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Happy Hypocrisy in Mahesh Dattani's *Do the Needful*: A Search for Potential Threat to Marriage

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Abstract:

The plays of Mahesh Dattani usually form a close bilateral or trigonal reality. Dattani's plays are about people who are somehow marginalised in our binaristic society. An 'other' confined reality constitutes his fictional world. It is the world of the homosexuals², bisexuals, transgendered, eunuch and the new women of India. Dattani sees these socially ostracised classes as a potential threat to our modern India as far as we are unwilling to accept them as a reality. I have used the word 'society' not only as a hierarchical stagnant platform the nation/state but also as a living organism which, when needed, enlarges its periphery to accommodate the need of the each individual creature for the general wellbeing of the whole system. Then, Dattani happens to be a microscope to detect out the potential dangers of the society that may prove fatal to the postcolonial progressive India. Dattani believes that our seemingly untroubled society in its most spheres is in a forceful harmony. In most of the cases peoples are bound to succumb to existing social systems like patriarchy, economic inequality, religious fundamentalism and political fanaticism etc. From these floating issues, Dattani shifts his locale to a zone so far untrodden by any Indian creative artist especially the dramatist. It is the community of the LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgendered)- their pleasure and pain, satisfaction and agony, independence and subjugation.

Keywords: *Marginals, social evil, homosexuals, cross-religious marriage, Human - relationship, moral choices, sexual/gender identity*

1. Introduction

The signs of a hypocrite are three: Whenever he speaks, he tells a lie, and whenever he promises, he breaks his promise and whenever he is entrusted, he betrays and proves he is dishonest.

Sahih al-Bukhari¹

Gujarati by birth, born and reared up in Bangalore, Mahesh Dattani, the modern Indian polymath, unlike most of his contemporary fictioneers, is more of a social researcher than just being a creative writer. His versatility is unquestionable. He is a writer, actor, screenplay writer, director and a dancer. He is the first English language playwright to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his "*Final Solutions and Others Plays*" in 1984. He has set a studio named Playpen of his own in his home-city Bangalore in 1984. Though he loves poetry, his preference for drama and stage representation is world known. Regarding the superiority of this genre Dattani speaks that, "In drama, one explores the distortions of everyday speech, the weight and flow of everyday movement, and endeavours to bring to them a sense of music." And also, he is very adept in music. Classical Indian, North and South Indian as well as the modern fusions of the East and the West. A Gujarati by birth, Mahesh Dattani has always been a cosmopolitan citizen. He writes from Bangalore but affects the whole continent for the boldness of his theme and the radicalism of his characterization. He clearly confesses the lasting impressions on him of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Madhu Ry's *Kumarni Agash*. Regarding Albee, Dattani says, "It unleashed in me an ability to set up my male and female characters against each other." As he says about Kumarni Agash, "It taught me to work within my own time and place and not operate out of a projected world of sophistication and grandeur."

Do the Needful was first aired on 14th of August, 1997 on BBC Radio 3 and 4 commissioned Dattani to write six radio plays on the occasion of the six hundredth anniversary of England's first 'modern' poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. *Do the Needful* was the first among the series and *Uma and the Fairy Queen* – 2003 was the last one of the project.

His contribution to Indian drama has secured himself the inheritance of the rich legacy of the Indian Dramatists like Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Habib Tanvir, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchawar.

For communal hatred Mahesh Dattani has his response in *Final Solutions* and for the confirmed gay and lesbian, Mahesh has shown their predicament in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. *Do the Needful* is, in a sense, an amalgamation of the two of his earlier plays. In it, Dattani has aptly mixed up the two themes of inter-religion love and an arranged (please read heterosexual) marriage of a gay.

The play very carefully framed the sensational issue of what happens when a gay person goes to marrying a girl who is devoted to a Muslim boy only to obey social norms and covers his/her true sexual identities. Marriage is obviously one of the biggest responsibilities of a social individual but simultaneously, it is also a big responsibility of the society where the individual belongs. An individual can adhere to any norm

so long as the norm does not steal away his/her inner peace and integrity. Individual being cannot forebear dissimulation throughout one's life. Hypocrisy can't be anybody's philosophy of life. Marriage is a very complex institution where individual needs reflect societal warranty. It is an age old belief that through marriage individual predicament gets secured/well founded in society which again, in return stabilizes the society. Society is expectant of a peaceful and fruitful tomorrow through marriage. Family is the most powerful minimal unit of our functional society.

2. Explanation

The play *Do the Needful* begins with a clear cut opinion from the two 'would-be-marrying' couple that Alpesh is a divorcee homosexual and Lata, an South Indian middle class Hindu girl is in a total relationship with Salim, a Muslim boy from Kashmir. The play is about them and their two pairs of parents trying to 'do the needful' for a happy arrange marriage for their children. Lata's parents know about her affair with Salim. That is why they are 'desperate' (Collected Plays 121) to save their respect in the community by somehow marrying Lata to Alpesh. On the other side, Alpesh's parents don't know about his homosexual love for Trilok. They are also desperate because Alpesh has got a social tag. He is a divorcee. So, the rich, landowner Patels of Gujarat are seen in search of matrimonial alliance in the Bangalore house and then to the fifty mile away farm house of the Gowdas of Karnataka. The plot revolves around the tension between the bride and the groom's family/social life and their private love life. The most striking fact of the theme is not that Lata, a South Indian Hindu girl loves a Muslim boy, Salim (it is nowadays very common). The listeners pause for adjustment that Salim is a terrorist working in India, though the play is not so outspoken about his missions or massacre he intends to cause to. Again, in my opinion, Salim may not be a terrorist in the actual sense of the term. It is only from an enraged Prema Gowda we hear the word 'terrorist' against Salim. ("Prema Gowda: You should have thought of our lives before sleeping with that terrorist!" Collected Plays 122). Unfortunately, it is not rare in exclusive non-Muslim private debates or conversations to refer even an innocent Muslim guy as a terrorist. Such is our public faith and Dattani discloses these types of shams and pseuds very frankly in his radio play.

Both Lata and Alpesh are tricky and only half-heartedly involved in their parents' venture. Their dialogues are with their social activities but their mind (*thought*) are exclusively for their respective hidden lovers. Alpesh's Trilok and Lata's Salim. Lata said her independent voice desperately to her mother Prema Gowda in a drawing room alto confrontation that, 'Please, Amma! Please don't insist I agree to this! You are ruining my life. (Collected Plays 122) Here, Alpesh too said to her mother Kusumben Patel before they start their journey to the north that, "Is it ... is it important for me to get married?" He also asked to her mother that, "What if ... I don't want to get married." His inner most struggle comes out when we hear him to say that, "Because I am happy being alone."

In course of time, the story reveals countless hypocrisies, lies, facial values and endless gibberish from one family to empress the other. Dattani has very carefully teased out multifarious issues that go round at time of formal marriage making. Showing of property, hidden desire of getting dowry have also got their traces in the play. Marriage has become nothing but a marketing management. The Patels and the Gowdas are here as if, in a 'bid to win' type game indulging from lying to 'push selling'. None of the family is genuinely concerned about the true nature and gravity of the problems both Alpesh and Lata are in. Rather all of them are deceiving each other or trying to make profit by making a fool of the other. The parent-pairs are constantly hoodwinking the truth about their children. Chandrakanta Patel and Kusumben Patel insist Alpesh, a small scale print capitalist (he supplies the print requirements of the HP company in Mumbai) to lie and show off. Alpesh could not tolerate the stress anymore and he spewed out in the bathroom of the Gowdas.

Alpesh's *thought* says: What could I say to them? Daddy had his colleague approve the loan. We paid enough bribes to get the damn thing off. We hired the underworld to have Grandpa's tenants evicted... I hate lying and liars. I have to do it so often. I feel every time I speak, I am lying. (*Pause.*) In case you think I am rich ... I am just the caretaker. It's all his. I can't walk out on him without leaving it all. I wish it didn't matter. I wish.

Fade out more retching.....(Collected Plays 136)

In such cases, lip service continues to the oaths they take at time of 'seven steps around the fire'. Their life remains muggy even in clear daylight. Both of them thought countless times in search of 'where there is a will, there is a way'. But they couldn't truly come out of their claustrophobic body – mind duel by 'doing the needful'. Alpesh's family didn't take any lessons from his first marriage. His parents are trying to somehow fix up the apparently disordered life of their son by patching him up with a girl in the marriage bond even by stretching beyond their caste community. So is true to Lata. Their parent, in spite of having few glimpses of modernity, could not make provisions for the true happiness of their 'talented' girl. They are ready for cross cultural marriage but not a cross religious one. They are disciplined to be betrayed within the most important relationships only to be false-worshipped by the meaningless common people of society. Lata retorts her mother with a much realized utterance about human psychology when she says, "People believe what they want to believe." (Collected Play 122)

Neither of them could form any meaningful dialogue in their social life. Rather, both of them are steeped in endless dramatic monologue with their respective secret ('illegal' or 'clandestine') lovers. Finally, Lata caught Alpesh with Mali, their farmboy in their village farm cowshed engaged in sodomy and came to know that Alpesh is. Lata and Alpesh decides a secret deal between them ('*teri bhi chup meri bhi chup*' 142) to bypass all the social and familial hazards regarding the former's cross religious affair with Salim and the latter's homosexual affair with Trilok and they 'happily decide' to marry each other just as a common camouflage. Without letting anybody anything known about their secret intensions, they decide to 'use' an age old institution named marriage. Society hovers everywhere to pin down least traces of change and resistance. The play remains undecided because of its half or no realization of the gravity of the problem. 'Final solutions' are a far cry for people who seek a new dimension of life and living.

They could have stopped their marriage by a fillip. But, they thought it easier to deceive their parents *viz-a-viz* society and keep their own respective gender and sexual choices free from the vigilance of society. Society has advanced, as I have said, Dattani has given a lot of hints to that. But his question is, "is this advancement enough?" An exclusionary system always get the minors cornered. Dattani's plays deal with sharp issues but the dealings are not loud. As a progressive writer he is faithful to the posterity. He knows that art can only suggest, it can't interpret. Taking the most effective of all the genres of literature, Dattani has chosen the territorial issues for the locus and focus of his dramas.

Thus, Dattani keeps his creative being restrained and objectifies the situation by not offering any handy solution to these problems, rather he has just uncovered the veils and makes us to confront with them. Thus, he has rested the whole thing up to our consciousness.

3. Conclusions

Dattani has shown that society has got accustomed with types of foul things such as bribing the government personnel for the processing of any work, land acquisition in the name of development, load shedding in the much needed agricultural patches just to siphon it to the black-marketing industrialists, ruining of rural, cultivating land in the name of urbanization and civilization, sandal wood smuggling and so on. Then, what would this society do to these newly cropped up 'problems' like homosexualities and inter-religion marriages in families like Gujarati Patels or Marasu Vokkaliga Gowdas!

As for his distracters of his writings, they opine that, once Indian society is cleaned off its present polemical issues, which are Dattani's strongest repertoire, Dattani's plays would lose their relevancy and would be considered as defunct and redundant. An emotional riposte is 'love' remains the theme for all types of literature from the beginning of our civilization, neither have we forgotten nor are we afraid of disremembering literature which has the same theme from the yore. Again, colonialism is an unpractised issue which is dead now. But, we have, perhaps anti/post-colonial literature on such a magnitude that no other literature in the world is as voluminous as this literature itself. So, issues are not just judged by their futurity, rather they are judged by how far they are capable of moving/challenging the *present* (emphasis mine) flow of the beliefs and the systems. We find similar examples in cases of movement literatures which most often are the call of the hour. A reformist writer is always in search of a better and more accommodative social system. Their achievements lie not in immediate effect but in the provident fund of their writings. Dattani is such an exception.

As a human being, Dattani is very sensible and touchy. He has always a very special reservation for people who are somehow treated as 'other'. His sensibility gets to flow when we hear him to say after he met a group of HIV infected children (and forsaken by their father) in an NGO. He poetises his sympathy for them by saying, "I thought of seasonal flowers which have a short life span but are beautiful."

Do the Needful ends with the message of a bitter compromise. A compromise between the moral self and the social self. Such situations invariably leads to hardcore hypocrisies. As we see, according to the dictionary, hypocrisy is 'an expression of agreement that is not supported by real conviction', or 'insincerity by virtue of pretending to have qualities or beliefs that you do not really have'. Dattani's personas are elbowed out of the mainstream society and are left to embrace such double standards. If we keep a blind eye and dumb year to these crucial issues which are threatening to destabilize our long past systems like marriage, one day, ultimately we would end up only in self-deceiving. It's time to say, whether we would keep on practicing happy hypocrisy and forced harmony or extend our rationality to include all the existing *others* in making a larger humanitarian social system breaking the shackles of binarism. If we fail to establish a holistic society giving the basic promises needed for each and every constituent elements, we may be the same target of the Liftman's saying to Alpesh that, "You big people don't know anything." (Collected Plays 157)

4. Notes

1. Sai al-Bukhari is considered one of the three most sacred and trusted hadith collection along with Sahih Muslim and Muwatta Imam Malik by the Sunni Islamists. The prophetic oracles were recovered by Muhammad al-Bukhari from Uzbekistan of Central Asia. In volume 4 and Hadith number 48, the Prophet says that, "The signs of a hypocrite are three: Whenever he speaks, he tells a lie, and whenever he promises, he breaks his promise, when he disputes he transgresses and when he makes an agreement he violets it." The above quoted wordings are variations of the same hadith.
2. The very word 'gay' took its origin from old French 'gai' meaning man. It is related to homosexuality between men. Another perspective of homo-sex i.e. Lesbianism is a WSW i.e. woman having sex with woman. The word had its origin from 'Lesbos' (a Greek island in the Eastern Aegean), home of Sappho who expressed affection for woman in her poetry.

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