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## Mahesh Dattani's *The Big Fat City*: Exploring the Black Comedy

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The paper tries to critically analyse Mahesh Dattani's stage play *The Big Fat City* as a black comedy. The play is regarded as the first black comedy of Indian theatre. This paper will also try to deal with the plot structure, diverse socio-cultural themes, and dramatic technique employed by Dattani in the play. J.L. Styan and Brom Weber's views about black comedy, its nature and features have been also discussed in the paper. A very essential feature of black comedy is its juxtaposition of the humorous and the pathetic that evokes a mixed feeling of laughter and gravity. In the play *The Big Fat City*, Dattani deals with such serious issues as commodification of moral and ethical values, breakdown of relationships, adverse impact of technology on human lifestyle, and emotional and spiritual hollowness of man. In brief, it is an attempt by the playwright to portray the anxiety, confusion, desperation and frustration that envelops the modern world. In fact, Dattani himself accepts that the issues of the play are serious and grave in nature but the treatment is light with a touch of 'dark subtle humour'. The present paper deals elaborately with all these aspects of the play.

Mahesh Dattani (b.1958), the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, is an acclaimed Indian English playwright, actor, director and the founder of the theatre company Playpen. Dattani's plays are primarily performance oriented addressing bold themes and grave issues pertaining to the urban middle-class Indian society. As a social realist he deals with subjects that are rooted in contemporary social, political, and cultural Indian milieu. Asha Kutahri Chaudhuri thus elaborates, "He deals with sexuality and gender issues, religious tension, and the workings of personal and moral choices as he explores a gamut of human relationships. From *Where There's a Will*, to the matrix of gender roles in *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara*, to *Bravely Fought the Queen* that explores the shams of the upper middle class joint family, to *Final Solutions*, a gripping and sensitive play about the Hindu-Muslim conflict, to *Do the Needful*, originally a radio play that comically talks about alternate sexual choices as do *On Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, to *Thirty Days in September* which looks at incest and child abuse, Dattani has never fallen short of serious issues that need to be addressed" (Chaudhuri 18-19).

*The Big Fat City*, first performed on 22 June 2013 at the Tata Theatre (Mumbai), was directed by Mahesh Dattani himself and produced by Ashvin Gidwani. The play was first published in Dattani's semi-autobiographical book *Me and My Plays* (2014) by Penguin Books India. The book is a collection of an autobiographical essay entitled 'Me and My Plays' and two stage plays, namely *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* and *The Big Fat City*. In an interview with Deepa Punjani for Mumbai Theatre Guide, Mahesh Dattani says he found inspiration for the play during his three years stay in Lokhandwala Mumbai. He further enlightens us on the inspiration and theme of the play describing it a black comedy or dark comedy: "... It was in a milieu of aspiring actors, musicians, filmmakers, corporate executives recently transferred to Mumbai. A very motivated lot of young people waiting for the right move or contact to take them a step closer to stardom, fortune or that penthouse in Oberoi towers. Success has to be worn on one's sleeve, so one always aspired to graduate to Bandra. What they say about New York City can be tweaked to fit Mumbai. I can say, in

Lokhandwala, everyone is looking for an apartment, a role and a lover. And when they have these then they are looking for a better apartment, a better role and a better lover. It is in this mobile, culturally and morally flexible class of people that I found inspiration. After all, there is a certain honesty even in their pretensions. Their objectives are clearly defined and so are their obstacles. When I gave Ashvin Gidwani the concept note and told him that I wish to write about this, he immediately drew out a contract and signed me on. He could see its commercial potential and I could see its potential for black humour” (Punjani, 2013).

*The Big Fat City* has been acclaimed as India’s first black comedy. Set in the metropolitan city of Mumbai, the play is a dismal and sarcastic tale of a murder, and carries all the elements of high drama – love, greed, hypocrisy, artifice, jealousy, adultery, murder, violence, drugs, mafia, family honour, and corruption. Black comedy, also known as dark comedy or black humour, deals with such subjects that are usually serious in nature and treated with gravity like insanity, death, murder, war, and violence. The playwright may deal with alarming issues but the treatment is humorous and ironical; this results in a dramatic juxtaposition of the pathetic and the comic. Brom Weber, in an essay entitled “The Mode of Black Humor,” described black humour as, “Humor which discovers cause for laughter in what has generally been regarded as too serious for frivolity: the death of men, the disintegration of social institutions, mental and physical disease, deforming, suffering, anguish, privation, and terror” (Weber 388). Weber says that black humour may leave a disturbing impact on the minds of the audience and is regarded ‘antithetical to light humour’. It is noteworthy that whereas light humour arouses laughter and rejuvenates the audience, black humour underscores the horrific realities of the world and leaves them to resolve the unresolved.

The play is set in the flat of Murli and his wife Niharika in a posh locality of Mumbai. It is a play that narrates three different stories about people from diverse genres of life that coincidentally come under one same roof. The first narrative is about a couple Murli and his wife Niharika who live in a compact one-bedroom-hall kitchenette in an apartment in ‘the big fat city’. Murli, who worked as an Associate Managing Director in Lotus Inc. India, has been fired from his job but has to pay the monthly EMI on the loan for the home they had purchased. Since they had been unable to pay their EMIs on time, Niharika arranges a dinner for her husband's college mate Sailesh as she feels he could help them get out of this financial mess. She ropes in a neighbour, Lalitha, a fading television actress to impress her guest. Sailesh Ganatra is the managing partner of Jalaram Bank and he too has personal reasons to visit them; he has to arrange for a sum of forty thousand to settle a client’s bank account. The next narrative discusses Lalita Jagtiani aka Lolly, her declining career graph in the Indian small screen industry, struggle to meet her family’s luxurious and extravagant lifestyle, and desperate efforts to get a running role in Ekta Kapoor’s daily soap. Lolly had played the role of Yamini in the daily soap *Saas Bani Saperan* and became popular for that. The last narrative is about a young aspiring actress Anu who has moved to Mumbai from Haryana with her male friend Puneet. They both plan to marry soon but that would mean dishonouring and displeasing their families and the Khap Panchayat. The drama occurs when Puneet enters Anu’s bedroom that she had rented in Niharika’s flat, finds Lolly’s drunkard husband Kailash lying semi-naked on the bed, and strangles him to death in a fit of rage as he thinks Kailash was the producer with whom Anu had slept. In order to save Puneet from the charges of murder Anu charts out a plan and promises monetary gains to those present on the murder spot to make them accomplices. She then calls her elder brother Harjeet asking him to send her a huge sum for a movie production and befools him that she has got a major role in that movie. However, the plan fails when Harjeet pays them a surprise visit because he had his

own doubts about her younger sister's intentions, finds out the reality that Anu and Puneet had purposely eloped from their village to get married, and shoots both of them to save the family's honour. The play dramatises three murders onstage but it does not affect the flow of life of any of the characters. By the end of the play we find that Niharika and Murli had to move to Thirunalvelli to Murli's mother's house as they could not save their own house in Mumbai, the newly widowed Lolly gets involved with Sailesh and they develop a link with the underworld mafia Usmanbhai to meet the luxurious lifestyle, while Lolly's only son Rahul leaves her as she fails to fulfil the role of a caring and responsible mother.

The characters of the play are people of dead conscience who lack sensitivity towards one another. They desperately try to use one another for their personal gains. While Murli is ravaged by feelings of declining self worth his wife is threatened at the prospect of losing her home. Murli is of a nervous and anxious temperament, his overbearing wife Niharika seems to be 'a pretentious, snooty bitch'. Niharika makes every possible effort to train Murli to convince his banker friend to help them with their EMIs. Sailesh maintains a sober appearance in the beginning but turns out a man of fragile character as during their first meeting he falls head over heels for Lolly. He rather seems more impressed with the idea of being in love with Yamini, the character Lolly played in a daily soap called *Saas Bani Saperan*, than actually being interested in Lolly. Though Lolly pretends to be very affluent, in reality she is in a desperate need of both money and a role in Ekta Kapoor's daily soap. One is extremely surprised to see her calm and indifferent reaction at her husband's mysterious death as she says, "Oh, Sailesh! When I saw Kailash's body on the street --- I knew he had left to make way for better things! I am so happy I don't need to feel guilty about anything!" (Dattani 218). All she seems to be really worried about was the drug packet that was worth fifty lakhs. In fact, she also disappoints us when she could not make herself available to save her only child Rahul from the goondas of the underworld who had been threatening to kill him if Lolly failed to arrange for the drug money. Before leaving home Rahul sends her a text message "You are not a bad mom ... no. You are a bad person" (Dattani 234). Then, a major role is played by Anu and her lover Puneet in the development of the dramatic action of the play. Puneet's love for Anu is true and untainted. He proves his love for her first by murdering Kailash and then by sheathing Anu and ultimately dying for her when Harjeet shoots them. Anu comes out as the most grotesque and ruthless of all the characters when in order to save Puneet from being charged for Kailash's murder she forges a plan and throws Kailash's dead body from the balcony of the fourteenth floor of the apartment. Her insensitivity comes forth as she has no remorse or guilt complex for her brutal act. The characters of the play are as hollow, artificial and materialistic as the world where they exist.

Indeed, a very fundamental characteristic of the black comedy is a skilful juxtaposition of the humorous and the pathetic to portray in a more palatable form the hard edges and grim tragedies of the modern 'wasteland'. J.L.Styan observes that dark comedy can be called a play which can be classified neither as a comedy nor a tragedy but a play in which "the impulse to laughter and the impulse to tears sit uneasily together" (Styan 270). Dattani's *The Big Fat City* incorporates the basic elements of the black comedy---- humour, dramatic irony, satire, parody, grotesque characters, and absurd actions leading to confusion and anxiety. The comic world of *The Big Fat City* continuously rolls on confusing, frustrating, and uncertain actions of the characters. For instance, ACT I, Scene I, portrays Murli's low self-esteem and lack of confidence in sharp contrast to his overbearing clever wife Niharika. While Niharika wants Murli to wear his typical silk kurta to impress his rich friend Sailesh, Murli is quite confused and uncertain about its purpose. The following conversation between

the couple evokes laughter but at the same time depicts the artificiality and hypocrisy of urban society:

Murli: Can't I wear my regular shirt, please?

Niharika: Stop fidgeting with that kurti. You will tear it. No, you can't.

Niharika: It's torn! (Most upset) One chance! We have this one chance and you want to ruin it?

*Murli calms down for a second before he goes back into his befuddled state (Dattani 156-158).*

Further, Dattani presents a violent contradiction of the pathetic and the comic in events that follow Kailash's murder. After sensing trouble Anu runs into the room to find Puneet breathing heavily but still on top of Kailash. The situation was serious and grim as Puneet had murdered Kailash. But Anu's reaction seems quite strange: **Anu** (to Puneet): You-- did this for me? You killed a man for me? **Puneet**: Yes, sweetheart. **Anu**: Oh, sweetheart!" (Dattani 184). And they embrace each other. The insensitive, unnatural behaviour and absurd conversation that takes place between Anu and Puneet following the tragedy makes Niharika wonder whether they both were real or unreal. They seem to be ridiculing death and the dead:

**Anu**: He is almost naked!

**Puneet**: Sweetheart, where did you put his clothes?

**Anu**: I didn't. Oh, you sweet boy! You think I and he were ... Oh! I love you, baby.

**Puneet**: I love you too, baby!

**Anu** (as if to a baby): Really. How much? Show me?

**Puneet** (showing with his hands): Such much.

**Anu**: Such much?

**Puneet**: Sachi muchi such much.

**Niharika**: Are you serious? You guys are unreal (Dattani 191).

The play deals with diverse themes related to the modern world such as commodification of culture, moral values and human relationships, the terror of patriarchal institution and honour killing, struggle for survival, adverse impact of technology on our relationships, and even commercialization of death for personal gains. The characters in *The Big Fat City* compromise their ethical values and as a result forfeit their integrity. They also fail to maintain the sanctity of motherhood, marriage, friendship and sibling bonds, and live with a dead conscience. The failure of Lolly as a mother and wife, Niharika's scheme to exploit Murli's college friend to save her house, Sailesh's indulgence with Lolly and his wife's extra-marital affair with their neighbour, Anu's gruesome disposal of Kailash's corpse speaks volumes about the emotional and spiritual barrenness of the modern world where human civilization faces its decline. Another major socio-cultural issue that has been discussed in the play is terror of patriarchal institution and honour killing. In order to safeguard the family honour Harjeet kills his younger sister Anu and her lover Puneet who had eloped from their village to Mumbai and wished to get married. Dattani makes a bold assertion about the orthodox and conservative side of society which deprives individuals of their freedom of choice. Jyothi Vishwanath and Srinivas C. Palakonda, in their well-researched paper titled 'Patriarchal Ideology of Honour and Honour Crimes in India,' have drawn our attention to the nature and horror of honour crimes in India. While analysing the position of woman in India where she is regarded a hallmark of family honour and the role of Khap panchayats in maintaining 'family honour' by terrorizing the 'rebels', the authors observe, "For re-establishing the family honour, presumed guilty girl or woman must be

retrieved and punished and cannot be disowned. Usually absorbing her back into the traditional *biradari* network being a difficult task, her physical elimination appears to be a better honourable option open to her family. She is made to take the stigma which can be removed only by extinguishing her *i.e.*, the object of dishonour. On the contrary, no stigma attaches to the perpetrators of the honour crimes by the society who are absolved of their guilt on the premise that sacrificing the natural bonds of love and kinship for preserving and restoring honour purifies the family” (Vishwanath 391).

Dattani has employed a very new device of using of text messages to communicate the true feelings of the characters to the audience. The use of technology to reveal their thought process and unmask the characters of their pretensions enhances the dramatic quality of the play. The audience gets familiar with what is going on inside the minds of the characters through text messages they see on the screen. For instance when Lolly’s conversation with Ekta Kapoor through text messages are displayed on the screen, her hypocrisy to maintain her social status of a television star and desperation to get a role in a daily soap to improve her declining career comes to the forefront. To quote from the text:

SCREEN (from Ekta): LOLLY I GOT 46 MISSED CALLS FROM YOU. STOP BUGGING ME. I HAVE 6 FILMS RELAESING THIS FRIDAY. IF I NEED YOU I WILL DEFINITELY CALL YOU. LOVE. EKTA.

SCREEN (from Lolly): SORRY EKTA. BUT PLEASE, PLEASE GIVE ME A RUNNING CHARCATER IN YOUR NEW SERIAL. I REALLY DON’T WANT TO DO THAT MORBID DATTANI PLAY. I AM DESPERATE. PLEASE (Dattani 167-168).

Here, the playwright makes use of technology to break the myths and facades that every character tries to maintain for their survival.

Analysed thus, we can say that *The Big Fat City* confirms to the norms of the black comedy and that Mahesh Dattani has employed ‘dark subtle humour’ and pathos to represent the way of life in a materialistic society where human values and moralities seem to be fading in many respects. In order to lessen the aversion to the contemporary social and cultural realities of the Indian milieu, and to help his audience cope with the gloomy outlook of modern ‘wasteland’, Dattani applies black humour. He expresses his views about the juxtaposition of humour and pathos in an interview with Debrarati S Sen for the Times of India. Dattani speaks, “The events are rather tragic but the mode is completely comic. At times you don’t know whether to laugh or to recoil in horror or to offer sympathy or to just ridicule what’s going on. There is *rasa*, there is a *hasya*, there is a *karuna*, there is *raudra*, there is everything. It is all in a platter - a kind of combination and you take it all in one” (Sen, 2012). The issues highlighted in the play are firmly rooted in the metropolitan city of Mumbai and reflect the city in its different shades.

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