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Mahesh Dattani as a Social Visionary: The Invisible Issues of the Marginalized Sexualities

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Abstract:

The current area of research focuses on the issues that are often overshadowed by the society, like homosexuality, gender discrimination, transgender issues, women subjugation and so on. Mahesh Dattani the first Indian writer, to write in English highlights these issues in his work and brings out the prejudices from harsh reality of our world. He portrays mirror of life in his plays; his characters are inspired from real life which struggles to find a place of identity in the society. Mahesh Dattani, the contemporary writer, represents the current day issues of the society where one finds, self-trapped in the clutches of society and is degraded to be the marginalised. The society treats marginalised with content as if they have committed serious damages on the human species at large. It should be noted that being a woman is natural, being a transgender is by birth and not a choice, being a girl child is God's gift not a curse on the family. The paper includes three major plays of the Indian writer namely *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *Do the Needful* and *On a Muddy Night in Mumbai*.

Keywords: invisible issues, marginalized, identity crises, gender discrimination, homosexuality, society.

[Dattani's work] probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal difference, consumerism and gender...a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English.'

- Sahitya Akademi award citation

Mahesh Dattani one of the most prominent Indian writer in English, was the first one to receive the Sahitya Akademi award for playwriting in English. Dattani is the one who initially initiated the writing of plays in English using his originality being an Indian. Dattani's plays are like fresh arrivals in the Indian sphere of writing where the play writer has used realistic images of his society to shape his writing. He focuses on deep-rooted

prejudices and social issues, where one is always constrained. These issues often make individuals run away from their natural identity. The main themes that the author focuses are gender issues and discrimination, transgender matters, women subjugation, homosexuality, communal violence among others.

Dattani evokes these issues which are embedded deep inside the society; they are neglected and are often not looked and worked upon. Here Dattani becomes voice of many people, giving them the way to analyze situations and combat them so that they find a strong image of self in the society. According to Alyque Padamsee, “At last we have a playwright who gives sixty million English-speaking Indians an Identity. Thank you, Mahesh Dattani!” The famous and applauding plays by the writer are *Tara* which portrays gender discrimination in an Indian society, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* shows the unfair treatment of the trans genders faced in India, *Bravely Fought the Queens* depict the woman issues and unflavoured treatment they face in the society and specially by the husbands and the in-laws, *On a Muddy Night in Mumbai* presents the live of homosexuals on how they are not considered part of society, *Do the Needful* represents the sympathy for gays who are considered mentally ill or morally wrong in society also it shows the value of marriage on the Indian mind -set, where one needs to get married to satisfy the society needs.

Mahesh Dattani the contemporary writer represents the current day issues of the society where one finds self- being trapped in clutches of society and is degraded to be the marginalized. People often look minority as a part out of society as they are ones who have committed serious damages on the human front but they do not realise that being a woman is natural, being a transgender is by birth and not a choice, being a girl child is God’s gift not a curse on the family. The prejudices are often the cause of resentment as in the play *Final Solutions* which won Dattani the Sahitya Akademi award. There is hatred among the religions because of some events occurred in the past but the humans should realise that the solution as Dattani rightly portrays in the play is to accept the differences and acknowledge the similarities. Dattani portrays the mirror of life in his plays where there are serious issues to be acknowledged and discussed by the humanity in general so that the people living in the society lift themselves up of the prejudices and let people live a normal life on status and harmony.

As Dattani himself remarks during a conversation “theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe...I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this

dynamic medium’’. The play writer transforms the life of the people especially the middle class on the stage which depict the cries of the minority. He is able to play realities of the society which have been so enclosed in the four walls of a house sometimes hidden by self and sometimes by society. The social visionary points out in one of his preface “I write for my plays to be performed and appreciated by as wide a section of the society that my plays speak to and are about’’. Dattani uses the stage as a powerful medium to express his views and educate people on the information and knowledge they lack which give way to their growing prejudices and resentment.

The paper observes some of Dattani’s plays which highlight the invisible issues of the marginalized sexualities in the plays *Do the Needful*, *Seven Steps around the Fire* and *On a Muddy Night in Mumbai*. In these plays of Dattani, the playwright explores the homosexuality present in society which is either considered morally wrong or some mental disease present in an individual. Homosexuality includes gayness, lesbianism, Tran’s genders and even bisexuals when the people of the sex are attracted to the person of the same sex. This fragmentation of gender is not accepted in society; therefore, people who are homosexuals have to struggle to survive in society where they sometimes have to hide their identity or even themselves to live in the prejudice of the society.

Homosexuality is considered as a taboo which has given way to identity crises where people who are born homosexuals often consider themselves out of the normal people and struggle to identify their identity in society. The society who considers these people as the ones having psychotic disorder make them feel out of the social paradigm and try every possible ways to hurt and insult these innocent people. In the note on the play by Jeremy Mortimer (Mortimer has been a director in BBC Radio Drama for nearly twenty years, and has also worked in television and theatre) believes that ‘Mahesh’s plays often feature characters that are questioning their identity and fell isolated in some way’.

In Dattani’s play *Seven Steps around the Fire* the Transgenders are represented who are also the minority, the marginalized group who are devoid of any status in the society, marriage and parenthood. The irony of life is that these people are considered auspicious and sign of fortune on the occasions of marriage and childbirth. In the play, Anarkali is the representation of the minority, a transgender who in the opening of the play is imprisoned in the charge of the murder of another transgender Kamla. Though there are no proofs of the murder by Anarkali, she is just kept there because everyone in the system believes that they

the *Hijra* are born liars and Anarkali is also lying about the murder. In the prison, she is kept among the male prisoners who mistreat her and beat her. In a conversation:

Munswany (hits the bars again) Back! Beat it! Kick the Hijra! The other inmates begin to beat Anarkali.

Anarkali (hitting back at first) Ai! Don't touch me!

The other inmates scream with pleasure as they beat up Anarkali. (9)

The above lines show how the *Hijra* is considered evil and even considered as 'it' by the police constable. Anarkali is the one facing all the plight of her community even the educated people like Superintendent Suresh believe in the prejudices and accuses Anarkali of murder without even interrogating the case. The only one who considers the trans genders are humans is Uma who does not believe in prejudices and helps the minority to settle down in the end and helps to prove Anarkali's innocence. The truth is revealed in the end that Kamla was the lover of Mr Sharma's son Subbu and it was Mr Sharma the minister who got Kamla killed because he never wanted his son to be involved with a transgender though Subbu and Kamla were secretly married. To secure the honour and prestige of himself the minister fixes his son's marriage with a girl and gets Kamla killed.

In the end, it is cleared to people as well as the audience that one cannot judge people even if they are marginalised on the bases of prejudices. Now a question arises from the play that whether the death of Kamla, the emotional breakdown of Subbu and later suicide and the struggle Anarkali and Champa are the results of society or the long prejudices about the Trans genders. If the society acknowledge the gay relationships or transgender ones then all would have been normal. The society does not want anything to be unnatural and new. They do not want anything to change and be according to them. There lies no acceptance among the majority of people and because of which the minority suffers. Kamla the beautiful eunuch was killed; her freedom to live like any other human was taken away just because of her being a minority, a transgender. The play hinders the possibility of love, affection, feelings, emotions and relationship among the homosexuals which are considered abnormal by the so-called normal beings.

On a Muddy Night in Mumbai, Dattani portrays gay and lesbian relationships which won critical and public acclaim all over the country and abroad, focuses on the inhabitation of

these minorities. They have secluded themselves from majority of the crowd and have built up their own world somewhere deep down the lane.

In the note on the play by John McRae (McRae is a special professor at the department of English studies at the university of Nottingham and director at the Abelians Theatre, Bari Italy) writes:

... the themes of *On a Muddy Night in Mumbai* deserve to touch the whole of the society and to be touched by it. It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust, and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates' (45).

In the play there are friends who are all gays or lesbian. They all struggle to survive in society and also struggle for their identity in the same system. Kamesh is a gay who is in love with Prakash also a gay. They both got separated as Prakash was not able to accept his identity. Prakash is the one who chooses to live a different identity of a man, which is accepted in society. Kamesh cannot overcome the separation and even tries to have a relationship with Sharad another gay just for the sake of forgetting his past love. Kamlesh is initially the first one to struggle in his relationship and also the society as it does not accept gay relationships. Prakash by now has overcome his homosexuality, though only for the terms of society and decides to marry a girl to satisfy the need of society. Kamlesh and his friends go through conversations as how to deal and survive in society which does not accept them. Sharad is the one who also is a gay and does bother about the society of what they think about his gender. Bunny is also a friend who is married to a woman but deep inside is a gay; he is the one to runs away from his identity as a gay and is a victim of dual personality. Another one is Deepali who is a lesbian but she is confident and true to her identity. Ranjit is also a gay but he flew to Europe as there, he is able to express himself more openly.

These characters are the victims of system which does not accept change, they all struggle mentally and emotionally to find a status and space in the society. Some of them are even ready to give away their original self just to survive as normal beings in the society for example Prakash and Ranjit. Prakash too is, ready to marry a woman who is also Kamesh's sister Kiren. In the climax seen of the play it is revealed that Prakash too has not forgotten Kamlesh and wishes to have a sexual affair with him after the marriage of Kiren and Prakash. The photo of Kamlesh and Prakash together creates a noise of unsettlement and disagreement

among the society members who do not want and allow gay relationships to grow as normal in the society. The guard informs the friends about the chaos that has been created by the photograph; it had created a stir down the building. He also informs them about the complaint that the society decided to launch about the people they considered abnormal. John McRae believes:

‘If two men want to love one another, what’s the harm? The harm now is in the oppression, symbolised throughout the muggy heat and the failing air con. ‘I really wish they would allow gay people to marry,’ says the naïve Kiran, only to get the reply from the cynical Ranjit, ‘They do. Only not to the same sex.’ It is the one of the wittiest barbs in the play, but, as ever with Mahesh, in the sharp humour lies all the truth of a very clever, moving and hugely dramatic tragicomedy’ (46).

These people have faced the struggle of their life and do not find any easy way to survive in this world. They face discrimination, insult, humility, mocking, and most importantly identity displacement. Bunny who has married a woman to survive the humiliation of society faces identity crises, ‘I have tried to survive in both the worlds, and it seems I do not exist in either’ (103) but in the end he decides to confront his wife and be true to self. On the other hand Ranjit is the one who opines that ‘I cannot seem to be both Indian and gay’

Do the Needful is yet another play by Dattani which explores the core issue of gender homosexuality and also the value and importance marriage in the Indian system. Homosexuality has never found a way to exist in the Indian system. The gay relationship and marriage are forbidden and not acceptable in social constrictions. *Do the Needful* is a radio play which focuses on the existence of gays in the community. The play also portrays the importance of marriage, the negotiations and the need to do something needful to get relationships establish between male and female. In our system, marriage questions are raised upon the family and the concerned human when people do want to get settled. There is desperation between the Gowdas and Patels to get their children married despite of the difference in their cultural background. The reason one gets from the play is the protagonist Alpesh, is a divorced man and Lata the south Indian girl who has an affair with a Muslim boy therefore the prejudices again play a major role where Lata’s family do not want a Muslim son-in-law. Both the families want their children to get settled with each other despite

acknowledging the fact that they don't want to. Alpesh is a gay and he hides his identity from the society and his parents probably this might be the reason for his divorce. Again gays are a taboo in society, therefore Alpesh has to forcibly listen to his parents and hide this intention. There is a mention of Trilok by Alpesh, where he is present only in his mind, and probably they share a hidden relationship.

In the end Lata finds about Alpesh's truth but what if their parents have already decided their fate. Lata and Alpesh decide to negotiate and adjust, they decide to get married but their relationship is superficial. They find it easy to negotiate in a marriage which is socially acceptable but they still maintain their early relationship with Trilok and Salim respectively. The play highlights the fact that the society does let people decide their fate and future but want themselves to decide so. Alpesh and Lata are two matured individuals who have full right to decide their own life but they are unable to do so because the system, which does not allow them to do so. The Indian family structure is knitted in such a way that people follow one another and also the tradition which is being followed from the centuries. They do not want to change anything or think differently, they assume what is being followed is right and fits well into the social constrictions. Nobody wants to be out from the society or the social group they live in therefore people do not accept new trends and fear change. But there is a need of realisation that change is important for the growth of the society and nation, through change only one can develop.

Dattani is a fearless writer who writes freely about the prejudices faced by society; his plays offer the audience a universal appeal of change and acceptance which serves the humanity at large. The writer is a social visionary who thinks about the humanity at large breaking all the barriers of inequality, gender discrimination, transgender issues, homosexuality, woman issues ...and educate millions of Indians about the prejudices that they keep in their heart about the issues which only give rise to resentments. Tanu Pant in her article rightly states-“He has chronicled the social victim and the follies, foibles and prejudices of Indian society”. Mahesh Dattani has beautifully portrayed the modern issues of his times and has done full justice to the characters to make them realise their position in the social front in the end the plays. John McRae illustrates “The plays of Mahesh Dattani bring Indian drama into the 1990's with a vengeance. They are the plays of today, sometimes so actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time they are plays which embody many of the classic concerns of world drama’.

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