

Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Bywords of Complex Social Processes

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Abstract: *Contemporary Indian English Drama has come afar from its original form of philosophical, religious, historical, and mythological Drama and is totally committed to arousing the public conscience for a headstrong change via the contemporariness of themes, choice of common men as characters and a literary compassion to the repulsive realities of life. Mahesh Dattani is one such playwright who engages in contemporary concerns associated to the urban middle-class English speaking society which is going through a social-cultural transformation. Dattani's Tara presents an intricate muddle of relationships unravelling the ways in which social beliefs regulate the lives of common men, hold them back in their dealings with fellow beings and compel them to take decisions which grip them in self-guilt for life. He renders new perceptions to the themes of gender inequality, corruption etc. by interpreting and analysing the meaning of social actions and their consequential circumstances through the conduct of individual characters. Dattani's Dance like a Man demonstrate how successive generations of units in a society are formed and fitted for co-operation; and how the pre-decided public perception of the position and function of an individual in the social order makes him feel claustrophobic leading to deformed social manifestations. Through the depiction of the dreariness of the bourgeoisie lives, Dattani exposes the conjured intellectualism of the bourgeoisie and exerts in the direction of a resolute rational resurgence of society. In the course of doing so, his works no longer remain merely iconic plays but bywords of complex social processes.*

Keywords: *Bywords, Bourgeoisie, social-cultural transformation, Social conventions, quandary*

1. INTRODUCTION

“The Modern Drama, as all modern literature, mirrors the complex struggle of life,—the struggle which, ... has its roots in the depth of human nature and social environment, and hence is, to that extent, universal. Such literature, such drama, is at once the reflex and the inspiration of mankind in its eternal seeking for things higher and better” (Goldman, Foreword, 1914).

Drama has been a very efficient and influential genre of any society and has throbbled with a deep involvement with the social and moral issues of its times. It not only registers but also manifests the changes (social, political and cultural) the society undergoes. Consequently, it can be held that any study of drama would enable the reader to reconstruct the past of a society, understand its social concerns and comprehend its identity. For a dramatist, drama is obviously a tool for social analysis and it is also reflected in Indian English Drama that has contributed its share in raising social concerns.

Indian English Drama can be taken into consideration to conceive the cultural identity of the society to which it belongs. Having evolved through depiction of themes and content of varied hues, it has come a long way from being philosophical, religious, historical, and mythological to being the Contemporary Indian English Drama committed to depiction of the unconventional themes, selection of common men as characters and a literary sensitivity to the ugly realities of life. Indian English Drama though saw its appearance with Krishan Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* in 1813 but it was the influence of British Drama in 20th C that added an actual spark to the Indian Drama. This century saw the emergence of great writers like Tagore, H. Chattopadhyay, Sir Aurobindo to name a few. The hallmark of Tagore's drama was reputed for its philosophical complexity conveyed through lyrical simplicity and allegorical significance. Shri

Aurobindo contributed as a major playwright by carrying forward the Elizabethan Poetic Drama. H. Chattopadhyaya's drama comprises his leftist leanings and revolutionary zeal which added a new dimension to Indian English Drama. A.S.P. Ayyar's dramas were message driven while Bharati Sarabhai, the maiden woman playwright who wrote during the colonial era of Indian English Drama, lends it a Gandhian touch.

Post independence Indian English drama is at the crossroads where different types of dramas are written which cannot be labelled together either in theme or style. On one side are writers like Asif Currimbhoy who wrote about east-west encounter, politics, economic problems, religion and philosophy etc. and Nissim Ezekiel who portrayed his observations of the oddities in human life and behaviour. On the other are playwright who have modified historical themes and fashioned them into focus and style of their own. Girish Karnad is one such playwright who draws heavily from history, legends, myths and folk tales though depicting it with modern perspectives. Mahashweta Devi is one of the pioneers in writing drama of commitment.

2. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DRAMA: BYWORDS OF COMPLEX SOCIAL PROCESSES

A perusal of the growth of drama in India reveals that the Contemporary Indian Drama shows a remarkable shift in its perspectives. It has developed from a drama touching upon social issues to a drama that is committed to arousing the public conscience for a wilful change in society bringing to fore unconventional themes presented with an out of the box thinking. Drama of the post independence era seems to get a fresh impetus from young writers like Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani whose plays are remarkable for raising social concerns with a streak of realism. Padmanabhan presents a dehumanised and terrifying world while Dattani showcases the mean, ugly and unhappy aspects of human life. This paper aims at studying Mahesh Dattani's *Dance like a Man* and *Tara* as plays studying *Social Concerns in New Perspectives*. Dattani has handled varied content in an unconventional manner.

Mahesh Dattani is, undoubtedly, one of the most prominent playwrights of the contemporary times whose plays are inspired with a mission to communicate profound meaning. He is not writing for the people who are poor or hungry, or raising existential questions, abstract or philosophical issues. He is writing for the urban middle-class people whose basic needs are taken care of and who strive for achieving their ambitions in life but are pestered by the issues of family, individual freedom, corruption, social and cultural prejudices. His plays are an apt representation of Manisha Vardhan's statement that "the more your basic needs is taken care of, the more space you have to reflect on certain things. Whereas, if you don't have that space and are concerned 24 hours about your basic needs, then you want to escape into something else..." (Vardhan, 2004,19). Truly, Dattani's characters are unconventional voices raised against the challenges posed by their social surroundings. The surroundings most of the times in Dattani's plays are the urban scenarios, which are as real and contemporary as our lives and which lend his plays a remarkable contemporariness.

3. DATTANI'S DANCE LIKE A MAN

Dattani's *Dance like a Man* takes up issues related to urban middle-class society which is undergoing noticeable cultural change and is passing through a transitional phase. The transitions in Indian social values form the matrix of the urban middle-class. Dattani targets these transitions, highlights the numerous fundamental social changes and shows how equations of familial relations are being rewritten. He has not focused on big international or national issues but on the big issues that are throwing the Indian life today into confusion and disorder—social prejudices, greed, marital discord, infidelity, generational clashes, gender discrimination, the blurring of male and female boundaries etc. *Dance like a Man* showcases the crisis of three generations in the family of Amritlal a representative of the orthodox and traditional norms of the society who is disgusted with the effeminate nature of the art of dance and tries to dissuade his son, Jairaj from pursuing a career as a Bharatnatyam dancer by any means. Amritlal contrives a conspiracy with Ratna, Jairaj's wife, to keep Jairaj away from dancing and in return agreed to allow her to pursue a career in dancing. In order to achieve success in her dance career, Ratna agrees to Amritlal's plans. She makes Jairaj take wrong career decision and he couldn't achieve any recognition as a dancer.

Through constant turmoil and struggles of his characters, Dattani's presents how the young rebellious characters live within the domain of the patriarchy. The society has pre decided notion that males can't make a career in Dance especially Bharatnatyam that is considered a women's dance form. The society sees it as prostitute's profession that is not appropriate for the daughter-in-law of a respectable family and the thought of a male Bharatnatyam dancer is impossible. With great subtlety Dattani asserts that if a man dances, grows long-hair, develops an effeminate walk then even his manliness is doubted. He is considered 'womanly'—an effeminate man with implications of homosexuality. It is this fear of society that forces Amritlal to go to any extent to keep his son away from becoming a dancer. This turmoil ultimately turns Jairaj into a frustrated and drunkard man. Dattani very brilliantly presents the predicament of a young man trapped between his aspirations and society's expectations of him as a male; the cramped feelings of the individual under the pressure of the sham morality of the society.

Besides presenting the clash between the orthodox social norms and the changing societal perspectives, Dattani also highlights how the social restrictions and the consequential conflicts affect the familial relationship of father-son, husband-wife etc. He shows how the complex social circumstances of struggling urban middle-class people leads to extreme emotional pressures resulting in cracks wide enough to crumble the structure of family and society as a whole. Amritlal carried the baggage of his own times and imposed his beliefs on the next generation. Jairaj and Ratna imposed their passion for dance on their daughter Lata who otherwise is content to marry and settle down in her life. The play ends with Jairaj and Ratna coming to realization of their imperfections. Dattani seems to be emphasizing that no belief is totally perfect. There can be no single perspective to life hence social conventions are bound to be changed with times.

The play seems to establish Dattani as a socio-radical thinker who raises sensitive issues like homosexuality, male-female boundaries set by social conventions; but without passing any judgements or statements. He releases a gamut of emotions resulting from the quandary of human ambitions against the expectations of social order. He presents a study of human relationships and weaknesses juxtaposed against the ever-existing clashes between traditional thinking and rebellious streak of the younger generations. The post independence scenario that forms the milieu of the play further enhances the conflicts present in the lives of the characters which spring from the complex situations in which they exist. Dattani shows how in a post independence India, an individual is caught in a complex situation that is the result of the traditional Indian culture further stratified by the paradigms of the colonial rules. The result is the rise of a new urban middle class personality characterised by curious mix of submissiveness, dependence, lack of self-confidence and a suppressed rebellion. They try to break free the shackles of familial and social pressures, only to realize their inability to do so, resulting in complex conflicts in terms of emotions and values. Dattani's plays seem to be study of these clashes that are manifested in the social contexts where the traditional Indianism is so dominating and intimidating while the modernism is attempting to consolidate itself in Indian space. Dipankar Gupta, a noted sociologist argues that "Though the past is in our present, it is not as if the past in entirety is our present. It would be incorrect to ignore ... the many dramatic transformations that have occurred in Indian society. Thus while we are not modern, we are not quite traditional either. It is in this sense that India is between worlds (Gupta, 2000, 206). It is these states of in between worlds and the resultant impact of this in between on the individual personality and life that forms the matrix of Dattani's *Dance like a Man*.

4. DATTANI'S TARA

Dattani is remarkable for the manner of speaking to the audience with complete honesty. He does not provide the audience with quick or expedient endings, rather presents a kind of insight into social issues through the lives of his characters who are common men like us living in complex social situations. In *Tara* Dattani presents a complex web of relationships unravelling the ways in which social beliefs regulate the lives of common men, restrain them in their dealings with their fellow men and sometimes forces them to take decisions which grip them in self-guilt for life. *Tara* is the tragic tale of a girl who has to face grave injustice at the hands of her own mother under the pretext of social demands. Dattani here presents the theme of gender discrimination from a totally new perspective. His story doesn't end with the injustice; rather it's a study of the life post this grave injustice, a study of the compunction and guilt that grips the mother. Dattani

presents an analysis of the themes of gender inequality and corruption by trying to interpret the meaning of social actions and their resultant circumstances through the actions of individual characters.

Dattani shows how the strong preference for a male child, overpowered the maternal instincts of Bharati, who despite being a woman made her own daughter a handicap for life. Dattani presents not only the female but also the patriarchal society as filled with bias and prejudiced thoughts. Patel is excessively worried about Chandan and his future only as he is a male child. The grandfather of the twins too leaves all his property in the name of Chandan as he is a male child. When the cruel reality was revealed to Tara, she couldn't tolerate the insensitivity of her own mother, eventually losing her will to survive and dies. Chandan ran away to a foreign country and spends the rest of his life in the guilt that he was the reason for the tragic injustice done to his sister. He couldn't forgive himself and asks his dead sister, Tara, to forgive him.

Dattani tries to stir the chord of human emotions and soften the society towards the issue of gender discrimination through a depiction of the sense of guilt experienced by Bharati, Tara's mother, her excessive show of affection and care to Tara, her wish to donate her kidney to Tara even though a donor was available. Dattani is judgmental neither on Bharati nor Patel but subtly tries to stir up compassion for the girl child who longs for a life of equal opportunities in a society marred by strong preference male child. The focus of the play is undoubtedly gender discrimination that is revealed by Dattani through a deft handling of an array of human emotions and reactions experienced in response to insensible social dogmas. Bharati crumbles under self-guilt and turns hysterical; Tara and Chandan bear the burden of being ogled all the time by the outside world. The perception of guilt receives a new interpretation, when the play goes back and forth in time revealing the dark secrets behind Bharati's hysterical state and the absence of normal emotional environment in the Patel family. The fading or transformation of the moral values under the societal pressures is the focus of *Tara*. Probing into several directions, the play contains contentious, very subtle yet illuminating remarks. The play tries to showcase the social and moral ruptures in Indian society and the devastating impact of these ruptures on the individuals caught in between them. He externalises the problems, guilt and the pent up feelings of the characters caught in these ruptures in a very authentic and realistic manner. He mirrors the inner recess of the common men and the alcoves of the contemporary society; which can be taken only with a grain of salt.

With an exceptional originality of conception, Dattani chronicles the lives of contemporary men as social victims and reveals through them the follies, foibles and prejudices of Indian society. The characters of his plays are most of the time the bourgeoisie and the situations of the plays in the course of the action reveal the hollowness of their lives. While commenting on his plays; John Mc Rae calls him "the voice of India" and observes that his plays are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy.... (Mc Rae, John, 2000) Dattani investigates what lies below the disguise of characters and families front up to dupe the entire world. He lays bare the pretences of urban middle-class families and presents his characters as social victims lost in a maze searching for security and acceptance, to be true to themselves.

5. CONCLUSION

Dattani makes abundant use of Indian traditions and juxtaposes them with contemporary problems of India's new generation. He raises these social concerns to such a higher level that they touch the human chords and emanates love, happiness while at the same time revealing identity crisis, feeling of self-guilt and remorse etc. His play brings to fore not only the contemporary social problems but also examines very imaginatively with multiple perspectives what really lies at the core of these social issues and the other way round. He brings out the complexities of the issues and the fragmentation of the contemporary urban lives as well as demonstrates through his characters how this fragmentation leads to distorted social manifestations. Through the depiction of the bleakness of the bourgeois lives, he reveals the pretended intellectualism of the bourgeoisie and makes an effort in the direction of a resolute rational resurgence of society. In doing so, Dattani no longer remains merely a creator of iconic plays but bywords of complex social processes.

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