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A WORLD GOVERNED BY WOMEN: A CRITICAL STUDY OF DATTANI'S  
"THE BIG FAT CITY"

AVIJIT PRAMANIK

Junior Research Fellow, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT Durgapur, West  
Bengal, India



ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is well-known for his treatment of contemporary issues which remain 'invisible' to general eyes. His latest play *The Big Fat City* presents the struggles of middle class people of Mumbai. The characters of the play are trapped in certain problems. However, we discern women characters to be more patient. They take control of their families and endeavour to protect their male companions from impending disasters. Dattani has created a unique world in which women are placed as controllers of families and saviours to their male partners. The women give meaning to the lives of the male members.

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Mahesh Dattani has persistently presented women characters as full of vigour, passion, and authority. They are shown to be engaged in a battle against the nonchalant society. The society pressurizes them to conform to the traditional and conventional roles of women. However, Dattani's women characters endeavor ceaselessly to break the orthodox shackles of the society. In an interview with Sachidananda Mohanty, Dattani confesses:

I relate to Tennessee Williams because he writes about vulnerable women in a very violent society. I think I tend to do that as well, although I don't see my woman as vulnerable, in the sense that they do fight their battles. (*Collected Plays 173*)

His latest play *The Big Fat City* projects women as the controllers of families. They successfully protect their families and male partners from probable ruin. Whenever their male partners are in danger, they hatch and execute plans to bring them out of danger. They appear as saviours to their male companions.

*The Big Fat City* cannot boast of a single protagonist. It portrays the lives and emotions of middle class people of Mumbai. However, it is not surely and solely the story of Mumbai. Any resident of metropolitan city can identify himself with that of Murlu, Niharika, Sailesh, Anu, and Lolly. Regarding the theme of the play, Achint Kaur rightly says:

It depicts ordinary people caught in extraordinarily tragic situations, each struggling to deal with their own situations in a bizarre way. It is a black comedy in the true sense of the term. (149)

All the characters in the play lack emotional as well as economical succour. They desperately seek to come out of the mess of their lives. Here women play prominent roles. They not only take initiatives for fiscal support but also render emotional support to their male partners.

Murli and Niharika reside in a one BHK flat. They are short of money. Hence, they cannot cope with the monthly EMI of the flat. In the meantime, Murli's friend Sailesh, who runs a bank, comes to visit Murli's house. Murli's wife Niharika repeatedly asks Murli to appear quite presentable and confident in front of Sailesh. She has, in fact, hatched a plan to transfer their loan to Sailesh's bank. Niharika wants Murli to impress Sailesh:

MURLI. Can't I wear my regular shirt, please?

NIHARIKA. Stop fidgeting with that kurti. You will tear it. No, you can't.

(156)

Niharika time and again reminds Murli: ". . . don't look so helpless. . . You have to look more confident" (157). In course of Murli's conversation with Sailesh, we find Murli to be less confident and desperate. However, Niharika superbly keeps her cool. When Murli talks in an urgent tone, Niharika intervenes:

MURLI. Sailesh, I need your advice. No, actually, I need your help!

*Niharika steps in with some nibbles.*

NIHARIKA. Oh, don't be so dramatic, Murli. It's nothing major but. . .

Sailesh, we have been a little behind on our EMIs. (163)

Murli has lost his job. Consequently, he has been immersed into the monetary problems. But Niharika twists the case and tries to present Murli in another way:

NIHARIKA. You see, Murli wasn't quite happy with his job. So he quit.

SAILESH. He quit? Are you mad?

MURLI. I didn't! I was fired! I lost my job!

*A brief silence.*

*The doorbell rings.*

NIHARIKA (*after looking daggers at Murli*). I think I better get that. (164)

Niharika has invited the TV actress Lalita Jagtiani to impress Sailesh. She wants to transfer their loan to Sailesh's bank by hook or by crook. Niharika sends a message to Murli even when they are in the same flat. The message, which is shown on a screen for the benefit of the audience, explicitly indicates the intentions of Niharika:

SCREEN (*from Niharika*): I INVITED HER SO HE WILL BE IMPRESSED.

IT'S WORKING, SO PLEASE DON'T SCREW THINGS UP.

DON'T SAY A WORD. (165)

It is quite evident to us that Niharika is trying her best to anchor her family and her husband. Sailesh, on the other hand, is himself in debt. He has come to Murli's house for some monetary help. Sailesh made some adjustments in one customer's account and now desperately needs money to manage that customer. It is also clear that Sailesh's wife Meena Ganatra has sent him to Murli's house. As soon as Sailesh reaches Murli's house, he receives a message from his wife:

SCREEN (*from Meena Ganatra*): HE CALLED ON THE LANDLINE, ANY

LUCK? (160)

Here also a woman takes initiative to help her husband. Murli and Sailesh are at a loss without the help of their wives.

The TV actress Lalita does her everything to keep her family going. As she fails to grab roles in TV serials, she has joined theatre group. Her husband Kailash is a drunkard and her son Rahul thrives on late night parties. Hence, Lalita is in charge of earning and maintaining the family. Gradually she gets involved with a drug racket and underworld. Anu is a struggling TV star. She has her own problems too. Her lover Puneet

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always snubs her for her proximity with producers. Anu lives in Niharika's flat as a paying guest. Her lover Puneet out of a rage kills Kailash who was lying almost naked on Anu's bed. Puneet misunderstood Kailash as Anu's bed partner. After the murder, it is Anu who takes charge of the situation:

ANU. (*To Puneet*) I am going to get you out of this, okay? . . . Okay, baby?

*Puneet nods, whimpering.*

ANU. Good. Just shut your mouth for now and we will be fine. (187)

Anu plans to present Kailash's murder as suicide. She convinces Niharika, Murlī, and Sailesh to help her. Anu proposes to pay them one crore to manage the situation. However, she fails to trick her brother Harjeet and gets shot by him. Anu's life story reminds us how Indian families discriminate a girl-child from a male one.

*The Big Fat City* again presents the struggles of women. But unfortunately like other female characters of Dattani, they are not on the winning side. They do their best to mitigate the problems of their families. Their efforts for survival derive veneration from the audience and readers alike. It is women who give meaning to the lives of the male-folk in the play.

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