause

Why did you ask your father for the money?

Uma. Oh, no particular reason. I was visiting him and...

Suresh. You should have asked me. Have I ever refused you any money? (32)

In order to save the family relations, Uma has kept mum for all the out bursting issues ranging from the personal to general.

The daring and considerate Uma was ready to accept a transgender as her sister though her husband was not ready to treat them as even human beings.

"Uma. One day you will understand. Anarkali, I would love to be your sister, if you will be mine.

Anarkali. Oh! You are only being kind. Don't hurt my heart.

Uma. No, I mean it". (7)

And she even corrects Constable Munswamy when he uses an inanimate pronoun for a transgender i.e. it.

Munswamy. If you don't mind me saying, what is the use talking with it? It will tell only lies. I will bring it.

Uma. No. Can I meet her in there? (7)

But in order to let her family survive, she deliberately fails to correct her husband when he addresses transgenders with filthy language.

"Uma. Yes. I know she is arrested for the murder of her sister, but...

Suresh chokes with laughter as he is gargling, and coughs.

Suresh (off).What's that you said? Sister? (Re -enters.)There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day, that Anarkali and... (9-10)

Women’s silence/ Locked room’s Crying is the Final Solutions of Family crisis:

Final Solutions, the Sakitya Akademi awarded play by Dattani concentrates mainly on two things. They are the made-up supremacy of Hinduism and the male dominated family. It is one of the famous plays of Dattani’s in which he speaks voluminously about gender relations and gender war. In this play, a character named Daksha is introduced by Dattani as a scapegoat and victim of a male dominated family. Her dialogues seethe with gender war and also they portray the position of a female torn in the gender crisis. The play starts with her diary writings. She writes in her diary:

Daksha (reads from her diary). ‘Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages. (Thinks for while) (165).

Now, one can clearly comprehend the real condition in Daksha’s family. Even in her diary, she has not dared to write the truth so far. Even her opinions as diary entries have exacted too much courage from her and to muster up that courage has taken her these many days. So one might as well understand how long it would take for her to speak to her husband frankly her thoughts, desires and needs. She further writes in her diary:

“I am sharing my inner most thoughts with you. Nobody else knows what I think or how I feel, except now- you (165).”

She has a single outlet to share her thoughts while she is at home. Even with her husband she is unable to share her thoughts, and nobody in her house knows or even wishes to know what she thinks or how she feels. Such horrid gender relationship survives between Daksha and her husband. She further writes the reason for having spoken to her diary, why she started writing it in the first place and why she needed to tell all her secrets to the speechless and an inanimate object rather than to her ‘live’ husband. She says it is because her “dreams have been shattered”. Even her smallest whim of singing is banned in the name of family pride by her father-in-law and mother-in-law.

“All my dreams have been shattered...I can never be a singer, like Noor Jehan. Hari’s family is against my singing film songs. His parents heard me humming a love song to Hari last night. And this morning they told him to tell me...” (166).

As she could not speak very openly against her husband and her in-laws, she started pouring out all her vengeance against the Muslim community. In the very next scene she hates Muslims as she hates her husband and father and mother-in-laws as they have all broken “the songs of love that I had learnt to sing with. Those beautiful voices. Cracked”. When her in-laws and husband were no more, her whole hatred turns as a personal cum religious vengeance against Muslims.

She further elaborated her relationship with her sweetheart, her husband, by letting out the vengeance that she stored for him against the Muslim community. There was no freedom in her house. Though she wished to break those shackles, she kept silent. Because she knew very well that it would result in the breakage of their so-called divine bond. So here, her silence saves her family bond from the definite wreckage. She neither believed nor loved her husband as her life partner and a soul mate. So she started relating to him as her lord and master. She says,

“You must be wondering why I haven’t mentioned Hari very much. After all he is my lord and master. Well, that’s because I think my lord and master has the brains of a silly goat.” (166).

She does not have the courage to tell all these directly to her “silly goat-brained man” as she was brought up in a male dominated household, where women learn and master the art of self oppression. So behind the curtain she does it. Dattani has introduced another couple in this play. They are the son and daughter-in-law of Hari and Daksha. Daksha envies her granddaughter as her granddaughter enjoys freedom that was once rejected to Daksha when she was young. As far as Daksha is concerned, things have not changed much as she has remained a slave to her husband, the slave master, and she still remains the slave, the role of the slave master duly taken over by her son after her husband’s death. So she has penned down all her thoughts in her diary instead of speaking them straight to her husband. Now again, as history repeats, she instead of speaking to her son, “rambles on about old times and bore her to tears”.

Dattani has introduced the second couple as if they fight in a battlefield, and they truly fight like rivals. Wherever they are introduced and they dialogue, there ensues a fight. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Suresh and Uma were introduced with the back drop of a bedroom, and in *Final Solutions* Ramnik and Smita were introduced with fight as the back drop between them. Dattani has tried to capture the changes that had happened in the society so far. In the last few generations, women were quiet and that solved almost all problems inside their family. Now the changes in the mode of production and development in the societal structures have enabled women with comparatively greater rights by which they are at least enabled to question their husbands who have “silly-goat brains”.

Cross fading to the living room of the Gandhis. Aruna, Ramnik’s wife, enters just as Smita and Ramnik are retiring for the night

Aruna (sternly). Smita, go to Baa and it with her till I call you.

Smita makes to go.

Ramnik. I think Baa will be fine. There’s no need.

Aruna. She hasn’t spent any time with Baa. She must learn to be with elders.

Ramnik. Baa will ramble on about old times and bore her to tears. (11)

Thus they fought on the means of nurturing their daughter. Ramnik wishes his daughter to be nurtured as he likes, but Aruna wishes her daughter to choose a life of her own. This problem is always solved by their daughter Smita herself. The couple does not have the courage to discuss such issues across the table, and they just keep on rambling stories, fight well and return to their barracks with the hearts full of pain. They fight like enemies for even silly issues. It clearly shows that how they are well ‘knitted’ together. Their differences are well visible as they differ from each other almost always.

Do the Needful, another of Dattani’s phenomenal plays talks about the futility of Indian arranged marriages, considered heavenly and highly hyped, and which exists primarily to blow one’s own trumpet of their family’s wealth and community power. Alpesh, a homosexual, and Lata who loves Salim, are forced into marriage by their parents who strongly believe in their duties of match-fixing their children, and are certainly blind to any ideas and wishes that their children entertain. Here, marriage serves more as a societal necessity, where people indulge themselves in showing off their riches, and has nothing concerning the hearts of the couple. Dattani has amazingly captured the essence of Indian weddings, where exists a lot of hypocrisy and societal obligation than anything else. Alpesh and Lata, two free-minded rational people are also pushed to be hypocrites with their marriage and to lead their lives in their dark, as they both agree on the terms as to Alpesh being a homosexual, and Lata continuing her affair with Salim,

for they could not oppose the views of their parents who add to the hypocritical moralistic crowd.

In both Oxford and Longman dictionaries, one could find the meaning of wife as follows “the woman that a man is married to”. But more than the phrase ‘married to’, it certainly has lot deeper connotations attached. When the term ‘life partner’ is going to replace the word ‘wife’ socially, economically, physically and psychologically, no messiah can save the shattering, distorted and dilapidated Indian families from its downfall and internal crisis. Indian families look better externally but behind the curtain the society’s so-called fake values and prestige alone keep them going. Maintaining silence never means that wives accept whatever the men folk speak but it definitely means that they would do what is restricted by the men behind the curtain, as they too as humans crave for some individual space which is hardly ever allowed to an Indian woman. Only an open, heart-to-heart discussion between couples can solve their problems and heal the internal rotting of the Indian families.

The historical materialists strongly believed that the existing families survived by stifling its womenfolk. When they were questioned about an alternative for these families, they could not come up with a solution. But the non-existence of an alternative for the present family setup does not mean that these families would go on, as there is already an inherent rotting in their core and they are shattering despite their external exuberance. “And if strict monogamy is the height of all virtue, then the palm must go to the tape worm, which has a complete set of male and female sexual organs in each of its 50 to 200 proglottides, or segments, spends its whole life copulating in all its segments with itself. Confining ourselves to mammals, however, we find all forms of sexual life-unrestrictiveness, indications of group marriage, polygyny, monogamy.” says Engels.

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