

Social Concerns in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani**10****Dr. Santosh Thakur***

A man of multi aspects, creativities & identities, Mahesh Dattani is a playwright, director, actor, screenplay writer, film maker & teacher all rolled into one. He has come a long way from the beginning of career as a playwright, doing English theatre, which was mostly derivative in nature, & has become a leading & most performed playwright of the country. He stands for a new generation of Indians who writes in English, as he simply rejects the concepts of the choice between Western or Indian identities, or exclusion of one at the cost of the other. His writings reflect the modern contemporary urban India of his own life as the success of his plays has proved.

Dattani's contemporaneity is demonstrative not only through his choice of language, which is vibrant, colourful & remarkable Indian English but also through the subject he chosen to write about. From his first play *Where There's Will to Uma & the Fairy Queen*, his themes probe & expose strongly about the ordinary & the daily conflicts of urban people who are living in traditional periods of Indian history caught in the net of tradition & social values & the pull of modernity & globalization. In essence his plays reflect the lives of people of middle & upper middle class Indians in present times.

The contemporary urban Indians struggle with conflicting loyalties - modernity with tradition & orthodoxy, respect for authority versus a deep rooted anarchic impulse, self-interest against the desire to appear socially responsible. Dattani himself avers, "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection on my time, place & socio-economic background" (Dattani, XV). His plays show people confronting everyday the tensions created by their several fragmented identities of class, caste, gender & religion. Family has been the center of our culture that nourishes our inter-personal relationship & helps transmitting the cultural heritage from generation to generation. Traditional concept of joint families is giving way for a longing for privacy & individualism, and economic

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pressures & restraints have forced the old value system to crumble. Problems such as emotional insecurity, mental stress & stress, ossification of feeling & sense of alienation – all form the themes of Dattani's dramatic works. Alka Tyagi says that Mahesh Dattani writes plays, which “deal with life head on” (Tyagi, 193-195).

Indian Society not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which also demands deceit & negation, rather than allowing self – expression, responsibility & dignity. The themes of love, trust, partnership, betrayal, extra-material affairs, cruelty against women, conflicts, repression & how past secrets haunt one through out one's life are discussed in *Do the Needful*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* & *Bravely Fought the Queen*. These plays also bring to the fore some sensitive & controversial issues like homosexuality, its social, aesthetic, moral, legal & political implications. Many consider homosexuality just a mental aberration, but in urban milieu this problem is becoming a painful but stark reality.

Do the Needful probes the issue of homosexuality & this play is a great statement about the modern generation which is increasingly outspoken of sexuality - a wind of change is imminent. This play brings out twin issues of gender & alternate sexuality. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with the tender & intimate relation of homosexual couples & this play shows varied faces of homosexual community. John Mc Rae says “It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership & betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour & how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates” (Mc Rae, 46). *Bravely Fought the Queen*, on the other hand deals with stale & rotten male-centric ideas in conjugal relationships. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari comments, “the play dramatizes the emptiness & sham in the lives of its cloistered women & self-indulgent unscrupulous men, blurring the line between fantasy & reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception & hypocrisies (Chaudhary, 32). *Bravely Fought the Queen* deconstructs the patriarchal myth that the indolence, leisure & luxury of the upper class woman's life is an example of their happiness & fulfilment. All the characters herein are in search of their identities within often oppressive structures of

custom, tradition, gender & sexuality within modern urban Indian family & conjugal relation.

The gender reaction, exploitation of the weaker in general, spiritual aridity, moral sterility, sterile intellectualism & political corruption in urban Indian society are the issues handled by Dattani in his plays. The norms, values & roles for individuals are culturally determined & socially transmitted *Seven Steps Around the Fire* has explored the themes that focus on the invisible zones of the social behaviour. The play interrogates the unusually ghettoized & isolated marginality of transsexuals or the 'third' gender- the community of eunuchs & their existence on the fringes of Indian milieu. They are denied even the fundamental human status because they cannot be fitted in the normative gender categories of male or female. Angelie Multani avers, "Mahesh Dattani's socially foregrounded characters... socially marginalized... question the social norms that advocate the inequality of the sexes, the place of the transgendered & so on" (Multani,145).

Thirty Days in September deals with the theme of child sexual abuse. Dattani simply proliferates that we do not want to believe that 'child sexual abuse' happens in our society. Even if the child wants to disclose those 'special secrets' they either are ignored saying forget those bad dreams or are affirmed as a liar telling stories. Shanker Sen says, "...this problem has not been seriously tackled or discussed openly & has remained shrouded in secrecy, making the likelihood of child abusers being caught & punished very low" (Sen,11). Then *Ek Alag Mausam* makes us to feel a caring outlook towards HIV afflicted & discarded people not only by the society but also by their close & loved ones. This play brings to the light the hypocritical nature of society for these people. Dattani exposes self-deceiving society in his plays, a society that has its own prejudices. Politics & perversions which exist not only in the social relations but also in the intimate relations like that of father & son, mother & daughter, husband & wife & brother & sister, form the base of his plays.

Women are treated as domestic household marginals in Indian society. In his plays Dattani presents the ways in which exploitation of

women is now couched in terms of culture & refinement. The subjugation of women is a central fact of history of mankind. The virtues of self-effacement, self-sacrifice, submission & docility are imbued into Indian girl in her childhood & it is taught to her to acquire these virtues which will bring her happiness & lead her to salvation. Dattani examines the growth of women in present times from initial position as 'victims' or powerless suffers to confident & self-reliant individuals reaching out to help other weaker sections.

Play *Where There's a Will* depicts the helpless condition of women, though they emerge powerful & self-confident at the end. Simone De Beauvoir's comment is very apt when she says, "To emancipate women is to refuse to confine her to the relation she bears to man, not to deny them to her, let her have her independent existence...." (Beauvoir,30). The play *Tara* is another study about the injustices done in the name of construction of gender identities & gender discrimination *Dance Like a Man* deals with gender issues as the play dispels the notion that views women solely at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of patriarchal society & explores the nature of the tyranny that even men might be subject to within such structures. Without any doubt, patriarchal control still dominates our society but the traditional concept of womanhood is undergoing many changes in contemporary Indian society.

Dattani very poignantly discusses the issues of religious fanaticism & communalism at their extreme in *Final Solutions*, *The Swami & Winston* & *Uma & the Fairy Queen*. He probes communal hatred, paranoid, transferred resentments about looking for a scapegoat, the impotence & depersonalization because of the over mechanized cold, selfish society led by nexus of politicians & bureaucrats. He brings out that communalism & religious fanaticism are becoming dangerous in the secular integration of democratic india.

The issues of class, caste & gender as marginalities in the middle class urban world are discussed very minutely in the plays- *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her child* & *Clearing the Rubble*. Both these plays bring casteism, classism untouchability, discrimination & inequality in India

against a vast section of its populace as are ordained by scriptures, which are held & hailed as sacred as well divine. No human intervention & interference in divine ordiance is, therefore, even theoretically countenanced by its faithful followers. Treatment of the marginalized section of untouchables is brought forth in *Clearing the Rubble* & the situation is so appalling that one feels an indigent hated for upper caste people.

It must be admitted that Mahesh Dattani manages to represent the essence of what contemporary urban life in India is about for so many middle & upper-middle class Indians. His plays carry the themes which touch the whole of society & be touched by it. His play have a universal appeal, because he draws full attention of the audience & manages to make his audience sit up & listen.

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