

The Spirit of Reform through Inclusion: a Survey through Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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ABSTRACT: Mahesh Dattani is one of the renowned Indian playwrights. This work tries to locate the similar strain of moral reform that runs through Dattani's plays. Our society has always accepted and embraced those who adhere to the set parameters, while those who differ are excluded, and looked down upon. Dattani's plays strive to present how this policy of exclusion is detrimental to every individual, (to both- the privileged and the under-privileged) their psyche, emotional health and to the development of the society as a whole. Dattani dwells on various issues, but at the root of all of them the exclusionist policy of the hegemonic groups is to be blamed. If differentiation on the basis of gender, religion, sexual orientation, cultural choice, is dismantled, and human kind as a whole is accepted, then reform is possible.

KEYWORDS: inclusion, binary, stereotypes, reform

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I. THE SPIRIT OF REFORM THROUGH INCLUSION: A SURVEY THROUGH MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

The following paper aims at locating and foregrounding the theme of inclusiveness that runs through Mahesh Dattani's works. The plays under consideration here are *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Final Solutions*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man*. Mahesh Dattani is a highly recognized, widely read playwright and a Sahitya Akademi award recipient. He is the first Indian playwright to write his works entirely in English. Alyque Padamsee appreciated Dattani by saying "At last a playwright with some conviction... At last we have a playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an identity." (12) His plays are easy to read, comprehend, and the issues he raises are varied. Gender, sexuality, religious orthodoxy, old age, tussles in family life, cultural life and career, and much more is brought to fore by his works. The plays though simple, have an elaborate stage setting and multiple layers to the characters. No matter what the subject of the play, there is a humanitarian aspect to each of these plays, and an unmarked desire for a healthy, prejudice-free, inclusive society that binds together all the plays. "Mahesh Dattani's plays have variety, and his themes are of contemporary interest. He has dived deep into human heart and re-created characters with authenticity and a sense of liveness." (Das 123)

Seven Steps around the Fire is an intense, deeply moving drama that talks about the repressed- the repressed wife, the repressed trans-genders, the repressed lovers. Uma is expected to conform to her gender roles, and be the submissive, docile wife who should bask in the glory of her husband's successful career, while putting to rest any of her personal desires. Her superintendent husband Suresh, completely fails to understand her passion for working on trans-genders for her doctoral thesis. While he nurtures the commonplace belief that trans-genders must not be trusted, he compels Uma to observe restraint, and whatever she does to unravel Anarkali's story, she has to do independently and carefully, to prevent being caught by Suresh. Despite doctor's advice, Suresh feels no need to get his sperm count tested, for that would belittle his ego. Subbu (a minister's son) who fell in love with a trans-gender, Kamla, goes through soul rattling mental trauma, since his father could not allow him to live life his way and the minister uses his power to coerce him into conformity. The "invisible minority" (Dattani 21) trans-gender community stand strong together, enveloped in their deep love and solidarity, despite little natural humanly clashes for power. They try to hush-up the truth about Kamla's murder to further prevent the wrath of the heterosexual elites. The climax reveals that Subbu managed to secretly marry Kamla, later his father got Kamla murdered, and got Anarkali caught in suspicion, while forcing Subbu to get conventionally married. The play ends with Subbu's suicide, while the entire truth is again swept under the cover by the elites for their reputation. Dattani hurls a direct satire at the shallowness of heterosexuals, who have not only internalized the grand narrative of heterosexuality, as the only norm, but can go to any limits, to conceal any digression from it, and hail their apparent prestige. Uma rightly remarks about transgenders, "they have no voice." (Dattani 42) The relegation of trans-genders to filthy suburbs of the main city, the violence against them and against anyone who sides with them, the prejudiced notions about them as being born liars and the guile of the elites in distorting truth are exposed and criticized by Dattani through this play.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is about the life of homosexuals in India. First performed in November 1998, not much has changed in our society and its attitude towards homosexuals in these two decades. The much lauded Supreme Court verdict in favor of legitimizing homosexuality is a legal matter, confined and graciously welcomed by very little part of the society in general. A group of homosexual friends and their mental, physical state is the focus of this drama. It is rather an easy option to talk about homosexuality and other sexuality related issues, in theoretical terms, but Dattani through his plays has stressed on the exponentiality (lived experience) of people, with their individual coping strategies. These friends are successful in their respective careers, but actually have a deeply messed up personal, internal lives. One of the friends, Bunny is a very popular television actor, who is the emblem of a perfect husband and son-in-law for the audience. He is married, and gives his wife the monetary happiness, to conform to the social expectations from such television icons. Internally, his sexuality keeps him on the edge, on a constant lookout for a soul satisfying homosexual relationship and the perpetual threat to hide his true self from the public eye. He lacks courage to accept his self, and fears ignominy at the hands of those who idealize and follow his projected image, as Deepali asserts, "It's fear... of the corners we will be pushed into where we don't want to be." (Dattani 89) Ranjit, another friend in the circle, has no hope for change in the Indian mindset, and has no courage to be shamed by societal censure. He therefore opts to settle abroad, to find a much more inclusive outlook towards homosexuals. Sharad and Deepali are quite open about their sexuality, while Deepali finds an equally upfront partner; Sharad never finds reciprocation of his love from Kamlesh, who loves Ed. Ed (Prakash) is the weakest of all characters, who neither accepts his sexuality, rejects Kamlesh, tries hard to fit-in by apparently adorning heterosexuality. Strangely, the girl he decides to marry is Kamlesh's once divorced elder sister. In a perplexing, perturbing situation, the friends want Ed to confess to his love and accept his homosexual self; rather he prefers to propose Kamlesh for a relationship after marrying his sister. The distorted psyche of the characters is evident, who are stuck between the socially accepted notions of conjugal bliss, and their bodily needs. A disillusioned state, searching for refuge among peers, each one is dissatisfied. The play ends on an optimistic note of revelation, and Sharad and Kamlesh's reconciliation.

In Final Solutions Dattani's purpose is to present before one the religious orthodoxy, bigotry and hypocrisy that characterize Indian households. While we have been for centuries lauding and hailing the secular nature of our nation, the Partition of the nation proved the ease of creating rift, the ease of separating the communities. While one feels the reconciliation is now complete amidst the remnant residents, and religious confrontations are political stunts, the ground reality is different. We have yet to scrutinize our true inner selves. Aruna, a devout Krishna worshipper, is hesitant to serve water to Javed and Bobby (Muslims) in her utensils, is defiant in permitting them to partake in their household chores during the curfew, and doesn't want them to stay. Javed is hardened by childhood experience of segregation at the hands of orthodox Hindus, and thereby is a professional riot-monger, a paid communal riot initiator. Even the liberalists, Ramnikand Smita are made to realize that their liberality is a by-product, a prerogative bestowed upon them by their privileged, complaisant majority status. One can definitely relate to these characters, see a reflection of one's self or of some acquaintance in them. A microcosm of the Indian society at large is the Gandhi household, where even years after Partition, neither time nor education has been able to instill complete inclusiveness. Alyque Padamsee's remark is worthwhile here, "Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever-locked in combat... Arabs against Jews, white against blacks, Hindus against Muslims?" (161)

Dattani's works are purpose bound. They seek reform. His idea of reform is not confined, there isn't one particular cause that ails his mind, and rather he seems to be grieved by every vice, every suffering that he happens to confront. It is as if his pen is at his command and gives a dramatic form, to any injustice that moves his heart. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is about the second sex, the female "other"- "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the other" (Beauvoir 26) Loud talks of Feminism, female rights, and much theorizing, and clamor hasn't changed the reality for many. The patriarchal world has yet not liquefied; female exists yet as the domesticized counterpart to the all-abounding male world. An all-inclusive society is still a much coveted utopian dream. The male are still the rulers, the privileged, and the law makers in most of the Indian households. Dolly and Alka (sisters) are stuck in dissatisfying marriages. Jiten is rash, insolent, pragmatic and violent, and his violent behavior with Dolly during her pregnancy is the cause of their daughter Daksha's disability. Ba, the Mother of Jiten and Nitin, is old, but has clear memories of the trauma of the violence she suffered at the hands of her husband all her life. Generations, education has not changed much for sufferers like Ba and Dolly. Jiten on his part enjoys the regular company of escorts, but Dolly's imaginative creation of Kanhaiya, proves that her sexual desires lay repressed and in-satiated. Praful and Nitin share a homosexual relationship and the brother himself uses his sister as pawn, to hide his homosexual affair. The notion of societal image, social expectations, and adherence to standard, drive him and he forces Alka to marry and adjust with Nitin, despite knowing the truth. Ba disapproves of Alka and Dolly's mother for being a dancer, an example of exclusion again. Ba dislikes Alka for her drinking habits, unaware of the wrong that her son and Praful had done to her. Women in power,

the older ones, fail to side with their own kind, excluding them from the centre and pushing them to agency-less marginality. Both the marriages are a farce, a masquerade to prevent social contempt and scorn. The bonsais produced by stunting growth and regular pruning are symbolic of the stunted relationships in this household. In both the plays, *Final Solutions* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani employs flashbacks, bringing to audience the lives of two different generations, but not much change is witnessed as to the exclusion policy of the society.

Dance like a Man is a similar foray into the world of performing arts, where too the forces of exclusion are operative. Set in post-Independence India, which was juggling with colonial legacy and Nationalism, trying to reform and evolve as a modern nation, the play focusses on the politics of gender identity. While Amritlal Parekh, a fervent freedom fighter and reformer, tried to fight the ills in Indian society, he was oblivious to the wrong he himself did to his son and daughter-in-law. Stuck on notions of gender identity, he was against his son Jairaj's passion for dance and choosing dance as his profession. When Jairaj aspired to learn Kuchipudi and grow longer hairs, the father tries to dissuade him, even asking him to leave his house. Where on one hand India celebrated freedom from bondage, Jairaj was not free to pursue his passion. Amritlal even foregrounds the prevalent belief of the elites, who despised the Devdasis, admonished them because of some preconceived notion about their characters, and failed to appreciate Devdasi community's service to temples and their rich dance art. Ratna's gradual success makes Jairaj withdraw more and more, and the couple has a forever strenuous relationship post their son's death. The play unlike the others, points through the two generations, that times have changed. Unlike the past, as far as performing arts are considered, the society has learnt to embrace talent, and be inclusive and supportive of the artist. Lata and Vishwas are a better, modified version of Ratna and Jairaj.

All the texts under study here are like perfectly embellished beads strewn together by the thread of Dattani's desire for an inclusive society. Dattani's plays are universal, and promote shunning of standards completely. An acceptance, gleeful acceptance of different outlooks, perspectives and respecting the individuality and choice of all, is Dattani's idea of righteous living. He wants the Indian society to change for the better, men to now consider women as their equals and have freedom to decide for themselves, trans-genders to not hide away from general society, the society to open their gates and hearts for these trans-genders, for homosexuals to have a healthy mental life freely, in the public eye, minorities and the majority to dismantle the existence of such binaries. Dattani is nodreamer, no moral preacher, he aims to just by his craft lay bare the prevalent binaries- Majority/minority, male/female, male-female/transgender, heterosexual/homosexual. He once remarked, " I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background" (15) Dattani's plays in a way aim to deconstruct the grand narratives of patriarchy, heterosexuality, religion, etc. Dattani's protagonists are those who have been for ages denied voice. Dattani does not take sides, for he shows the result of these binaries on both, the privileged and the oppressed. For instance, effect religious orthodoxy on both majority (Aruna-Hindu) and minority (Javed-Muslim), effect of social bias on Subbu (male) and Kamla (transgender), effect of gender role stereotypes on Jairaj (male) and Alka (female), and many others. These binaries and the connotations, standards expected from them are equally atrocious to both parties. When this is evident, as Dattani proves in his plays, he leaves the audience with the decision making power. These plays are bound to imprint the mind of the audience, indirectly stirring them towards a change, towards inclusion.

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