



POSTMODERN APPROACHES IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

S. K. SANKAR

Research Scholar,
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Tirunelveli (TN) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani 'an avant garde' playwright depicts in all his plays what he sees in the social structure, what he realizes in the life of marginalized people, and openly argues with the subjects. As a postmodern visionary playwright he deals with the social issues like patriarchy, gender discrimination, child sexual abuse, LGBT issues and touches the minds of the readers. He decides to uncover the hidden realities which is common in the marginalized society. He communicates in some of his plays, sensitive issues like communalism, gay issues etc to the readers. He visualizes the sufferings in some sect of people and tries to find out the solution for the problems. His themes are common to all readers throughout the world.

Key words *Avant-garde playwright, marginalized visionary, discrimination, hidden realities, sufferings, solutions, LGBT issues, communalism, solution.*

INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of the best contemporary Indian playwrights. He is a versatile theatre personality. He has been awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for his 'Final Solutions and Other plays' in 1998. His plays mainly deal with humanism and specifically justice to marginalized sections of society. He presents his views and appeals to us to find solutions for the problems.

Mahesh Dattani, A Postmodernist

The main aim of this paper is analyzing the social themes of Mahesh Dattani in a postmodern view. Many writers of all genres present their themes relating to social evils through their

S. K. SANKAR

1Page



characters in the works. As a true postmodernist, he thematizes social issues maneuvering postmodern techniques. He in all his dramas presents his themes at two levels, namely personal level and societal level. He argues in such a way to support these marginalized people in the upper middle class family. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari argues as such:

the preoccupation with 'fringe' issues forms an important element in Dattani's work issues that remain latent and suppressed, or pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage - quite literally with Dattani, this becomes the only way to actually push these invisible issues forward, to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence (47).

In the play 'Where There is a will', Dattani takes up the issue of patriarchal code. He laughs at the patriarchal nature of the society in a humorous way. In this play, Dattani shows a self-made successful industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta and his patriarchal nature. He throughout the play tries to dictate his son Ajit. He is blunt and contemptuous and his son is defiant. We can easily identify the protagonist's controlling nature through these lines.

Ajit: Don't I have any rights at all?

Hasmukh: you have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders.

Ajit: Thank you. You are so generous. I could kiss your feet.

Hasmukh: There's no need to do that, just polish my shoes every morning and I will be happy (WTW 458).

In the play 'Dance like a man' Dattani shows the patriarchal mind of a family head and father of Jiten, Amritlal Parekh. We see in him a dominated man with traditional mindset against the practice of dance. He controls over his son as well as his daughter-in-law. The following conversation reveals Amritlal's patriarchy.

AMRITLAL. Where were you yesterday?

RATNA. I really must get back

AMRITLAL. Where were you the whole of yesterday?

RATNA. I told you where I was going.

AMRITLAL. But where did you go instead?

RATNA. I don't know what you mean.

AMRITLAL. You had informed me that you were going to the Shiva temple.

RATNA. Yes. Like I do every Monday.

AMRITLAL. Every Monday, is it?

RATNA. Yes. (DLM 418-9)



Amritlal compels Ratna not to go to Chennai Amma's house to practice dance. He instructs Ratna to get permission whenever she wants to go out. It reveals the narrow mindedness and the dominating power on others.

AMRITLAL. And you feel what you are doing is right?

RATNA. Yes. My husband knows where I go and I have his permission

AMRITLAL. Your husband happens to be my son. And you are both under my care. It is my permission that you should ask for

RATNA. You would not have given it to me

AMRITLAL. And I never will (DLM 420-1)

In *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Tara*, he elaborately discusses the sufferings of women in the hands of male chauvinist society. As a realist he then portrays the pains of lesbians and gay people using fragmented scenes in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the needful* and *Seven Steps around the Fire*. He uses symbols as signifiers such as photographs, music, thumbri songs etc. to simply describe the inner feelings of the characters. For instance in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Kamlesh has a photograph which shows his deep love with Prakash. They are hugging each other 'cheek to cheek, pelvis to pelvis, Naked' (OMN 71). Like this in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and in *Final solutions*, Dattani uses symbols like the bonsai plant, Naina Devi's Thumbri songs to reflect the inner mind of the characters. Alka and Dolly in '*Bravely Fought the Queen*' and Smita in '*Final solutions*' often hear thumbri songs whenever they are happy. These usages clearly prove Dattani's postmodern features in his plays.

He writes what he visualizes in the society in his plays. The most vulnerable theme of child sexual abuse is clearly presented in *Tara* using different stage techniques. He portrays the molestation of Mala, by her uncle Vinay. The playwright uses 'silence' metaphorically to reveal the deepest pain of Mala to the audience. Dattani captures the stark reality of life. Gender discrimination is very common in the Indian society from the early age. Dattani from the women side protects the welfare of females signifying gender roles in his plays, mainly *Tara* and other plays like *Dance like a Man* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Pranav Joshipura, a famous critic in his book *A critical study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays* calls him a realistic dramatist. He argues in his book.

Dattani is indeed a realistic dramatist. But he does not aim at confirming to our usual observation of the society. He does not depict what easily strikes the eye. He leaves that task to others. He does not want to repeat through dramatic technique what the fiction writers have done in their narration. He chooses to bring to light instead the hitherto unperceived realities. He forces us to see what usually we do not want to see.

S. K. SANKAR

3Page



We turn away our gaze from hijras and homosexuals conditioned as we are to regard them as abnormal humanity or as lesser humans not deserving our attention. This is instinctive on our part, not intentional. Dattani shocks our prudery. But he also convinces us when we are ready to think impartially that there is a variety of humans. That one type of them is normal, does not mean that the other types are abnormal or normal. All of them are natural beings. There can be nothing unnatural in nature. Dattani just draws our attention to sexual minorities He reveals them as they are by proper study of their psychology and manners. Their psychology is more important to Dattani than their physical behavior. Dattani portrays their lives, their tensions, troubles, tribulations, struggles for existence quite faithfully. That is how he is realist (240-41)

India is a secular country with different religions, languages, customs. Dattani handles the sensitive issue of communalism and presents the characters using many postmodern techniques like symbols, historiographic metafiction, and parody. He wants the readers to find out the permanent final solution to these communal conflicts which is quiet common even in the developed countries.

Dattani has explored various social issues mainly the issues related to marginalized, subjugated, down trodden people. He lights on the hidden side of these people. He is a realist who portrays the world of reality in the Indian urban society without any inhibition. In an interview with Erin, B.Mee, Dattani tells about his need to address invisible issues related to society.

What's interesting to me, and I'm sure it's true for many people, is that I was attracted to the form first, and then I discovered my content. My own political stand came because I started doing theatre, not because I had something political to say and I used theatre as the platform- just the reverse. Since I've realized the potential of theater as an agent, if not for social change, at least or reflection, I can't be frivolous about it anymore. Unless I have something strong to present, I wouldn't write.

Anindya Sen a notable critic, views Dattani's choice of themes from marginalized and oppressed society and praises him as a brave voice of protest.

Dattani's need to deal with repressed issues and interrogate the darkness inhabiting the collective unconscious is so great that he cannot even write a detective play without bringing in elements like the marginalization of the 'hijra' community (Seven Steps Around the Fire) or the flourishing of Hindu

S. K. SANKAR

4P a g e



fundamentalism (The Swami and Winston) in urban educated India. Typically, his Bravely Fought the Queen brings to the forefront a medley of such issues. Within the span of one single three-act play we come across, the social repression of homosexuality, dowry system, the repressive and abusive patriarchal social structure etc. Dattani presents us with the glimpses of a reality which we prefer not to acknowledge even to our own selves. It is this constant engagement with repressed issues that has led critics to hail Dattani as a brave voice of protest.

We can easily stamp his themes and techniques postmodern because in such a way Dattani deals with the subjects relating to invisible, marginalized people and works hard to light on such issues to make it visible to others.

CONCLUSION

Dattani is reputed to have dealt with 'burning issues' of contemporary urban life such as communalism between two major religions, banned gender issues etc. His plays are funny, dramatic, topical, controversial, profound and entertaining. Any academic scholar can find plenty to analyze such as his use of language, stagecraft, subversion of gender and questioning tradition. He presents his ideas in postmodern view using postmodern narrative techniques in all his plays.

REFERENCES:

- Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. Contemporary Indian writers in English. Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi: Cambridge university press, 2008. print.
- Dattani, Mahesh Collected Plays. Where there is a will. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000. print.
- Dattani, Mahesh Collected Plays. Dance like a man. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000. print.
- Joshipura, Pranav. A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's plays. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2009. Print.
- Multani, Angelie, ed. Mahesh Dattani's plays critical perspectives. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. print.
- Sen, Anindya, ed, Kaustav Chakraborty. Indian Drama in English. New Delhi: PHI learning, 2014. print.