

SOCIAL CRITICISM IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

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Abstract: Family forms the basic unit of society and what gets enacted here is representative, and also reflective of larger narrative of nation. The dichotomy between public and private spaces, like other constructed discourses are hugely problematic and its premises can easily be questioned. What happens in the larger narrative of public space/ nation changes and affects the private spaces/ family in a major way. The medium of theatre/performance offers exacting ways of representing how identities of individuals are constructed in family/society and the ways in which one goes on to perform/ enact those roles consistently. Mahesh Dattani's plays bring out an exposition of what happens as a consequence of such entrapments which do not provide for an individual's choices and preferences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The medium of theatre/performance offers exacting ways of representing how identities of individuals are constructed in family/society and the ways in which one goes on to perform/ enact those roles consistently. An actor playing a part in a narrative of a play has to imbibe her/his role and perform it to perfection, likewise an individual born within the given social/ideological discourse has a pre-assigned role which has to be imbibed and enacted with strict adherence to the script. However the actor moves on from one role to another, depending upon the choices and options available to her/him, but the individual who is trapped in the societal narrative is doomed, for there is hardly any scope for alternative roles/ existence. Mahesh Dattani's plays bring out an exposition of what happens as a consequence of such entrapments which do not provide for an individual's choices and preferences.

Dattani limits his scope to the unit of family for it is here, the socialization/ conditioning of the individual begins and also forms the initial ground for resistance. Family forms the basic unit of society and what gets enacted here is representative, and also reflective of larger narrative of nation. The dichotomy between public and private spaces, like other constructed discourses are hugely problematic and its premises can easily be questioned. What happens in the larger narrative of public space/ nation changes and affects the private spaces/ family in a major way. Therefore, in no way can this space be underestimated, for this is a fertile ground to analyze the resultant effect of various contestations with hegemonic discourses. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) in *Gender and Nation* rightly argues that the construction of nationhood involves specific notions of both 'manhood' and 'womanhood'. She examines the contribution of gender relations to key dimensions of nationalist projects-the nation's reproduction, its culture, citizenship- as well to national conflicts and wars. Homi K Bhabha in "The 'Nation' as an ambivalent construction: Some definitions of 'A Nation'", discusses the 'ambivalence' that surround in creating the idea/narrative of nation. He quotes Hannah Arendt's view, "the society of the nation in the modern world is 'that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance' and the two realms flow unceasingly, and uncertainly into each other..." Clearly political and personal are coalesced together through the cultural wagon. For the playwright, what happens at the local level, because of larger political/social discourses holds more importance and this consistently remains his area of inquiry.

Dattani's plays like *Dance Like a Man*(1989), *Where There's a Will*(1988) and *Bravely Fought The Queen* (2003) are expositions of lives under the dominant hegemonic discourses and the ways these ideologies influence ordinary, everyday existence of the characters. Beginning with an apparently comfortable setting of 'home', his plays penetrate the façade of 'normalcy' and expose the power politics at work. His focus is the urban, middle/upper middle class joint family setting where at least members from three generations are putting up with each other. The dominant patriarchal ideology is at work in these families which works through coercion and repression. The ways in which family members try to live with the dominant forces, the survival strategies, putting up of appearances and pretences, all get replicated in his plays. These plays offer crucial insights into day-to-day acts of conscious and unconscious role playing, which becomes a way of life for the characters. All this is done to bring his point home that like all other social spaces, this is a political zone where there are contestations for power, subversion, and resistance and attempts to gain authority. There is battling of ideologies and continuous efforts to bring a shift in the power equations. The other aspect of such analysis is to bring to the

fore the socio-political realities of our time and the ways in which the lives of people are shaped and affected through socio-historical forces. The plays present the everyday struggle of the characters with the rigid, hegemonic discourses which operate through guised and visible coercions. In our common uncritical perceptions the unit of family holds reverential position-a unit which is free from any political motifs and supposedly thrives on love, providing a sense of belonging, of making one feel at home literally! However the attempts of the playwright is in the direction of looking beyond the professed comforting notions, and presenting the lived realities of his characters, which by extension would give a peep into our own realities. The entrapments which are not overtly visible and exist in the most comfortable of surroundings leading to serious alienation of the characters from their surrounding becomes the focus of the dramatist. In Prasad's words, '...families are about rules and hierarchies, power and obedience, rewards and retribution'¹, and these are the angles through which Dattani has critiqued this space.

2. POWER PLAY WITHIN THE UNIT OF FAMILY

Through his plays the dramatist aims an exposition of this power play at work in the seemingly apolitical unit of a family. The onus of construction of individual identities conforming to the social mores and hence, the creation of a normative order rests on this societal unit i.e. family. It is incumbent on the family (through patriarchal figures, codes) to reinforce the set images, stereotypes, gender divisions, permissible sexual behaviour on its members. The contestation which happens in this space is the focus of the dramatist and his plays bring out the conditionality inherent in formation of relationships here. The foundation of this social unit rests on the institution of marriage- which is described as 'social union' or 'legal contract' between individuals. The very conception of this institution is to create a normative world order, to channel the sexuality of individuals and allow it to be performed in a contained manner especially for women. Establishing the 'fatherhood' of the child is an intriguing area and the family lineage has to be established with certainty given the onus laid on ties of blood. Sexuality, which is so multifarious in nature becomes taboo outside the realm of marriage and a matrix of discourse surrounds its expression. The rules governing the sexual mores for men and women are laid forth from the point of progeny, and strict regulations are in place to check any 'lawlessness', deviations, or transgressions. As only heterosexual mating would result in reproduction, this was made the norm, and any other form of sexual behaviour was considered redundant or non-existent. Thus the heterosexual, arranged marriage set up² is the norm against which any other form of sexual expression is categorized. What is important here is this heterosexuality is not only aimed at biological reproduction but also at 'cultural reproduction'. The general phobia and aversion towards homosexuality is mainly stemming from the need of the conservatives to maintain and reproduce the status quo.

Clearly, in this arrangement there is enough room for men to indulge in excesses for the task of reproduction rests on women. Therefore, the rules have been quite loose for men from the very beginning. Curbing men's sexuality was not the target here to begin with, for they are to be known for their sexual prowess, their machismo was to define their 'manhood'. The rhetoric for women's sexuality eulogized all the opposite traits- subdued, prudential, and acquiescent to men's needs. Evidently, this dichotomy between man-woman sexuality is ridden with serious flaws as also the arrangement of marriage which treats women only as reproducers. Dattani's lens is focused on these problematic elements of our social system which have been deeply ingrained in the thought process from over years of conditioning. "Men and women are the biggest stereotypes in the whole world"³, says the playwright. Blurring the distinction between biological category of sex and sociological category of gender, his plays depict the helplessness of individuals caught in this labyrinth. He projects varied characters with different sexual orientations, personal motivations and in complex situations which are not considered to be the mainstream elements of our society. The marginalized section of the society- women, homosexuals, transgender, disabled individuals are shown to be caught in relationships of self denial, continuous fear of persecution, guilt, resulting in low self esteem. The lives of these individuals become a ceaseless struggle against the hegemonic doctrines and yet they are unable to create a space for themselves in this unyielding structure. However, as Dattani has projected, this unit of family does not serve for even the mainstream individuals, even in the most 'happiest' of families its members are in a perpetual strife to lead life as

¹ G.J.V. Prasad, "Terrifying *Tara*: The Angst of the Family", in *Mahesh Dattani: Critical perspective*. Ed. Angelie Multani, New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007:138.

² Arrange marriage set up was most suited for 'preserving' the best blood/gene in the clan.

³ Dattani quoted in Lakshmi Subramaniam, *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Anand Publications, 2002: 20.

per their choice.

3. PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

In the depiction of scars of communal hatred perpetuated through generations in Ramnik Gandhi's family in *Final Solutions*, or in presenting patriarchal violence (in almost all his plays), Dattani emphasizes on how the consciousness and psyches of the characters are shaped through the forces of the past. In the unit of family resides the residue of angst/prejudices that the previous generation/family/society held, but how far is it justified in deciding the present course of action is the moot point here. The characters are simply caught in dealing with these demons of the past in various forms- Javed and Bobby's precarious position vis-à-vis the communal history of the nation, tampering of Smita's personal relationship (like her grandmother's) due to this inherited past (*Final Solutions*), Dolly and Alka bearing the consequences of their father's licentious relationship, Jiten and Nitin in enacting the prejudices held by their mother, are all caught in a similar web. The agony of Chandan (*Tara*) is as much from the separation from his twin sister Tara as from the guilt of depriving her of the shared leg which naturally belonged to her. The decision taken by their mother creates the never ceasing guilt ridden atmosphere in which the characters are stuck forever. Kiran's thoughts reflect the lived reality of all these characters: "Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?" (*Where There's a Will* Act II Scene II)

The way our society has embraced modernism is full of contradictions. In order to create a 'progressive' image we have selectively embraced new concepts, and comfortably rejected the ones which appeared to pose a threat to the dominant conservative ideology. The spirit of inquiry, the space for questioning age old beliefs, critical acceptance of existing 'values', faith in individual capabilities, the need for revisiting the traditional notions with a fresh outlook etc, which characterize modernism are missing here. Instead there is a struggle to accommodate the new ideas selectively within the existing patriarchal structure. As with any other movement/reformation, women have to bear the main fallouts or are at the receiving end of such experimentations. Modernity pushes the woman out of the four walls of domesticity and instils in her the spirit of independence. However she is expected to absorb the new worldview selectively. Again the limits of permissible and non-permissible behavior are shoved upon her and she is compelled to abide. Balancing two opposing ideologies, she has to be modern in a traditional way and the dominant patriarchal discourse would always restrict any deviation.

Alongside the modernity discourse women have to suffer for the non- adjustment of the male counterparts with this newly conceived world. As in the traditional role, a woman in the modern avatar has to put up with the frustrations, failures, and desperations of men in their lives. In the newly formed arrangement she would have to live up to the image of educated, independent woman at the same time she has to belie all the freedom that comes along with it. Ramaswamy aptly sums up this phenomenon:

The working woman in the modern nuclear family bears
unbelievable burdens as she struggles to balance the desire for economic
independence with the yearning for the presumed security her mother enjoyed within the home.
The oppression and violence practiced in overt and covert forms in many
educated middle class home stem from deep-rooted prejudices and well-
entrenched patriarchal social structures that continue to operate alongside the
pursuit of modern life styles.⁴

Staging the violence perpetuated in middle-upper middle class households and the way educated, 'independent' women continue to live with this is an important concern of the dramatist. In presenting the slices of modern life styles he is commenting on the apparent progress made by the society and the status of women herein. Nearly all his plays have women characters who undergo violence and abuse (mental as well as physical) in the hands of men as also by female custodians of patriarchy. Baa in *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) is regularly beaten up by her husband, her sons perpetuate similar violence on their wives on her behest; Alka and Dolly continue taking the burden of abusive relationships and lack of financial security may be a reason for resigning oneself to such fate. How deeply entrenched is this structure that women who have undergone the pain continue to be a major exponent of the same oppressive discourses?

⁴Radha Ramaswamy, "Contemporary Indian Drama in English". *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Angelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007: 42.

As with women, so are the men subject to the dictates of dominant ideology. Patriarchy is equally binding on men, even their survival depends on adhering to set roles associated with being a man! The whole system is so rigid, every kind of behaviour already stratified that there is hardly any room for deviation. These plays projects individuals borne out of various degrees of absorption of these phenomena and their resultant consciousness. In *Dance Like a Man*(1989), Amritlal readily agrees to let his son Jairaj marry outside his community, for he went about as a 'liberal-minded' man, but is unable to come to terms with his son's passion for dance. He was a 'freedom' fighter and is excessively proud of what they have achieved through the struggle for independence. But within the purview of his home his son is fighting a losing battle to chase his dreams. As goes the logic, it does not behove a man to pursue a career in dance, so he is asked to give it up:

Amritlal. I have always allowed you to do what you have wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is *expected* of you. Why must you dance? (emphasis mine) (Act II)

Amritlal colludes with Jairaj's wife to make a *man* out of him. In this tussle between individuals and unchanging attitudes, society is going to produce mere bonsais of individuals. Denied the space for self expression, non recognition of individual specific needs, the characters in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are shown to be choking under such constricting atmosphere. Dattani's interest appears in laying bare such casting molds by rendering characters who are living in non conducive environ with thwarted desires, repressed sexuality and minimal say in the affairs concerning them. His characters are grappling for space to be themselves- some of them are totally resigned to their fate, some successfully defy attempts at normalization while others after their initial resistance succumb to social norms. Ajit in his vehement opposition to his father's orders finds himself caught in the double bind of the Will left by his father. Ultimately he resigns to obeying his father's will, for the monetary comfort that the Will offered. Jairaj too leaves the house of his father along with his wife to pursue his dreams on his own, but comes back within a few days failing to cope with up the initial trials. Dattani could have shown his protagonists doing well outside the sphere of family but this may not have suited his purpose. Clearly he is staging the fact that it is impossible to evade family ties and therefore there is a serious need to rework the existing structure to create room for individual voices and preferences. He is trying to look for solutions within this space by presenting the irreparable damage that such unbending structures do to individual psyche.

Another major contestation which is operative in all these plays is that of tussle between parents over the life of their child. Again this happens at multiple levels/ motivations. Baa (*Bravely*) fills her son Nitin with hatred for his father in order to revenge herself of the violence perpetuated on her. The progeny appear to be a convenient means to retaliate, settle scores, prove the point to which one was holding on for long. "Maternal love becomes an instrument, not a natural state of being, or even an end in itself"⁵. Ratna (*Dance*) despite being a good dancer is unable to achieve the heights she had aspired for in her career. In the dance career of her daughter Lata, she sees the opportunity of materialisation of those dreams. Although she has used all her contacts to give Lata the exposure which would give her acclaim and recognition, she credits all the success solely to herself.

The much hallowed love of parents is shown to be motivated with personal interests. Dattani is questioning the apparent unconditional mutuality of these relationships and shows how every act is driven with a self suiting purpose. Often, in battling out the personal differences, parents resort to showering excess love or attention to their child in order to establish a 'better' relationship which would feed their respective egos. Prasad in his analysis of *Tara* aptly sums up the phenomenon of ongoing, continuous struggle between the family members for power and authority over each other's lives:

If the play is about motivations of individual characters, and about the construction of gender identity, it is also about the battlefield of the family. While I have already said that this is a dysfunctional family, Dattani's question (and this is a recurring motif in his plays) is which family isn't? All family life is complicated, family values are a sham made up of compromises, and middle class morality is only a façade [...] there is always a power structure within families, and also struggles for power. The past exerts as much power on the family as the present. The parents fight turf wars over their children. This is a normal behaviour! (Prasad, "Terrifying Tara" 142)

⁵GJV Prasad, "Terrifying Tara: The Angst of the Family", in *Mahesh Dattani: Critical perspective*. Ed. Angelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007: 142.

The parameters of success or failure of an individual depends on the extent to which one assumes various societal roles expected of her/him. There already are fixed qualities and behavioral patterns for different categories. Starting from assuming the role of being a girl or a boy, and subsequently a woman or a man, the chain of conformity is ever widening. While adopting the societal roles, conforming to the set patterns of behaviour - of individual identity, sexual preferences etc. - the individual is deprived of the chance to realise her true potentials and live her desires. In an interview to an online journal, 'Gaytoday' Dattani says:

Modern Indian society is just as narrow-minded and un-accepting of differences as traditional Christian or Islamic societies. People talk about the Kamasutra and its celebration of sexuality but how celebratory of sexual expression mainstream Hindu cultures were in the past is anybody's guess. It would be simplistic to put this denial of sexual expression down to Victorian mores. I have a feeling we, as a culture, have become too boring! (Raj Ayyar, "Indian Cinema Comes of Age")

Be it the wave of modernity or post-modernity we still have to fight the tendency of the system to strait jacket the individual within its fold. Dattani's plays highlight the hypocritical existence of our society and expose the nuances of power we have made ourselves comfortable with. Angelie Multani (2009) aptly sums up the thematic engagement of the play *Dance Like a Man* in the following words:

Dance Like a Man (1989) centres around the theme of how classical art forms like dance are contaminated by the politics of the art world, ill-defined by the narrow, constrictive beliefs of the conservatives, and reduced to facile constructions of gender-based realities by thoughtless traditionalists. While women are often recognized as the oppressed or the marginalized, this play unfolds how the prescription of a certain kind of socially acceptable behaviour for men oppresses and marginalizes them. (71)

Can there be any scope for a 'man' to 'dance like a man'? Jairaj could never regain his self esteem and confidence for he had chosen to dance like a woman (a career in dance) while the social system wanted him to dance like a man (behave like a 'man')? Can a 'woman' 'fight' at all? If yes will she still be called a 'woman' or that would catapult her to the exalted position of 'man'?! Dattani is quizzing the 'gendered nature of performing arts' and tinkering with the possibility of subversion. The way we perceive 'bravery', we can only associate it with men, and hence in the folk lore the Rani of Jhansi will always be appreciated for her manly valour and not just as a brave queen. For there are divisions between male and female 'bravery' and there is no over lapping between these separate categories.

4. CONCLUSION

In a response to Angelie Multani's question, "You (obviously) write your plays so that they can be performed. Then, as inevitable fallout of academic acceptance, those plays are taken out of the performative context and analysed, with all sorts of motivations, politics and philosophies being attributed to them and to you. What is your reaction to this kind of academic analysis?" Dattani says:

One hopes that the academic context includes the performative one. Yes, one aspect of academic analysis is the content, but the form and content need to be studied together. ("Conversation with Mahesh Dattani" 168-169)

The playwright's apprehension over academic analysis as mine which solely relies on textual study and criticism is well founded and I do realize the limitation of my work. The genre of drama is obviously performance oriented and any concentrated study of the content has to be coupled with the performative analysis. However, given my thematic occupation with the playwright's representation of the family unit, and 'performance' as a way of living in the rigid structure, one of the aspects of the form has been taken care of. The dramatist is focusing on presenting the overt/covert form of acting in everyday lives of the characters, through the depiction of multiple/fractured identities and consciousness of the characters, multiple level of stage settings, and by showing the contestations between the 'real' and 'imagined' lives of the characters. Richard Schechner (1985) a major theorist of performance studies, describes the two overlapping divisions in his analysis of 'performance' as:

There are two main realms of performance theory: (1) looking at human behaviours- individual and social- as a genre of performance; (2) looking at performances- of theatre, dance, and other 'art forms' as a kind of personal or social interaction. These two realms, or spheres, can be metaphorically figured as interfacing at a double two-way mirror. From one face of the mirror persons interested in aesthetic genres peep through at 'life'. From other side, persons interested in the 'social sciences' peep through at 'art'. Everything is in quotation marks because the categories are not settled. (296)

Although the playwright does not attribute as much motif to his works, but his narratives easily cross the 'staged' reality into the realm of the 'real' where the audience/reader is made to take a look at similar trappings in her/his own life. The theatrical devices and stage settings of his plays highlight the fuzziness of the boundaries between the drama on stage and in life. The separating boundary, the 'fourth wall' in theatre is not only fuzzy here, but is also made redundant.

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