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Glimpses on the Transgender Issues Reflected in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract:

This paper explores the issues of Indian transgender (*hijras*) in Mahesh Dattani's dramas. Being an anti-traditional writer, he captured the real situation of transgender and created transgender dialogues from ground realities of Indian Diaspora. The paper attempts to highlight the third gender people and their agonies. The playwright also highlights transgender nostalgia, psychological maleness and femaleness, "Autogynophilia", incest and their social status. Dattani's plays subvert the characteristics of feminine and masculinity into transgender characters; he amalgamates both the qualities, men in women and women in men, in his transgender (*hijra*) characters. Socio-realism of transgender in his plays enables him to promote a culture of transgender from Indian origin which are showcased through his *hijra*-characters. This study is an attempt to capture the glimpses of transgender issues in Dattani's dramas, through the glasses of capturing the same issues of India in real.

Keywords: Transgender, Nostalgia, Autogynophilia.

Change (in present situation) is the rule of our orbit and Literature is not an exception to it. Especially, while talking about drama we conclude our study in the final view that it is not a static product of literature rather it bears a tag of continuous flow of change. Indian drama and theatre is very fast in this changing quality of literature. A dramatist like Mahesh Dattani is a revolutionist in the genre drama. Mahesh Dattani being an anti-traditional dramatist among a host of Indian English dramatist had taken a revolutionary step to involve the transgender issues in Indian English drama.

The dominant playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, Badal Sirkar and Vijay Tendulkar had established a tradition for Indian English dramas. Indian theatres were enjoying tragedies, comedies, etc plays of men and women till Dattani's debut. But, the plays of Mahesh Dattani seem to break the tradition. Mahesh Dattani a writer, actor, and director is a great name in Indian English Drama who came into fame with the prestigious award for two volumes of his plays: The Sahitya Acadami Award for *Final Solution and Other Plays* in 1998. His plays touch to the realistic scenario of the transgender people and their families (Eunuchs and their families). Dattani give voices of the transgender issues in his dramas: *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Circles Round the Fire* (radio play) also named: *Seven Steps Around the*

Fire (1998), *The Murder That Never Was* (2000), *30 Days in September* (2001), *Brief Candle* (2009), *Where Did Leave My Parda* (2012), *The Big Fat City* (2012). In all the aforementioned dramas Dattani focuses the pangs of transgender- contemporary to his period however, factually now in India, gay, lesbian, eunuchs (categories of transgender) are having their voting rights and equal dignity with their acknowledgement and sex.

While, going through the plays of Dattani, he gives vent to the plight of their love, family, utility, grief, tolerance and response. Nostalgia and revisiting memories are major tools of Dattani which he utilizes with the characters. It is natural in transgenders in India to seek reasons behind their day-to-days status, mentality and attraction for sex, e.g., gay verses gay, lesbian verses lesbian. Dattani's flashback technique tracks us on a track of nostalgia of the character. Bijay Kumar Das said:

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. From *hijras* to homosexuals (lesbians), he moves on to portray the impact of dreaded disease (HIV positive) on our society. Again he portrays, music, dance, communal disharmony, family disruption and above all, human love and compassion vividly in his plays. His plays speak to us in our situation and we tend to see the reflection of his characters in our society. Dattani's themes strike us for two reasons- novelty and authenticity. Therein lays his strength and the hallmark of his achievement. (Das.59-60)

While going through the plays of Dattani, the current issues of diversity of gender and sex physic pinpoint audience/reader's attention. "Dattani has the courage of conviction to depict the lives of such people who are looked down upon by the society". (Das.93) Through his dramas he expresses the ideas of third world genetics of human beings, where its audience grabs the opportunity to redeem themselves by true repentance and faith for transgender, especially those who remained representative in Dattani's dramas for their whole community on the stage. It's an open plight to the nostalgic agonies of transgender community which is a continuous series in the theme of his plays. Chronologically, his dramas keep in continuity to handle the transgender theme; they appeared interlinked on their nostalgic surface. Uma, the research person of Sociology, talked in her researches on the issues of transgender community. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire* Uma is the research student. Neither Hero nor Heroine but the murder victim Kamla (an eunuch) is the main protagonist in the drama. The transgender, Kamla married with a minister's son and meets to death. Uma keeps all the notes of discovering truth of Kamla's murder.

Thus, the next potential action was to note the suicide of Subbu, the minister's son. He produced a gun on the occasion of his farfetched marriage ceremony and gun shot dead by him. Thus, the plight of the criminal height of the minister was at its peak when he wanted to hide the actual sex of his child in society. His heart had been throbbled to disclose the truth that his

progeny was she-male and desired to get marry with a eunuch-Kamala. This is the main search of Uma for his doctoral thesis on transgender, which is having its fountain head in the mind of Dattani.

Anarkali, a transgender, discloses the secret of the murder of Kamla and answered Uma after the acknowledgement and trust on her and on the wife of Suresh Rao, the superintendent of Police. A single throw of speech from the mouth of Anarkali discovered the nostalgia of treatment, likewise untouchables in the world of transgender in India, where they bethink only on two occasions: marriage and birth of a child. It is the guilt of maltreatment reflected in the researches of Uma from the mind of Dattani. Dattani used the pronoun “she” for Kamla, the hermaphrodites. Thus, “she says: What is to tell? I sing with other *hijras* at weddings and when a child is born. People give us money; otherwise, I will put a curse on them”. (Das.13) Next, she expressed her dread towards masculine society where she felt insecure to tell the truth of Kamla’s murder. There were two ends for her either to die in jail or outside jail by the hands of Kamla’s culprit. However, she suggested the name of, Champa, another transgender, who were living at the Russel Market in Shivaji nagar, had given right information to Uma for the sake of money. It is the psychodynamics of transgender in India, where the tasks of this community people done only forsake of money and utilizes curse as a strong weapon on some uncomfortable occasions. In other words, their diluted quality in psychic and physical order was an earning source and defensive tool in the plays of Dattani, reflected from contemporary reality of Indian transgender.

Similarly, Uma tried to disclose the nature of *hijra* community which is ultimately the disquisition of Dattani, who articulated the truth from the narrow lives of Autogynephilic and transgenders. A sex-fuled mental disorder can be divided into two group of in its category - Homosexual and Autogynephilic. “The homosexual type is at that extreme feminine end of the male spectrum.” (http://www.oocities.org/transsexual_analysis/transsexual3.html) on the other hand, an Autogynephilic individual had a fetish history; he may marry and may “heterosexual” in its previous life, and might be sexually aroused by feminization. Autogynephilia is the term which impart us an intimate relationship between two or among more persons which are in demand of familiarity, morality etc. The transgender have a different bias to it in India. Realistically, in the plays of Dattani there is a predicament about the transgender people’s families in the reminiscence of Uma’s mind thus:

Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this country with Islam, or are they a part of our glorious Hindu tradition? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? How do they come to know of these wedding? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just exorcists? And why they do not take singing lesions? (Pause.) Is it true? Could it be true what my mother used to say about them? Did they really put a curse on her because they did not allow them to sing and dance at their wedding? Or was that their explanation for not

being able to have children of their own? Or... a reason to give to people for wanting to adopt me? (Das.134)

Uma's research provided purgation to all the aforementioned questions in quotation. Critics correlate answers of it with the story of transgender occurred in Ramayana and impact of invaders on it. Next, the agonies of this community member concatenate readers in the following conversation between Uma and a transgender, Anarkali:

Anarkali: Then what will you do knowing who killed Kamla?

Uma: Tell my husband to make an arrest.

Anarkali: One *hijra* less in this world does not matter to your husband. (Das.14)

The lines focus the inner most feelings of transgender that nobody cares for them and their existence is of no use except on the two occasions in Indian society where they are treated as unwanted. Common men and women are like goons for them. They are dreadful for their lives. They have no voice under the threat of higher people at the level of ministry and at the level of police department. It is their nostalgia by which they are always reluctant to provide the right information on the issue of the murder of Kamla, a transgender. Thus, the protest of subconscious assumptions of Indian *hijras* realizes the protest of the transgender against an injustice measured on the canvases of contemporary Indian society. With special references to the plays of Dattani, readers and audience of his dramas count an innumerable injustice after getting an untouchable treatment in various issues of transgender. Thus, it is the nostalgic ramification of the writer. B. K. Das's words are worthwhile for it:

Dattani is questioning the age old beliefs of marriage being based on heterosexual relationship. He seems to say that homosexual and lesbian relationships being as natural as heterosexual relationship, same-sex marriage should be permitted in India. Laws should be made to this effect. Secondly, the plight of *hijras* in our society is deplorable. It is an *irony* of life that the *hijras* who are welcome on two occasions- one at the time of marriage, and two, at the time of child birth – to sing and dance, are themselves deprived of marriage and childbirth. ... In real life, homosexual relationship is an accomplished fact, why can't it be a subject matter of play? This is what Dattani asks, though implicitly. He believes that since in real life there are left-handers, which is as natural as heterosexual relationship. (BKD 17)

Dattani's plays explore new themes to the Indian English Theatre through the lenses of reality. His themes are on the psychological "maleness" and "femaleness", Autogynophilic tendencies in course of the reflection of contemporary Indian society. Thus, transgender conversations are the anti-traditional attempts on the contemporary Indian theater to Dattani. His play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, supports its audience to trace the socio-economic background of transgender on the stage. He proves that on the stage an individual may seek its (transgender's) way to fulfill their love and sex, apart from all social impositions, restrictions and complications on its path.

Dattani used Indian girls' name to the transgender characters: psychologically female soul in male body - e.g. Kamla, Anarkali, Dipali, etc. The acceptance and regret of Gay qualities have been expressed by the very characters of this drama. *On a Muggy Night* Sharad, a gay person, said to Kamlesh, another gay thus: "You know I still love you" (text 56). Next, Kamlesh felt the beauty of Deepali, a lesbian, thus he seeks help from Sharad, who only expressed his attention of fear. Such occasions in drama discussed the audience realizes the innermost regret of being a diluted personality: "For the first time in my life I wished I wasn't gay" (<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=3dgTAAAAQBAJ&pg=PT39&dq>). It is its nostalgia to realize the power of sex and wants to be heterosexual. It's appropriate to see the nostalgic tendencies of the transgender in Indian society in the following quotation herein, it says, in the drama thus: "... Power with sex, power with muscle, power with size..." (Das. 29) Bunny confessed his sexual category, like other concessioners of drama who had been the scapegoat of sexual exploitations. Bunny said to Kiran, "I have never told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now- I am a gay man" (Das.22) Thus, the search of identity stayed in dilemma between sex and gender and soul for desire; i.e. to say that these characters were nostalgic in search of sex identity which resulted in the answer of ambiguous gender. They failed to achieve life due to this ambiguous quality of physis. On a turn of life some of them who are the victims of psychic maltreatment from childhood, desire to become heterosexuals, in fact. The nostalgic ramification of such characters in Dattani's dramas unveiled the quest for identity among the transgender. It's worthwhile to quote the following lines of Sharad, a transgender in play of Dattani: "I myself what I have got and what I am not what I'm not" (Das.23).

Next, the families and material relations of transgender remained a new twist to the themes in Indian context and drama. In such context young couples of transgender desired to pursue the extramarital relationships. "*Do the needful*, a family play, is built on the theme of 'gay'. B. K. Das found in his studies thus:

Do the Needful, a family play, is built on the theme of 'gay' relationship and as a result the marital relationship is given a new twist to suit both the wife and the husband. This story through appears to be comical reminds us the abnormal behavior of a young couple who are willing to pursue their pleasures independently outside marriage. (Das.23)

The task of Vinay in *Thirty Days in September* is the instance of incest-molestation. This is the courageous task of Dattani to take to forefront a shade of incest molestation or family sex for which *Gautragaman* is the apt Sanskrit ward. Mala, the daughter of Shanta, reveals her anger on her mother thus:

I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Every vacation when we went to visit him or when he came to stay with us. You are busy in either the Pooja room or the kitchen. I would go to papa and cry. Before I could even tell him why I was crying he would tell me to go to you. You always fed me and-and you never said it but I knew what

you were saying to me pain will go away. And, and-Oh God! It did go away. But it comes back. It didn't go away forever! (Das.26).

Mala confessed to her mother that she had slept with many men including her uncle and office buddies. On this Shanta had decided to reveal the covered grim reality of his life and throw the light on accounts and actions and raises the questions:

Where were you when he locked the door to your bedroom while I was napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-one or whatever. That's how long or how little it took for you to send me to hall for the rest of my life! Surely you must have known, Ma. (Das.27)

This was the bad picture in civilized society in drama where a brother molested his sister and the same sister's daughter and the dumb tolerance of ladies against this molestation, i.e. to say that the *Gautragaman* along with molestation is casted in his dramas. These ladies are very much acquainted with the social issues in India, practically, where women ought to bear all the torture of a culprit, although they are or not. This notion is fixed at the back of their mind resulted in their dumb tolerance to their physical and psychological molestation. Thus, the true picture of male dominance came on the screen in fact, where morality banged and ruined the lives of Feminine.

In *Mango Souffle* Ed's nostalgic ramification had thrown light on the lesbian and homosexual relations. In this play the innermost pent up feelings of men and women were in action on stage where persons of same sex hide their love. Although, it is as natural as the nature of heterosexual love; is it accepted by our society? Dattani's play raised questions and gave us catharsis on the same stage. Transgender compassion, desire, attraction, suppression, tolerance, etc. are a part from Dattani's dramas of unity in diverse variety.

Thus, the amalgamated characters of feminine men and masculine women in the dramas of Dattani gave us various glimpses on the realistic life of transgender and his anti-traditional act in which his audience ruminate on issues of transgender characters in his dramas. He used the characters from gay and lesbian persona where he had personified them in the names of Indian girls in his dramas. There is a fusion of nostalgic thinking and behaving in-between these transgender. However, factually in the southern part of India the transgender people (*Kinhar* or *Hijras*) are introducing themselves successfully as an individual and won the successful protest in the quest of identity- the third gender. In Indian subcontinent they are protesting to acquire equal honour and status in society. Dattani's attempt to give them a break on stage is such an endearing act among the successful Indian writers and stage directors in India. Thus, he gives an open platform to critics to discuss on the issue of transgender, which is not against the nature of mankind but it is as natural as the two sexual beings on earth, according to the studious reflection of writers mind reflected and rejuvenated in the researches of his protagonist Uma. However few

critics said that the characters of dramas were not confrontational, Dattani's the meticulous study and presentation of the characters impart us the real glimpses of transgender on Indian subcontinent. With this study on the realistic dramas of Dattani one cannot deny, in 21 century that the transgender are not a civilian of India. Social treatment to transgender individuals who might be lesbian, gay or *hijras* is very much suffocating under the burden of men, where women, in some regions of India, are still struggling for their equal right. This study helps to the students not only of literature but also of social sciences. Research students can take a further step in this study to find the status of transgender in literature and social, economic, political impacts on the lifestyle of transgender.

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