



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**AUTHORITY, SUBVERSION AND THE TELLING VOICES OF THE SUBALTERN IN
MAHESH DATTANI'S "SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE"**

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Article info:

Article Received:05-07-2015

Accepted on: 25-07-2015

Published online:30-7-2015

ABSTRACT

Transgendered occupy a chunk of the world population. Not only in India but in most of the countries they live like social outcasts. Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who takes up his pen for these wretched of the earth. Seven Steps around the Fire dramatizes the brutal murder of a hijra for her secret marriage with a son of a minister. Dattani delves deep into the problem and snobbish hypocritical face of those in the upper echelon of society is exposed. The first part of this paper highlights on the authority, their politics of hegemony and how the same authority is dismantled and social institution has been subverted. The second part of this paper attempts to trace the voice of the subgroups or the subalterns and how the playwright has captured the voice of their age old struggle for survival. Dattani highlights an area of darkness of the human civilization and thereby does justice to the underdogs, the subaltern, the sidelined communities.

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While much ink has been spilled over the privileged occupying the centre, few writers seek to capture the voice of the marginalized and specially the transgendered. Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who takes up his pen on behalf of those weaker sections of human society divided by class and gender and even excluded as an outcast. His major thematic preoccupations are homosexuality, gender discriminations, male female ascendancy and social divide. In a conversation with Utpal K Banerjee the dramatist points out:

I am strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leit motifs of my plays.

Dattani addresses the invisible issues that have accrued to the society from the time immemorable. He has a penchant for the mean, the ugly, and the unhappy things of life that are too embarrassing to be accepted as facts of life. For instance, 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai' and 'Do the Needful' deal with the life and problems of homosexuality. Tara upholds poignantly the male female ascendancy or gender discriminations. 'Bravely Fought the Queen' deals with the stunted lives and troubled relationship bred by dishonesty. 'Final Solutions' deal with partitions and suspicions on a generation. In 'Seven Steps around the Fire,' Dattani breaks away from these themes and focuses a revealing searchlight on the transgendered hitherto expressed by any dramatist.

Post colonial literature posits a tug of war between the centre and the marginal. The centre cannot hold sway over the peripheral forces. Consequently, what counts as 'marginal', comes to the fore and occupy the pivotal position in the non western world. The mechanism of power in colonialism and its aftermath, as Leela Gandhi argues, may manifest itself in 'application of force' as well as 'the disinterested purveyor of cultural enlightenment and reform.' The power dynamics, as evident in Foucaultian framework, is ubiquitous as a web:

Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing or exercising this power...individuals are like vehicles of power, not its points of application.

According to Foucault, power begins to insinuate itself both inside and outside the world of its victims through the collaboration of its subjects. The ruling class exerts its authority by coercion, force and cultural aggression. The Italian communist, Antonio Gramsci foregrounds his concept of hegemony and emphasizes on how a social class achieves a predominant influence and power on the subordinate classes not by direct or overt means but by succeeding in making its ideological view of society so pervasive that the other classes accepts and participate in their own oppression. This power dynamics operate at the behest of the superior classes be it modern, colonial or postcolonial. Dattani champions the cause of the individual self and 'its ability to inhabit a multiplicity subject position- what Homi K Bhaba talks about in his 'Nation in Narration' "the instability of cultural signification" which is articulated as dialectics of various temporalities in terms of modern, colonial, postcolonial. Gauri Shankar Jha cogently sums up in his essay, "Dattani's Exercise in Post colonialism." " --this instability of cultural significance does not lead to limitlessness of representation but opens up spaces in which significance functions on the level of temporality whose inflections are governed by changing cultural and social practices." In 'Seven Steps around the Fire' Dattani brings to the surface the plight of the transgendered, their affirmation of self and their debunking of the authority. The setting of Dattani's plays is the post colonial India of the 1960s and 1970s. The plot of the play revolves round the murder of Kamla, one of the hijra sisterhoods. Uma Rao, a post graduate student of sociology is doing her case study on class and gender violence. Uma has an additional identity of being the wife of the Chief Superintendent of Police and it puts her in an advantageous position. Uma is bent on discovering the murderer. It is Uma's painstaking effort that unravels the mystery and Anarkali is finally released. Under this surface level of the play, Dattani examines the power structure that is operating in society. Miruna George identifies the possibility for 'reworking, reconstructions and resignifications' in Dattani's plays starting from family as the basic unit of society. Dattani views family as the foundation of institutional power. As a basic unit of society family runs by dominant patriarchal ideology. Here Mr. Sharma, the minister, Suresh, the Superintendent of Police, Uma's father-in-law the Deputy Commissioner of Police and Salim represent the patriarchy. Champa, Kamla, Anarkali stand for the marginal. The dominance of the patriarchy, their power politics over the marginals comes to the fore with tripartite strategic manoeuvre.

POLITICS OF MYTH: In conventional outlook, the eunuchs are taken to be the lowest of the low; they exist in the low rung on the social ladder. This view is a product of the age old social conditioning. The legend runs that all the people of the city of Ayodhya wanted to follow lord Rama in time of his exile. So he commanded, 'Men and women turn back.' Some of his male followers were so devoted to the lord that they did not know what to do. They could not disobey him. So, out of sheer devotion they sacrificed their masculinity to become neither men nor women. Their lord was pleased with their dedication and blessed them. So the transgendered came into existence. The other Indian epic, The Mahabharata also marks the presence of the third gendered. In time of their living incognito, Arjun, one of the five Pandavas, took up the disguise of a transsexual. He was appointed the dance teacher of princess Uttara. Arjuna was cursed (by a woman) to remain transgendered for one year. The other transgendered, Shikhandi was noted for her vow of taking revenge on Visha. Shikhandi had married. Such incidents testify to the existence of the transgendered through the ages. The marriage of Shikhandi is a case in point. This proves that the marriage of the third genders was socially acceptable in past. Dattani seems to question the politics of myth perpetuating the subjugation of the transgendered in the

human civilization. He recognizes 'the years of social conditioning as the culprit of all hypocrisy.'⁵ He lays bare the hypocritical practices and its self contradictions within a given dominant culture.

POLITICS OF POWERS: Dattani portrays a social system that reposes faith and power in the hands of those affluent sections of society and derogates the ones that are located in a position subservient to the ones in power. There are those powered groups such as state power, police, politicians and disempowered groups like the eunuchs, the sexually handicapped. Here the disempowered groups are trapped in the politics of hegemony. The drama contains echoes of the police- Politician- crime nexus: As the play opens we find a captive hijra, Anarkali being beaten up by all male prisoners. Anarkali, is an innocent hijra caught on the charge of murdering Kamla. She is a scapegoat. When interrogated by Uma about the torture inside the cell, Suresh reacts:

--More lies. They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day, that Anarkali and ...

Neither Suresh nor average people feel compassion for them; Anarkali knows that her release and justice is a far cry. She reflects on her precarious existence:

They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth I will die in jail (P-244)

The fact is that truth is stranger than fiction. Kamala was beautiful and her beauty finds parallel in the implanted beauty of Subbu, regardless of the sexual deformity in his beloved. Subbu's love results in a secret marriage but long before it gets social recognition, their hope is nipped in the bud. Subbu's father, Mr. Sharma wreaks vengeance over Kamala:

The body was found by some passersby after four days. The temple priest complained about the stench. It was thrown into the pond after being burned. (P-247)

Kamala becomes a helpless victim of crushing social order and power politics. Police, an agent of state force, are rendered powerless (subservient to the interest of the bourgeois):

--Then they (Police) came. They were more interested in the jewellery. (P-247)

No wonder, therefore, that the case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspaper. Here the third gendered are trapped and they are humiliated and victimized.

POLITICS OF CONVENTION: The plays of Dattani dramatize the problems of the marginal, their painful existence under the pressure of social convention and oppressive patriarchy. 'Seven steps around the Fire' present a group of transgendered or rather third gender who bear the age-old social convention. In a voice-over Uma, the mouthpiece of the playwright, informs:

The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable- marriage and birth – ironically, are the very same privileges denied to them by men and nature.

In Indian imagination hijras bless a new born babe by cradling it in their lap. They also bless a new married couple with their singing and dancing. It is axiomatic that society which accepts these entertainers, the age-old preserver of a tradition of a social convention, does not allow a hijra marriage. Kamala was burnt to death as she defied the social norms by marrying Subbu, the son of a minister who occupies a higher social hierarchy. The transgendered or the hijras in our society, stand for a life of deprivation, mockery and derision. They lead the life of social outcasts, deprived of the happiness of marriage by society which practices discrimination against them. Dattani subverts the concept of marriage as a social institution. The title of the play is reminiscent of the sacred image of 'seven circles' before the sacred fire that makes a marriage complete. The secret marriage between Subbu and Kamla in a temple also involved seven circles around the fire for its fruition. But such marriage between Subbu and a transgendered is sanctioned neither by Subbu's father nor by society. The playwright seems to question the relevance and validity of this convention in contemporary India. Possibly, he suggests that a marriage is a spiritual union of two true minds beyond the barriers of the body or impediments of physical limitation. In an intense tensed moment, the authority is exposed and dismantled. The dramatist's investigative emphasis, his introduction of a new woman in form of Uma helps the peripheral presence with a much greater interrogative power lead to demystification of authority and question power dynamics. The result is a social, cultural and ideological dislocation. Finally, irregularities and discrimination of norms and convention are exposed, the authority is dismantled. The same Mr. Sharma, who was proud of his

social status and power, is seen begging at Champa's feet for the life of his son. Mr. Sharma pays a heavy price in form of his son's death. A social institution that cannot safeguard the interest of the humanity any true sense of the term is a failure. Age old social conditioning and social and religious codes have only concealed the social reality from normal facts of life. The dramatist seems to be suggesting the necessity of revamping the whole tradition, the stereotyped social norms so to yoke it with the reality of life and that is what young India wants

TELLING VOICES: ARTICULATING THE SILENCE OF THE SUBALTERN

Subaltern theories of literature aim at empowering the marginalized by bringing back the voices, space and identities silenced or sentenced by history to subjugation and displacement. Some of the plays of Mahesh Dattani are eloquent defenses of the outcasts of society who occupy no space in social order. In the play, 'Seven Steps around the Fire,' Dattani examines the community of eunuchs who perpetually struggle to survive under the cover of shame and silence. Their tragic existence is explored by a sociology scholar, Uma Rao who infiltrates the community and investigates the murder of a beautiful hijra, Kamala. Uma finds out a thread of corruption behind this brutal murder. Subbu, the son of a minister is irresistibly driven to the beauty of Kamala and he wants to marry her. Mr. Sharma is vehemently against the marriage. Champa warns that she would not be happy in the outside world: There is no world for a hijra other than the one we make for ourselves. (261) she scratches her face as a desperate attempt to prevent her, by hoping that she will become ugly and her fiancé will forget her. In spite of all her attempts, Subbu married Kamala secretly in a temple. This marriage led to dire consequences. Mr. Sharma, the father of Subbu, ruthlessly burnt the bride to death. A recurrent preoccupation of the Subaltern group of scholars has been 'the uneasy negotiations between the state, both colonial and post-colonial and the civil society. Here the politician, Mr. Sharma, in collusion with the police, burns Subu's wife to the other world. Of course, the evidence is destroyed but the consciousness remains. That consciousness, the residual memory of the beloved within Subbu, helps Uma to arrive at the truth. Anarkali, another genderless who is captured on the charge of the murder (just like a scapegoat) voices a voice of the subaltern: -- we cannot speak -- when we want to speak nobody listens"' (P-259)

This is not simply the pain and pathos of a third gendered in a civilized society of an urban audience. It is the tragedy of the inarticulate through the ages: In a revolutionary moment Champa says:

Even God does not listen to us.

A lifetime of suffering is contemplated in moment. They live a life of deprivation. They are wretched of the earth. The dramatist does not want to draw our sympathy; what he wants, is a dignity for the individual. The message is brought home by letting the genderless sub-groups speak on their own, thereby solicits a new social awareness. Dattani explores the plurality of the subalterns. Uma, Anarkali, Champa Kamla are all subaltern. Uma occupies the central position in social hierarchy whereas Anarkali belongs to the marginal. Anarkali is biologically subaltern but Uma is a gendered subaltern. She has not the financial support from her husband. Hence she has to fall back on her father. She borrows money under the pretext of buying wedding gift for Subbu. She is suffering from infertility for her husband's low sperm count. Yet her husband, Suresh refuses to visit a doctor. What is unique, is that one Subaltern comes face to face with the other to let out their voice. Through Uma, the mouthpiece of the dramatist there is a message for the restitution of self -- respect, identity and justice for the transgendered: -- what they want --to move on, to love, to live.

CONCLUSION

Dattani breaks a new ground in the Indian drama in his depiction of the transgendered. He opens a new horizon in Indian drama by bringing into context the invisible issues that are too uneasy for surfacing yet they exist as the fact of our life. Perhaps he is advocating a change, a change in societal outlook. The genderless or the subalterns are no longer be kept as outcasts but they are very much part of our society. In the words of Dr Beena Agarwal: *Dattani in the process of engineering current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to real life, experiences tried to articulate the voice or the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices---within the framework of dramatic structure, tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order.* Dattani breaks the age old silence of the outcasts and gives them a face to the faceless. We may humbly conclude that as playwright of a

new age he creates a new social awareness by challenging the social norms, dismantling the authority and initiates liberation of the marginal groups against the politics of hegemony. By surfacing the invisible issues from the seamy sides of society Dattani the dramatist solicits our attention to enduring lesson of living and thinking. It is pertinent to remember the words of Homi K Bhaba:

–it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history –subjugation, domination, diaspora and displacement – that we learn the most enduring lessons for living and thinking.

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