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## **The Burial and Revelation of Memories: A Psychological Study of Effects of Violence in Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?***

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### **Abstract:**

Dattani's play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* is a play about passion for theatre and about the violence that affects the life of the protagonist of the play Nazia and the life of next two generations which is the life of her daughter Ruby and granddaughter Nikhat. The play explores communal violence without any bias and analyses the psychological effect of brutal violence on the life of a woman: Nazia.

The present paper makes a brief study of the role of violence and its effect from a psychological point of view in the play. It explores the behaviour of the protagonist in the light of the pattern of reaction to stress used by Nazia which is the defence oriented reaction pattern and the coping technique employed by Nazia to overcome the stressful memories through denial of reality and repression and the way the revelation of the facts are made when she is unable to cope with the stressor.

**Keywords:** Denial of reality, repressed memories, parent-child relationship, communal violence, violence in drama, Dattani.

Mahesh Dattani is a playwright, screen writer, film-maker and stage director. He was honoured with Sahitya Academy Award in 1998 for his contribution to Indian Drama and literature. He has written plays such as *Final Solutions*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Tara*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Do the Needful* and *The Murder That Never Was*, *Where There is a Will*, and his latest plays are *Where Did I Leave My Purdah* (2012) and *The Big Fat City* (2013). The present paper puts forward a brief psychological study of violence in his last play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*

Theatre and plays have been able to generate stronger emotions in audience as it can be perceived by more than one sense, it provides audio-visual stimulus to the audience and hence is able to produce a stronger emotion in him making him more aware of the feelings of the characters in plays.

Violence has been a significant part of drama and it plays many roles in it. Violence has many types. In its broadest sense it can be physiological and psychological: one that hurts body and other that hurts mind and emotion. However, there are other types of violence such as domestic violence, communal violence, systematic violence, structural

violence, violence based on honour; there are some other kinds which are more specific such as sexual violence, work-place violence and the list goes on.

The theatre of violence represents the violence of real life on stage and makes an attempt to create awareness among people about the violence that takes place all around against various members of society. This way the theatre sensitizes people about the hurt, pain and suffering of those who undergo violence.

All the plays that have violence in it does not necessarily sensitize the audience, as in some plays the violence is not used as a medium to convey the effect of violence but its role is just as an event which does not make suffer any other character except the victim and sometimes the character who undergoes the violence suffers because poetic justice demands it. However, such cases can be found in comedies and even then the form of violence is mild and the plays usually end in reconciliation among all.

However, cases in which the violence is of grave nature the results, in most of the cases, are manifested in a graver nature as well. The present paper attempts at analyzing the effects of violence in the play from a psychological perspective and how it sensitizes audience about the suffering of a victim.

The play *Where did I Leave My Purdah?* is as much about the long term effect of violence on its protagonist as it is about her passion for theatre. The play moves at two levels: one the story of present and the other about the past which was the making of present. The play is about Nazia who has been passionate about theatre since her early age. She was a Pakistani who moved to India during partition in order to pursue her passion. However, the road towards her dreams was not the easy one.

Lillette Dubey, the actress who played Nazia, in "A Note on the Play" describes the plot as a story set against the backdrop of the theatre, tracing some of the theatrical forms that constitutes our history, and recounting a tale that mirrored the stories of a multitude of women artists who were consumed with a love for their craft, almost at the cost of everything else (Dattani 48).

Nazia kills a man in Pakistan to save her lover Suhel, a Hindu, during partition riots. They, along with her sister Zarine, take a train to India to escape from the violence in Pakistan. But the train is stopped in Pakistan at the border and people are killed, among the killed was Zarine who gave her burkha to Nazia to save her. The violence did not stop there; when Nazia enters India she is raped by a group of people in front of Suhel. These acts of violence change the life of Nazia and others around her.

In the play the most evident type of violence is communal violence. Communal violence is part of collective violence which has been defined as the 'instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group...against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives. Collective violence includes war, terrorism and violent political conflict between or within states, violence perpetrated by states (genocide, torture, systematic abuses of human rights) and organised violent crime such as gang warfare. It may include all

categories of violence, be these physical, sexual, psychological, or characterised by neglect or discrimination.

Though communal violence plays an important part in the play, it is not biased towards or against any community. It shows the mob reaction that at the time of collective violence community or nationality does not matter, people are driven by frenzy in such times without caring about the outcome of their actions.

The theatre was passion for Nazia and unconsciously her passion for it deepens after she moves to India as theatre gives her an opportunity to forget the violence she had been subjected to. But her reaction towards the violence may not be termed as successful as it leads to breaking up her marriage, and her relationship to everyone around her. She creates a new life for herself based on lies which tend to hide the reality of her past, she does not acknowledge her own daughter Ruby and everyone thinks that Ruby was Zarine's daughter. Even Ruby is not aware of the fact that her real mother is Nazia not Zarine and calls her aunty and Nazia outwardly and consciously does not like Ruby, "*her presence still irks Nazia*" (Dattani 65) , as her unconscious mind knows that Ruby may, and she usually does, trigger the unpleasant repressed memories of the past:

Nazia: Of course I want you to call me Nazia. I hate being your aunt.

Ruby (with some bitterness): That I know. (Dattani 63)

In this one statement the inner turmoil of Nazia becomes clear when it is seen in the view of the fact that Ruby is her daughter. Here, an unconscious revelation of truth and repressed feelings can be sensed.

The complete truth about the victimization of Nazia and her suffering is revealed almost at the end of the play in Scene VI, but the personality of Nazia is revealed in gradual way which keeps indicating that there might be something hidden in her past. In the first scene, in a moment of reflection, she says:

Nazia: This is it. There's always a time in your life when the truth strikes you.

(Dattani 58)

Nazia lives in denial and tries to cope with her trauma and stress but the events and people around her keep her reminding the grim reality of past:

Nazia: You think it is so simple?... Things don't get finished. They just hide in the dark corner like a ghoul and grab at you when you are not looking. And sometime you have to beat the shit out of the ghoul to make it crawl back into the darkness. (Dattani 89)

Her way of coping with the trauma of violence and rape can be defined as defence oriented reaction patters for coping with stress. Her reaction is a mixture of two patterns: denial of reality and repression which are defined by James C. Coleman in his book *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life* (1988).

Coleman states that denial of reality is an attempt to screen-out disagreeable realities by ignoring or refusing to acknowledge them ( Coleman 123). The tendency towards perceptual defence is part of the inclination to deny or avoid reality. This can be seen in Nazia's behaviour in her denial of being mother of Ruby, she says:

Ruby: Everyone said my mother died after giving birth to me. Everyone said that because that's what you told them. (Dattani, 214)

Nazia even tries to forget that she was married to Suhel:

Nazia: I don't know any Suhel.

Vinay:.....he says he is Suhel-your husband.

Nazia (shouting for the benefit of the caller): I don't know any husband! He heard that so why don't you just hang up? (Dattani, 88-89)

Repression is defined by Coleman as a defence mechanism by means of which threatening or painful thoughts and desires are excluded from consciousness. Although it has often been referred to as selective forgetting it is more in nature of selective remembering. Nazia attempts to forget the past and to be busy in the theatre and present but all the repressed memories are revealed when she faces Nikhat, her grand-daughter, which reminds Freud's quote, "There is always a return of the repressed." (Berry 100).

The play explores the conflicts and frustration of the protagonist. She is conflicted as she has to choose between the burial of memories and through that to try to forget what happened to her or to accept the reality which was perhaps too painful to live with. So, Nazia takes the first way out of the situation and deals with the conflict by choosing to hide the reality from all. The real parentage of Ruby is only known to her, for a very long time.

The path she chooses resolve the conflict does not does not provide her the shelter which she hoped for because she had to live with the shadows of the past which included her husband and her daughter Rubi. It is through this continuous presence of stressor that the pain becomes unbearable and she had to leave Suhel, her husband, the feelings that she was holding in her heart find voice when she tails to Suhel:

Nazia: Move on? I am trying-trying to do that, but you keep reminding me of what happened...I just have to look at you and it all comes back! I can't play Shakuntala because of you. The first time I see you as Dushyant, I look away because it reminds me that I once made a mistake of falling in love with you. When you kill the bee it reminds me that I killed for you. When you take me in your arms as Dushyant I-I want to throw up! (Dattani 89)

Nazia's way of coping with her stressor, the cause-event of the stress, the murder of her sister and her rape, causes complications in her inter-personal relationships, particularly her relationship with her daughter Ruby:

Ruby:....You are capable of anything! I could kill you right now for destroying me. I hate the sight of you. Even as a little girl, being handed over from an

actress backstage to a seamstress to the washerwoman.....You only looked at yourself. Never at the world around you. I didn't exist. Everyone sympathized with me. Poor girl, her own aunt does not want to look at her. Send her to her uncle. No, no, he is married again. His wife will not want her.....I hate the theatre, I hate my father for deserting me like this, but I hate you more than anyone else. You were so close to me and yet you may as well have been thousands of miles away. (Dattani 124)

These complications of relationships do not end with the problems between Ruby and Nazia but they are apparent in the relationship between Ruby and her daughter Nikhat. In this way the long term effect of the violence is evident as violence on Nazia not only shatters the mother-daughter relationship of her generation but that of the next generation as well. After listening to the complaints of Ruby against Nazia, Nikhat reveals her feelings:

Nikhat: You gave what you got. Oh, you were always around at home trying to compensate and making sure I didn't go through the same feeling of abandonment. But even when you were holding my hand...you were thousands of mile away.....You went through the motions all right of being a caring mom. But you weren't. You couldn't. I was angry too. You didn't know but Dad took me to a therapist in New York. ...He understands that your anger came out of your own unhappiness. It's okay, Mom, to let go. I am trying very, very hard. (Dattani 126-127)

Nazia has not made her peace with past and therefore that past torments her. She has made a web of lies to forget her past, and perhaps her hate for cobwebs which irritate her symbolize her hate for the lies with which she has to live. She is not at peace even by living in denial after repressing the stressful memories:

Nazia: I think that deep inside you know the truth. Your mother knows the truth. But we don't want to acknowledge it. We all weave these tangled webs around the truth so we can strangle it and make it disappear. We all are deceiving one another. (Dattani 127)

The cobwebs has been used by Dattani perhaps as a symbol to represent the situation of Nazia that even though she tries to live in the denial of reality she cannot escape from the reality, she says:

Nazia:....(Pulling at a cobweb) Look at these cobwebs! No matter how often I clean them all, they keep coming back. (Dattani 107)

She later understands that it was useless to live in denial and to repress the truth. Therefore she accepts her past and reveals it to Nikhat and Ruby that Zarine died on train and was killed in the riot long before they could come to India. She also tells them that she was raped and humiliated before Suhel when they crossed the border and came to India, and that Ruby was the result of the rape and that Suhel was not her father. She explains the reason for her hatred towards Ruby when she was child but Ruby tells her

that Nazia was not always hateful towards Ruby and that there was always the love of a mother in her heart, she says:

Ruby: He told me that between the acts and when no one was looking....

*Young Nazia picks up the baby and suckles her*

Ruby: That you would suckle me....and Suhel Uncle would delay the next act to give you time to make sure I was well and asleep." (Dattani 136)

She is only able to find her peace when she opens her heart and tells the truth. The hatred and fear in her goes away after accepting the truth. She is able to have peace and she acknowledges the role of her sister and her husband in front of press and it is then that she feels free of her internal turmoil and she says:

Nazia: Come on, spin me up! Don't stop! Thank you! Thank you, Zarine! I will see you in paradise! (Dattani 142)

In "Me and My Plays: An Essay" Dattani says, "I wanted my writing to explore areas that people wanted to be kept in darkness. In doing so, I was clearing the cloud that loomed over my life and my identity as a dramatist." (Dattani 32) In the present play he has explored one more such area.

The play is intricately woven around the passion for theatre and effects of violence on victim and people around her. Dattani has shown not only the immediate effects of it but also the long term effect of it which run through generations as is the case of complicated relationship between mother and daughter of two generation the cause of which was one act of brutal and humiliating violence.

The narrative technique employed by Dattani helps in showing the contrast between past and present and between truth and lies as it shows past and present one by one and sometimes together which may also indicate that present is not free from the past and no matter how much repressed the memories are, they always remain there, ready to come back at the surface any time.

The play shows gradually that there lies turbulence under the surface of the outer behaviour of the character. The revelation of truth comes gradually with the help of characters and events. The burial of the memories in the way of repression and gradual revelation of those memories are expressed in a way that shows the suffering of the victim and the effect of violence on her mind and life.

The perception of the play either on stage or in book provides a glimpse of the internal working of the mind which has gone through a terrible act of violence and the audience or the reader gets a picture of the suffering that such a victim has to go through even after a lapse of years. The play explores the suffering and its effect in a sensitive way and a dramatic exposure to such an experience helps in sensitization of audience against such acts of violence.

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