

Unmasking Social Prejudices : Caste, Class and Community in Mahesh Dattani's Theatre

Dr. Pallavi Parte*

*Assistant Professor (English) Govt. College, Bijawar (M.P.) INDIA

Abstract : India possesses rich cultural and traditional heritage unmatched by any other nation in its multi- cultural, multi -traditional and multilingual diversity. However like a coin with two sides, Indian society embodies both virtues and vices : a great historical legacy alongside deeply entrenched intersectionality of caste ,class and community that cannot be ignored. Literature serves as a luminous mirror faithfully reflecting the multifaceted contours of society. In Indian English literature Mahesh Dattani stands out as a prolific playwright who exposes these social prejudices through his theatrical works. He addresses the sombre issue via a deceptively convincing narrative style.

Introduction - Mahesh Dattani is one of the excellent and serious playwrights of contemporary age. His plays offer an authentic depiction of social realities. His plays serve as an unflinching mirror to the hypocrisies and prejudices pervasive in contemporary Indian society and secure his reputation as the 'bold confrontation of social truths'. He boldly confronts socially taboo and obscured issues ,utilizing the urban middle class family as a microcosm to reveal the defects and inconsistencies embedded in the wider societal structure.

Dattani's plays reflect the problems that develop in Indian context. They often expose social discrimination based on caste, class, community, minorities, women, gay people and transgender people. Each play of Dattani like **Final Solution, Seven Steps Around the Fire, Tara, Dance like a Man, Bravely Fought the Queen** etc. addresses the societal issues. These issues are actual life problems and sometimes cause controversy. Dattani adopted different forms of drama as a medium to represent the real depth and vitality of human experience. These rather radical themes and forms of his drama have separated him from the traditional Indian playwrights.

A very poignant masterpiece of Dattani 'Tara' reveals overtly the theme of gender discrimination which is the result of the intersectionality of the societal class and caste. It would not be an exaggeration to say that overall this gender discrimination reflects upper middle class dynamics in urban India. Tara's mother Bharti belongs to a socially privileged class from a more liberal community often interpreted as upper caste in Indian context. Tara's maternal grandfather holds elite social status, influential politician who was position to become chief minister and her paternal Patel family overall reflects upper middle class dynamics in urban

India. With their collective decision the twin's fate is decided . By manipulating the physical separation of Tara and her brother they favour the boy (Chandan)over the girl (Tara).It shows how elite status in Indian society often aligns with class and caste privileges that prioritize sons:

Play - Tara

Patel : ".....your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar.That same evening your mother told me of her decision.-that they would risk giving both legs to the boyMaybe if I had protested more strongly !"

Thus his play '**Tara**' throws a light on gender conflict and the role of societal class and culture in creating such conflict. Gender is purely social or cultural phenomena while sex is biological. It is not possible to alter biological phenomena but social and cultural constraint can be changed with a little effort.

Dattani maintains impartiality in addressing gender inequalities. He examines how societal notions of masculinity rigidly limit men's choices, a constraint upheld by both the genders within the community. Through the words of Amritlal in '**Dance like a Man**' a very clear picture of the limitations on men's choices is visible as he is totally against of his son's dancing. These limitations based on class ,cast and status in our society.

Play - Dance like a Man

Amritlal : Do you know where a man's happiness lies?

Ratna : No.

Amritlal : In being a man.

Dattani's **Final Solution** explores the much debated subject of communalism. It was on the problem of communal disharmony between the Hindus and Muslims in India, especially during the period of post- partition riots

. Dattani's purpose in depicting the post-partition communal violence in India is not to convey the actual events that took place but to present the psychological fear that has been inculcated in our minds. The play also argues that love is not restricted by religion, cast and creed as his evidence from Smita's love for Babban. The juxtaposition of love and hatred complicates the uniform and unhindered violence that is promoted in a communal riot. The play brings characters from different religious backgrounds together in a tense, riot-torn situation, forcing them to confront their prejudices. At the end of the play Bobby, by speaking about one final deed to be done, deliberately removes his footwear and advances towards the pooja room slowly. He picks up the image of Krishna which is tiny enough to sit in his palm and shows the image to everyone:

Play: Final Solution

Bobby : See ! See! I am touching God. Your God! My flesh is holding him! Look, Javed ! And he does not mind! He does not turn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated! Look how He rests in my hands! He knows I cannot harm Him. He knows His strength! I don't believe in Him but He believes in me.

In a very famous play 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' Dattani highlights the critique of justice and silence imposed on the marginalized. Anarkali Hijra (eunuch) is framed as the main accused in Kamla's murder due to societal prejudices against her community. Her arrest protects the elite and makes her an easy scapegoat despite her innocence and close bond with the victim who she calls her 'sister'. An extremity of injustice is reached when she articulates the atrocities inflicted upon her in these words. Her dialogue captures her bitterness and exhaustion:

Play-'Seven Steps Around the Fire'

Uma: Anarkali ! Please, help me.

Anarkali: Go away. After servicing all these sons of whores, my mouth is too tired to talk.

Uma: God !

This play not only explores the themes of social injustice and the marginalization of the hijra community but also delves into gender identity crisis, the corruption of power wielded by the elite due to their class and societal status, and the enforced silencing of the marginalized owing to their subordinate position in society.

A very sensitive issue of domination and suppression is uncovered by Dattani in his plays. In *Bravely Fought like Queen* he presents three generations of women in an Indian family who are oppressed and exploited at the hands of the patriarchal male figures in their lives. The first generation of Trivedi family 'Baa' herself is exploited by her drunkard husband. Her suffering ended her in inability to live in the present. Even after husband's death, her memory haunts her. Dolly and Alka represent the second female generation of the family, are married to Jiten and Nitin respectively. They lead their life taking care of the needs of their husband

and senile mother in law. The intermittent bell ringing by Baa which calls for an immediate attention shows how women also become oppressors in patriarchal society. Dolly and Alka are ill-treated by their husbands as Jiten's wedlock with Dolly is purely for the sake of societal norms of marriage and he satisfies his sexual libido by calling whores at his office and Alka remains childless because of Nitin's homosexual relationship with her brother Praful. Daksha the face of third generation becomes a victim of her father's brutality. With her premature birth she remains deformed and mentally retarded. The barbarity and atrocity of the patriarchal system implicitly appears when Dolly, in a precarious condition, becomes a victim of the inhumanity of Baa and Jiten:

Play-Bravely Fought the Queen

Baa: Jitu, throw her out as well. Whore !

Dolly: And you hit me! Jitu, you beat me up! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up!

Baa: No ! Jeetu, hit her on the face but not on the..... stop it Jitu! On the face, only on the face.....

Thus Mahesh Dattani's theatres perform for unmasking the hidden and bitter truth of the society and present a real picture of societal prejudices. As theatre is a process of making the word flesh. When the words are Mahesh Dattani's, the flesh is already contained within the word; the written texts are only fully realized through the process of performance.

In conclusion, Literature - be it verse, drama, narrative prose or fiction- stands as an essential conduit between personal lives and collective society, ceaselessly echoing realities and forging new paths. It not only amplifies silenced voices but also boldly defies entrenched norms. As literary critic Terry Eagleton observes 'Literature, in the full sense of the word, is the expression of human creativity. It transcends boundaries, it travels across time, and it is a means by which we come to know ourselves and the world we inhabit.

Much as Eagleton describes literature travelling beyond limits, Dattani's theatres perform as an outstanding example to examine, challenge and expose societal prejudices, norms and injustices. His concept positions dramas as a powerful tool for reflecting on and critiquing class, caste, gender and community in our society and enables readers to question and rethink established beliefs and system. Vivid portrayals of caste, gender, identity in works like *Tara*, *Final Solution*, *Dance Like a Man* etc. compel readers to confront biases head-on.

Mahesh Dattani guides readers to uncover the shared human experiences and pressing moral dilemmas of their era, long obscured by entrenched social prejudices. Echoing Mathew Arnold's view of literature as a 'Criticism of life', Dattani's works do not merely reflect society-they dissect, interrogate and provoke it into reckoning. His legacy endures as a beacon, continuously challenging readers across generations to question norms and prejudices,

embrace nuances and envision a more equitable world.

References : -

1. Arnold, Mathew. Culture and Anarchy. Oxford University Press, 1869.
2. Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory : An Introduction. Blackwell, 1983.
3. Chandra. Dr. Prakash. Literature and Society, Published on 16 Jan 2025.
4. Shukla Seema. Indian Writing In English. Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, Bhopal 2023.
5. Dattani Mahesh. Collected Playes. Penguin Books An imprint of Penguin Random House
6. Introduction to literary theory review: Literature as Social Critique by Fiveable Content Team.
