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GLITTERING FACADES OF SOCIAL REALISM IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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ABSTRACT

The literary cord of drama is both thin and weak in the artifact of contemporary Indian English literature. While the Indian writer in English is successful in giving bona fide expression to the Indian consciousness in the area of fiction, he has not been able to match it with his performance in poetry and, much less, in drama. It is an ingrained fact that English is no longer a foreign language in India. The fact that its ingenuity and potentiality have been scrupulously delved deep in the field of fiction should encourage the playwright to take stock of the situation obtaining post-Independence. He needs first to understand, and then revive the great dramatic practice India has had for over two thousand years, relating to it the urgency of contemporaneous concerns. Then he is expected to take benefit of the successful experiments made in drama-writing and staging in some of the Indian regional languages like Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada. And eventually, he must decide either to bend English to fit into the dramatic pattern of the Indian theatre or use English as a translating means.

Mahesh Dattani is viewed as one of the best Indian playwrights. He is an actor, playwright and director. Almost all his chief dramas deal with the wide-ranging issues related to a choice of dramatic techniques, his theatrical art, his concept of alternate sexuality, his gay themes and his unique art of fusing the feeling with form. They concentrate on social issues, not the very obvious ones, but the deep-seated prejudices and problems that the society is by and large conditioned to turn away from. The present research paper throws light upon the glittering or impressive facades of social realism reflected in the plays of Mahesh Dattani.

INTRODUCTION

The literary cord of drama is both thin and weak in the artifact of contemporary Indian English literature. While the Indian writer in English is successful in giving bona fide expression to the Indian consciousness in the area of fiction, he has not been able to match it with his performance in poetry and, much less, in drama. It is an ingrained fact that English is no longer a foreign language in India. The fact that its ingenuity and potentiality have been scrupulously delved deep in the field of fiction should encourage the playwright to take stock of the situation obtaining post-Independence. He needs first to understand, and then revive the great dramatic practice India has had for over two thousand years, relating to it the urgency of

contemporaneous concerns. Then he is expected to take benefit of the successful experiments made in drama-writing and staging in some of the Indian regional languages like Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada. And eventually, he must decide either to bend English to fit into the dramatic pattern of the Indian theatre or use English as a translating means.

Mahesh Dattani is viewed as one of the best Indian playwrights and he writes his pieces in English. He is an actor, playwright and director. Almost all his chief dramas deal with the wide-ranging issues related to a choice of dramatic techniques, his theatrical art, his concept of alternate sexuality, his gay themes and his unique art of fusing the feeling with form. They concentrate on social issues, not the very obvious ones, but the deep-seated prejudices and problems that the society is by and large conditioned to turn away from. Also, his plays transact upon gender identity, gender discrimination, and communal tensions.

GLITTERING FACADES OF SOCIAL REALISM

In art and literature, *Realism* is a term that covers “a broad range of views centered on the attempt to depict life as it is usually experienced, without recourse to miraculous events, larger-than-life characters, or supernatural intervention. In a realistic text, the emphasis is on the way things are for ordinary people, whose behaviour and speech mirror their social position and cultural attitudes. In this sense realism is opposed to Romance, which represents life as we would like it to be, or to other anti-realist approaches such as Expressionism or Impressionism.”¹

Social Realism is a trend of writing that has become trendy now-a-days especially with Indian playwrights writing in English. It aims to embody the society in its original hue without any romanticizing the things. Literature should mirror the society as it is. It ought not idealize the ways of the world. This kind of writing gives an exact picture of people, their life-style and their way of thinking in a particular time. Majority of the twentieth century English playwrights followed this tradition of accurate representation of society, the principal dramatist being *G.B. Shaw*. Another playwright *Henrik Ibsen* also dwelt upon the evils in the society through his plays. Indian English dramatists in the earlier period had used the mythology, folklore and history as their material which was very much away from the reality. Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Mohan Rakesh have written about prevailing social issues during their times.

In an Interview taken by Sneha Subramanian Kanta to the question “A novelist has many tools to present his characters' nuances whereas a playwright has only one, dialogues. How do you manage to create this one tool into a strength?” Mahesh Dattani replied: “A play can be written without dialogues too. The true canvas of a play is conflict. Characters in conflict with one another. Without conflict you cannot have drama.”²

There are certain issues in our society over which people do not want to speak or write about. They consider it obscene to write about these issues, though such issues are very much the reality of society. People deem them as taboo issues. Though we live in the 21st century, gender equality is still not rooted in our psyche. We are not ready to admit that women are equal to men in every walk of life. Many educated people still indulge in female feticide. *Communal hatred* is still a reality in our country though we have adopted a secular democracy. We, the people of all religious beliefs, are not ready to live in harmony and it is a great hindrance in the progress of our nation. Our society has been a witness to numerous communal riots and many people have lost their lives through these riots right from the independence and ensuing partition of our country to the present times.

Sexual abuse of children is another serpentine evil that we face. The children fall victim to the sexual abuse and the number of such victims is near around half the population of children. Neither do parents nor children talk about this topic due to shame, apprehension and lack of awareness. There are some people in our society who could not come out of that ordeal and shock and could not lead a normal life all through their lifetime. People need to be made aware of this spiteful evil.

A significant section of society, i.e. *eunuchs*, is not a part of mainstream society. They are not considered as human beings and are treated contemptuously by the established society. These people are ignored of their human rights and it persists at government level too; thanks to the recent landmark judgment

given by the Supreme Court, creating the 'third generation' status for eunuchs which for the first time gave these people an official recognition. Although such judgment has been given, we the people are not prepared to accept eunuchs as part of our society and it needs a long way to go to stop all sorts of discrimination against eunuchs.

Heterosexuality is a considered norm in our society and abnormal and pervert behaviour is not acknowledged. *Homosexuality* is a sin and such sinners do not have any place in traditionalist society. The section 377 of Indian Penal Code prohibits any 'unnatural offense' and whosoever indulges in such activity is liable for punishment. There are around 4 millions of homosexuals living in India. They cannot come out openly because of their expulsion from family and eventually from conformist society. Many homosexuals live double lives that are, having homosexual relation as well under the guise of married life. They are forced to do so because society does not permit deviant behaviour. Mahesh Dattani exclusively wishes to sensitize the minds of his audience and make them aware of the contemporary reality.

With the dawn of new wave of liberalization, privatization and globalization, the socio-economic status of Indian middle class and upper middle-class has changed significantly. Most of these people live either in metropolitan cities or towns. Indian society has accepted new methods of living as regards their peripheral appearance is concerned whereas they are disinclined to accept western values like gender equality, scientific approach, etc. The open economic policy changed individual's outlook towards life and it has enormous impact over people's thinking and expression. The world has become a global village. People can exchange their ideas, values and feelings across the world. Marginalized sections in the society are vocalizing their rights and expressing their feelings more frankly and assertively as never before. The new ideas of liberalism and individualism are challenging the notions of India and Indian culture.

The major social issues which Dattani has taken into consideration have contemporary relevance and the playwright's aims are to make audience aware of these issues. These major issues are Religious Harmony (*Final Solutions*), Gender Equality (*Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen, Where There's a Will & Dance Like a Man*), Sexual Abuse of Children (*Thirty Days in September*), and GLBT—gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Issues (*Seven Steps Around the Fire, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai & Do the Needful*).

The following statements of investigation can be framed to explore the social realities in the form of issues or problems Mahesh Dattani addresses in his plays. The statements of investigations are:

- Do plays of Mahesh Dattani depict the social reality or the issues which affect society?
- What are the issues that are socially relevant and handled deftly by Mahesh Dattani?
- What are the exceptional facets of the writing of Mahesh Dattani which make him the writer of social realities?
- Are issues addressed by Mahesh Dattani 'taboo issues'?
- Does Mahesh Dattani appeal to audience to solve these problems in society?
- What are the 'stage techniques' used by Mahesh Dattani which make him the unique Indian English playwright using such techniques?
- Does Mahesh Dattani provide any solutions to the problems through his plays?

THE WORLD OF MAHESH DATTANI

There are many entry points having different shades of meanings from which one can truly get into the world of Mahesh Dattani. He has presented the contemporary man and his life without romanticizing it. He has given the voice to the marginalized sections of society. His writing makes people think about the constituent parts of society. He, through his plays, has discussed very genuinely burning issues in the society. Many researchers and scholars have tried their best to find out the relation between society and the individuals reflected in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. There is a book, *'Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's*

Plays' by B.K. Das published in 2008. There is another book entitled '*A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays*' by Pranav Joshipura published in 2009. Beena Agrawal has published a book '*Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theater*' in 2008. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri has written a book '*Contemporary Indian Writers in English – Mahesh Dattani: 'An Introduction'*' which was published in 2005. Parmar Bipin R is another person who worked on '*A Critical Study of Dramatic Works of Mahesh Dattani*' for the award of his Ph.D. in Saurashtra University, Gujarat in 2011.

There is Alpana Saini who worked on '*The Construction of Contemporary Indian Subjectivity in the Selected Plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani*' and got her Ph.D. from Punjabi University, Patiala in 2010. Another researcher G. Dharmaraja has got his Ph.D. on the topic '*Gender and Family Relations in Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A Study*'.

IMPERCEPTIBLE ISSUES

It is hypothesized that contemporary Indian English Drama has a very wide-ranging and profound convention of social issues which have been applied and implemented by few playwrights and Mahesh Dattani is a prominent name among them. It is evident that the plays of Mahesh Dattani address the imperceptible issues in society. These plays deal with the issues of gender discrimination, communal differences, sexual abuse of children, plight of hijras and the homosexual behaviour. It is said that these issues are '*taboo issues*'. The issues handled by the playwright are rooted very much in the Indian soil; it is not fantasy but contemporary reality which we need to acknowledge and about which we should be aware of.

CONCLUSION

In Mahesh Dattani the prodigious ingenious dramatist, one can study critically various glittering or impressive facades of social realism. Such a research exploration helps to get a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the contemporary issues which mirror the factual strands of the dramatist's literary fabric. It thoroughly reiterates the relevance of literature.

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