



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2021; 7(9): 293-295
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 28-07-2021
Accepted: 30-08-2021

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Social issues in the plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

In the modern or post-modern era the problems of the society have changed. Various writers have portrayed the harsh realities of modern day society and playwrights like Dattani found it their duty to present them to the readers. Dattani is known for putting forward the issues that directly concern the society. He has dealt with various issues over the years like gender biases, discrimination towards homosexuals, greed, complexity of relationships etc. He has written a number of plays including *On a Muggy night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, *Where there's a Will* and *Tara* among others. We live in a 'modern society' and get carried away by all the developments around us, but Dattani through his sensitive observation of queer characters, family conflict and various gender problems points out the essential norms a society should live by. Dattani chooses urban-middle class family and their standard of living majorly as subject area.

Keywords: Gender, transgender, patriarchal, social

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is a prominent post modern dramatist who is known for his versatility as a playwright, artist and theatre instructor. He presents the contemporary issues of urban Indian society. In his plays all the issues ignored by the mainstream society like the problems of LGBTQ community find place. His plays challenge the stereotypical images of male and female in society. The prominent themes in Dattani's plays relate to the unending adjustments and compromises people have to make to live in a dignified manner in a traditional society. About his themes Dattani said in an Interview: "You can talk about feminism because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that is not Indian, doesn't happen here. (Mortimer, 3-4)

Through his plays Dattani also tries to portray the prejudiced minds of the people who are still hard hearted and unsympathetic towards trans-genders and homosexuals and who still feel that people from another religion are 'terrorists'. The fact that people find it difficult to accept uncommon things creates an adverse situation in our society.

Dattani is among the first writers of post-colonial times to mirror the changing face of the nation. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* presents two interwoven stories, one in which Uma is married to Suresh Rao, Jail Superintendent. She is incapable of conceiving a child and has undergone numerous check-ups, but when once she asks her husband to consult a doctor he denies it as it would be insulting to question his masculinity and he cannot have any defect because he is a 'Man'. She is writing her thesis on gender based power implications in society and in this context meets Anarkali the 'Hijra', who is in prison on a murder charge. Uma's sensitivity and concern wins Anarkali's confidence and gradually a sisterly bond develops between the two.

The objectification of hijras' is best expressed through Uma's husband and his subordinate, Constable Munswamy's use of the pronoun 'it' or phrases like that thing for Anarkali. Moreover we are told throughout the play that nobody cares about the murders of people who have inferior position in the society and that they are good for nothing. The invisible chains of society deny the transgenders family and love. Those who try to break free have to face dire consequences. Kamla, the young hijra 'is burned to death by her lover Subbu's politician father Mr. Sharma. When the minister arranges a second marriage for Subbu, Uma invites the eunuchs to the wedding of Subbu and in the end scene we find Subbu committing suicide out of guilt on the day of his own marriage.

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Therefore the 'pavitra agni' becomes the reason for the death of two persons who could have lived happily if the society was a little less hard hearted.

We read of Shikhandi in Mahabharata who became a reason for the death of Bhishma Pitamaha. Shikhandi was born in a royal family and if it was not because of him the whole epic would have been different. Eunuchs are called upon every sacred occasion and their blessings are considered necessary for all. Their first and foremost expectation from the society are respect and dignity, which although they truly deserve yet are deprived of. The basic qualities we all need to possess to be called human beings are humility and morality and none of them is seen when we deal with people who do not belong to our own community or are different from the common people.

Patriarchy is the norm of traditional society. We find Uma talking to her husband when she asks him to consult a doctor when they are not able to have children; very efficiently Suresh disposes off the request because that will hurt his masculinity. We have always been living in a patriarchal society and the subject is strongly evident in the plays of Dattani. Through his plays, he not only brought to spotlight the condition of women but also the suffrage of deprived classes. We are well aware of the position of women in the society but seldom have we felt empathetic towards those who belong to the minority.

The concept of preference of a male child over a female finds place in Dattani's *Tara*. The play tells the story of two conjoined twins who are separated through surgery. It is a short play of two acts and the main characters are Chandan and Tara. The plot revolves around the surgical separation of the twins and how the parents, though well educated, put the life of male child ahead of their daughter. Apart from the limb the other organs are also transplanted in Chandan's body not realizing that the resultant medical condition will lead to the gradual death of Tara. Throughout the play we find the father of the twins Patel making plans for Chandan's future about how his career will bloom in and what should he study and even Tara is not left out from feeling the coldness of her father but instead of crying about it she chooses to live a happy life. Tara is portrayed as a strong, smart, intelligent girl who, if given a chance, could have achieved something great in her life. But that great could not have satisfied the parents, who wanted a male child. It doesn't matter if he was not so brilliant and smart but a boy was all that was needed in the family because he would carry the family's name.

Tara seems to portray the dilemma and confusion of Indian society towards gender equality. Whereas the world is progressing and fighting for equal opportunities for men and women, our Indian society still finds it hard to give a girl a fair chance to win the world. The overwhelming guilt of the narrator Dan pushes him out of the nation where he expects that his sister's death will not haunt him any further but he cannot escape the biggest grief of his life. Tara raises the issue of preference of a male child in the 'modern' society.

Social realism is that branch of realism that deals with the realism prevalent in the society. The social flaws and hypocrisies are highlighted by bringing in spotlight the sad realities that were always in front of our eyes and yet we were blind towards them. Dattani is a modern playwright and hence he not only described the old flaws but also wrote about issues like homosexuality which is still considered western and people are reluctant to talk about. Dattani has

written a lot of plays where he dealt with a wide range of issues that are still affecting our society in adverse ways, may it be a preference of male child, or suppression of the voice of eunuchs, or secondary treatment towards homosexuals. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* emphasizes on the condition of eunuchs in the society and how they are deprived of basic rights in the society. The play makes us question the whole system of law and order where people are not given fair trials just because they are not part of a larger community and furthermore they are given the worst deserved treatment for entering in the world of the 'normal people'. The brutal crimes are overlooked if the people of 'elite' class are involved and especially when the crimes are against the downtrodden of the society.

Where There's a Will is a play which has all the constituents of Shakespearean catastrophes like authority tussles, gender discrimination, generation split-up, male-controlled domination, conflicts, and wickedness.

Dattani's plays in general include characters who are probing their individuality, and who feel secluded in certain ways. In his plays, Dattani employs what he considers the indiscernible problems of the social order. In addition, the plays take up the concealed problems of contemporary culture. Another important feature of Dattani's production is that his characters remain alive in audiences' heart and mind. Dattani raises the voice about the old-age conviction and thoughts of wedding based on heterosexual relationship. The play appears to expose that even homosexual relationships are usual and common as heterosexual relationship. The play deals with the psychological effect of individual rather than common code of conduct in Indian society. Dattani portrays the social pragmatism in an extremely comical and ironic mode. His plays signify the issues of people who dare not voice their issues and women's' lives in the hands of patriarchal society. He has been persistently trying to bring out such problems and giving a solution through his plays to the issues tackled by the colonized division of Indian social order. In short, the personal identity is attempting to attain as much liberty as probable from the control of communal or social identity.

On a *Muggy Night* in Mumbai examines the psychology of persons who are by nature or by choice 'gay' or bisexual. Their unseen worries, emotions and sensitivities are cautiously depicted in this play. The play focuses upon a whole spectrum of gay behaviour-Sharad's flamboyance, Bunny's hypocrisy and double-dealing and Ranjit's cleverness in escaping to the liberal West. The play concentrates on the secret private spaces of the bedroom and the deeper space that belongs to the inner thoughts of the characters.

Dattani tries to microcosmically look at the world the gays inhabit in the backdrop of Mumbai skyline. Prakash and Kamlesh were deeply in love with one another. The separation between them causes immense grief to Kamlesh who can't adjust with Sharad. It is a shock for him when he gets to know that his ex partner Ed, intends to marry Kiran, the divorcee sister of Kamlesh. The identity crisis and societal pressures lead these gay characters to pretend to be Heterosexual. Ed tells Kamlesh: "Nobody would know. Nobody would care...I will take care of Kiran. And you take care of me. (104) In this respect Dattani's play is a strong protest against the existing norms of social ethics and moral hypocrisies of Patriarchal society. He provided a platform to those who were marginalised due to gender or

class differences. His plays raise issues which are considered taboo in the urban Indian society. The angst and the struggle of his characters to attain a dignified existence in society strikes a deep chord in the heart of the reader, and perhaps therein lies the reason for his popularity.

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