

SOCIAL REALIST THEATRE OF INDIA AND PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECT PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani is one of the creative theatrical personalities of Indian drama in English (IDE), particularly with his involvement with the socio-political issues in the 90s India to reclaim equal space for all, stress social integrity, revise tradition to highlight modernity while questioning the so-called normalcy of gender in social structure. This present study is an endeavor to show how Dattani has represented the concept of human rights through his dramatic narrative in Indian patriarchal social system in the 80s onward when Indian society has transformed into the largest democracy in the world, yet facing the crisis of equality in society of which gender discrimination forms part of it. He has probed into the forbidden areas like hijras, homosexual relations, same-caste marriages, and gender oppressions. A critical study of select dramas has been captured to highlight the condition of marginality of the oppressed groups in the middle class urban Indian society and how the dramas have facilitated social consciousness to promote social change through the social realist theatre. The aspects of social inequality arising out of gender based marginalization have been narrated through the effective use of English as a fusion of native language.

Keywords: Gender, Human Rights, Discrimination, Marginalization, Consciousness, Social Change.

INTRODUCTION

Theatre is generally considered as one of the traditional art forms which command immense authority and effect on human culture. It is the most appropriate medium for changing the traditional Indian thought towards modernization. It represents, educates and facilitates to shape the opinion of the masses. It should not be overlooked that a change in the beliefs and the value systems of individuals is required for performing social justice, change and development. Theatre plays a crucial role in forming mass consciousness and thereby inspiring masses towards accepting social changes. As a form of informal education, theatre promotes equal rights for all irrespective of caste, creed, gender, and religious differences to establish a constructive means for the all round development of the common people. Many human rights activists in the third world countries have appreciated the value of using traditional media, of which theatre is a part, as an alternative communication strategy in highlighting socio-political problems where social justice is hardly possible to mete out. There is a renewed interest in the use of the theatre for human rights development in present Indian society.

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Mahesh Dattani focused on the issue of marginality in the background of Indian social system at a time when Indian society already tested the essence of democracy, yet staggering under various troublesome issues, one of them being the problem of social inequality of which marginality forms part of it. Dattani appears to be an experimentalist theatrical artist who uses folk and traditional performance genres. It chiefly pencils in its contemporary significance while portraying the urban middle class society in general. Marginalization issuing from Dattani's theatre of consciousness has integrated all the hidden aspects of the middle class society upon which theories and practices of marginalization may revolve.

Social realist theatre is a form to express and communicate the sufferings of common people in society. It is worth mentioning that particular forms of suffering might produce detailed forms of narrative within the language of rights. Local, socio-cultural, and political circumstances of atrocity are connected to global discourses - including legal - of human rights via a narrative that is simultaneously homely and universal, even as the legal field of human rights pervades other areas of politics and culture. It proposes that gender based atrocity in a particular place in a particular time are linked to local and global discourses of human rights at the same time. In fact, human rights narrative believes particularly on such emotional narratives of oppression, distress, and discrimination. Gendered narrative of marginalization appeals to the global community in general and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international agencies and tribunals in particular. This present study stresses that select dramatic texts of Mahesh Dattani develops the theme of human rights only implicitly via discourses of suffering, discrimination, and the representation of marginalization.

Anthony Langlois (2005) asserts that the discourse of human rights proposes a narrative tradition in which the "human" emerges. Ironically, the marginalized women, homosexuals, and hijras seek for equal space in patriarchal society, and have been forced to break their silence in order to fight for rights and justice in postcolonial India. While realist theatre of Mahesh Dattani explicitly locates gender discrimination in India, it also develops a notion of the human subject that can be serviceable within multiple contexts of oppression. Indeed, the genre's narrative tradition of recognizing the 'queer' in India offers strong parallels with other such humans the world over. In its representation of suffering individuals, plays generate marginalized 'other' for (possible) ethical appropriation by a global literary field for human rights. The dramatist shows a remarkable ability to shift narration between the characters' lives and the lives of the marginalized communities they represent for, with the text functioning as a social document with a specific political agenda i.e., of human rights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of existing literature is an essential part to identify the areas where previous studies had pointed out and certain portions overlooked by them. There have been several interesting studies on violation of human rights against the underprivileged section of society. These earlier studies show that violations against gender based marginalized people are mounting rapidly in the local and global perspective.

Devi (2005) shows that violence against women should be considered as violation of women's rights in particular, and of human rights in general. Empowerment of women can aid them to raise their voice against hostility and claim their rights.

Joshipura (2009) points out that Dattani's plays actually sort out humanism in general and discrimination to marginalized sector of society such as women, homosexuals, hijras in particular. He sketches out that Dattani incites our opinion, induces us to consider differently about the crisis and thereby to modify our traditional views about social realities.

Khobragade (2011) suggests that the plays of Mahesh Dattani highlight social consciousness about gender bias in Indian social structure. According to him, Dattani's dramas act as a mirror of society to capture life and manners generally accepted as normal in our world.

Basu Thakur (2013) depicts theatre as a very useful and reactive device to foster social development. The supremacy of theatre lies in its instant feedback from masses. Thus it is necessary to give power to the marginalized people of India.

This paper endeavors to explain how theatre has been used by Mahesh Dattani as a way of voicing protest against gendered discrimination and marginalization. A dramatic text written within the framework of realist tradition of drama is nothing but a picture of unnoticed areas of the contemporary social realities. The connection between literature and society is obvious in drama; realist theatre performs the role of an informal means for examining a particular society. A critical study of select plays by Mahesh Dattani has been done to project the efficacy of popular theatre in realist tradition to grow awareness of common mass with a decisive consciousness crucial to the struggle against the forces responsible for the violation of human rights in Indian society. In this paper, the dramatic performances of the texts are carefully touched upon where they are needed. The select dramas of Dattani taken here for analysis are *Tara*, *Dance like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Seven Steps around the Fire*.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND MARGINALIZATION

Discrimination denotes real behavior towards human being or another community. It can be seen in everyday life-experiences where any person is disqualified from opportunities open to others of the same group. Discrimination may be very hard

to prove because it is closely intersected with socio-political, cultural or historical condition. It is a complex tool through which marginalization is carried out in a certain society. Discrimination stemming out from gender bias leads women and human with 'queer' gender at the margin of society. Thus the concept of marginalization emerges in social system. The word has diverse implications in the contemporary era of capitalism.

Indian society suffered from a multifaceted marginality during colonial phase and in the postcolonial situation in the 20th century. Indian Writers in English have been representing social realities behind this marginalization through different literary forms. Indian drama in English is no exception to this purpose. Dattani's plays mark the voice of the marginalized people. The problems of women, hijras and homosexuals occupy a central place in his plays. But the fertile area in Dattani's dramas is the issue of human rights violation generated from gendered discrimination and marginalization in contemporary Indian society.

Dattani in his play *Tara* undertakes the hidden issues of gender bias followed by patriarchal society through dramatic account of the discrimination and misery of two Siamese twins. *Tara* digs out the emotional parting that develops between two identical twins following the finding that their mother and grandfather prefer the boy (Chandan) to the girl (Tara). The viewers witness the inequity between male and female from the very beginning. The stereotypical gender roles in our Indian family are represented through the performance of pooja by Bharti (the mother of Tara) and of getting ready to go to work by Patel (the father of Tara). Gender discrimination becomes more explicit when Patel (representative of the patriarchal society) favors Chandan to join the office over Tara. Mr. Patel is always anxious about the future of Chandan. It minutely points out the family politics of traditional Indian society. A girl is born only to learn domestic affairs, and perform social behavior constructed by male dominated society. These are the strictures which a boy and a girl have to follow. The condition of Chandan and Tara is very similar to the recently mentioned case. Dattani introduces the crucial scene of the operation when the doctor confirms that a major quantity of blood supply to the third leg is provided by the girl. At this time Bharti and her father determine to give both legs to the boys instead of girl. Like Tara, Bharti is also suffered by the male controlled society because she followed her father's decision at the time of operation.

Tara offers the message that gender disparity is a form of social injustice. It finds its root not only in unequal economic distribution among common people but also in socially constructed rules and views about gender. Through this play Dattani brings out the root of gender discrimination and probes into the suffering of marginalized to consider the problem from human rights perspective.

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance like a Man* is another outstanding play which represents that women are not only the subject of discrimination but also the men who do not fit to the social code of gender roles. The play asserts that individual

choice can never be fulfilled under patriarchal control. Dattani portrays how Jairaj, Ratna, and Chenni Amma are bounded to the system of the prejudiced society which does not react positively to the predicament of human being and allow freedom of expression. Amritlal, although a renowned social reformer in this play, appears to be the representative of patriarchal society. He dislikes his daughter in law, Ratna's connection with Chenni Amma and he is trained at her house because he was anxious to retain his family honor. Thus the play deals with Ratna's career after marriage in particular, and women's position in male dominated society. Finally, Amritlal plays tricks against Jairaj to curb his desire of being a dancer. He conspires with Ratna to keep away Jairaj from his passion of dancing and assist him being a 'manly man'. Performing the role of 'feminine man' by Jairaj is a threat to the stereotypical gender roles in society.

Throughout the play, Jairaj has been exploited as an instrument by Ratna to fulfill her dreams although not achieved. Ratna tries to shape Jairaj in her own way and regain his manhood. Amritlal takes the challenge to form Jairaj in the framework of socially constructed masculinity. Dattani's play expresses his belief that social equality and justice are always denied under the patriarchal control and one has to defend individual rights by rejecting perpetual suffering and subjugation in society. The play thus hints to the censorship of basic human rights, i.e. of freedom of choice and expression, and facilitates to stimulate social awareness among all against human rights violation.

In the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Mahesh Dattani handles the forbidden relationship of homosexuality in contemporary Indian society. The play begins in a living room of Kamlesh, a famous fashion designer from Mumbai. He converses with friends to sort out solutions about his problems. He reveals the truth that he is still in a homosexual relationship with Prakash (Ed) who has deceived him by openly moving on 'straight'. The gay friends of Kamlesh stand for the dissimilar features of the homosexual community. Sharad hardly cares about the view of the world; Bunny is bashful of his sexuality because he is concerned about social standards; and Dipali is very frank concerning her sexuality. With the advancement of narrative readers realize that Kiran and Prakash are ready to get married. Kamlesh is in a dilemma as Kiran is his sister and Prakash is his gay friend. Kamlesh conceals the truth about their same-sex relationship from Kiran because he does not want to upset her by disclosing the hypocrisy of Prakash. But finally the unequivocal photo of sexuality between Kamlesh and Prakash is unveiled before all. Prakash is unable to accept the fact and he determines to commit suicide but in vain. The mask is now taken off in the climactic scene.

The play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* highlights that gay people pretend to be hypocrites to live their lives. They perceive that homosexuality is against the normalcy of gender roles prevalent in society. The play reveals that gays face politics of gender and social inequality. Dattani advises that all are human beings

and everyone has equal share in the world. It is the human behavior that makes the difference. The play brings out the plight of human arising from the conflict between the individual choice of gender performance and social construction of gender.

The play *Seven Steps around the Fire* focuses on the mistreatment of hijra community which represents the social and mental crisis of this third gender people. Mahesh Dattani is one of the Indian writers in English to point out the social exclusion of marginalized hijra community. It is evident that the play narrates the investigation of a murder case where Anarkali, a hijra, is accused of murder of Kamla (another Hijra). She was physically, mentally, verbally and sexually exploited in the jail by the police and also by the journalists. There was no one to diminish her pathetic condition. The reality is heart-breaking as it unmasks the traditional social set up where a hijra cannot express her preference to fulfill her desire, feelings and emotions beyond the customs of society. Kamla is in a love-relationship with Subbu, the son of a minister. But since Kamla is a eunuch, she is unaccepted as legal wife to Subbu and therefore, she was brutally killed under the authority of the minister. This much of injustice to her was not enough, that her murderer was not arrested even though the policemen know who the culprit is. It highlights the social status of hijra people as pathetic. They have no voice of their own. They are at the periphery of society where they desire for marriage, love, and family but in vain. Society disapproves these privileges to hijras although they have inborn rights to enjoy them. They are deprived of marital relationship as their voices are suppressed by others.

Uma's experiences in pursuing her research highlight the position of women and hijras in India when socially excluded people are fighting for rights everywhere. Uma, now a research scholar in sociology, belongs to an educated family. She is married to the Superintendent of police, Suresh Rao. Education is a power for her to exercise freedom of choice, i.e. choosing research topic on the community of eunuchs. Unfortunately these research topics and case studies are often placed at the margin of discussion. Constable Munswamy's advice to Uma clearly asserts the marginal space for 'queer' gender studies. While Munswamy is backing Uma by the regulation of high command, he very politely proposes that a lady like her should emphasize at some more acceptable cases. In fact, Munswamy suggests that it would be very challenging and contentious to labor on such an issue and therefore, she should follow the conventional crime cases as it would be easier and praiseworthy for her. The play thus debunks the socially constructed reality and examines that not only hijra community is being marginalized in our society but their explorations and investigations which are being executed against their discrimination and oppression are also overlooked.

The play protests against the socio-political marginalization of the *hijras* in India where gender roles are determined by social norms practiced and controlled by patriarchal culture. Dattani emphasizes the fact that the *hijras* have conscience that

craves for self-dignity within social rules and regulations and when it is denied from them, it finds way to get away from such age-old traditions. When they dissent, their voice is generally curbed by the established social order that is normally accepted by majority. People of such exceptional categories face gender discrimination and violence because of their lower position in the society. They are human beings like other people but lack equal rights and destined to suffer injustices in reality. The play gives a picture of hostility on human beings in general and pleads for equal space in society. They struggle against the bitter social reactions that they face. Uma's exploration of underlying truth prevalent in society but ignored so far is the realist-dramatist's thesis report that atrocities against women and marginalized are out of control with the mutual understanding between police and politicians. Dattani is a world-class playwright who leaves moralist view through his sparkling dialogues and settings. His tone never seems to be didactic although it arouses consciousness about current affairs of violence against common people. Dattani tries to change the mind-set of the masses in a stable society with the vision of justice and equal rights against the inhuman treatment in general, and to provide a voice through indigenous English to the marginalized. It may be concluded here that Dattani gives power to the voiceless to be believed as human beings and mete out justice and equality to the socially marginalized people.

MARGINALIZED CONSCIOUSNESS AND PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Dattani asserts that his plays are "true reflections of my time, place and socio-economic background" (Dattani, 2000). His plays depict everyday social reality from a new perspective and directs to critical consciousness for promoting action and change against the traditional patriarchal culture of society. These plays written in social realist tradition perform vital role to raise a decisive awareness among the common people about the subjugated and thereby motivate the people to consider the problem of the marginalized from humanitarian angle. They focus on the predicament of the oppressed to instigate the idea of equal rights for all, their right to freedom of choice and expression, and their right to assess their condition and take action properly against it. Consciousness helps an individual to change his or her attitudes, perception or beliefs in a particular socio-political environment. It develops among individuals the belief that social reality can be questioned, revised or changed. Thus theater represents not only an art form for mass entertainment but also an effective medium for education and promotion of human rights.

Michael Ignatieff (2001) proposes that discourse of human rights helps to communicate and concentrate on the crises of suffering. It implies that particular types of suffering might produce certain forms of narrative within this language of rights. Local, socio-cultural, and political circumstances of atrocity are connected to global discourses—including legal—of human rights via a narrative that is

simultaneously homely and universal, even as the legal field of human rights pervades other areas of politics and culture. It suggests that gender based atrocities in a particular place in a particular time are linked to local and global discourses of human rights at the same time. In fact, human rights narrative believes particularly on such emotional narratives of oppression, distress, and discrimination. Gendered narrative of marginalization appeals to the global community in general, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international agencies and tribunals in particular.

In his plays, Mahesh Dattani represents marginalized people in Indian society as victims of gender violence, and henceforth when they speak “rights language applies” because “it is the claim of abuse that sets a human rights process moving” (Ignatieff, 2001). The stress is on the narrative—claims—that locates the method and politics of rights on its way. Ignatieff (2001) mentions that rights discourses have developed from the base of human history and they rely upon the narrative of “testimony of fear”. Dattani’s theatre incites the audience to demand rights. His dramatic narratives are often packed up with the language of agony and pain. It is closely related to the brutal violation of human rights, and thereby should be included in the global debates of human rights. It proves that the “testimony of fear” that Ignatieff mentions depends particularly on the poignant narratives of atrocity, suffering, and inequality. Thus the “claims narrative” unquestionably incorporates itself into a canonical and global discourse of rights because it records their abuses for individuals and communities in general, and human beings in particular. Gendered discrimination on women, hijras, and homosexuals generates “claims narrative” which outlines the violence against socially ‘other’ categories of gender. It relates the narrative to the discourse of marginalized rights which can customarily be placed in relation to universal discourses. From this perspective, the present study confirms that dramatic texts of Mahesh Dattani develop the theme of human rights just implicitly through discourses of violence, discrimination, marginalization, and the representation of the oppressed. The select plays are concerned with marginalized sufferings in Indian society, and thereby appropriate to include into global contexts.

Anthony Langlois (2005) points out that the discussion on human rights accentuates the explanation of the “human,” and thus intends to draw attention to a narrative form in which the concept of the “human” emerges. Human right is determined by international community’s recognition of the touching narratives of violation of common people’s basic rights. Ironically, these marginalized women, homosexuals, and hijras seek for equal space in patriarchal society, and have been forced to break their silence in order to fight for rights and justice in contemporary Indian culture. The question of human rights for oppressed and marginalized generally emerge in a socio-political context but, as this article demonstrates, can be suitably attached with global concern of discrimination, marginalization, and

human rights. While realist theatre of Mahesh Dattani explicitly locates gender discrimination in India, it also develops a notion of the human subject that can be serviceable within multiple contexts of oppression. Indeed, the dramatist's narrative skill of identifying the subjugation of women and 'queer' in India presents undistinguishable connection with other such humans around the world. In its depiction of oppressed individuals, the plays taken here for analysis expose marginalized 'other' for proper validation by a worldwide literary field for human rights. The dramatist shows a remarkable ability to shift narration between the characters' lives and the lives of the marginalized communities they represent for, with the text performing the role of contemporary social document with an unambiguous purpose of promoting human rights.

Theatre is a performing art where different characters represent certain image of society through voices and gestures. One theatrical technique recurrent in dramatic texts is the act of staging the scene through verbal accounts that disclose with powerful feelings the exploitation, agony, and trauma experienced by the narrator or character. Such an emotional performance generates conflict within the human rights narrative itself. Schaffer and Smith highlight the tension by focusing the necessity of a unique narrative form which may be helpful to the dramatist to codify or standardize the chaotic, touching, and individual voice into the discourse of rights, the legal issue, and the staging form of studying hidden truth beneath apparent reality (Schaffer and Smith, 2004). It proposes that human rights narrative must incorporate these expressions as claims for modification or inclusion. Dramatization is a process of exchanging dialogues or views where the possibilities of informal education and awareness of individual rights can be stimulated in the nexus between the dramatic character and the social activist. It hints to the constructive change of social relations between sensitive viewers and marginalized protagonists or victims. Thus theatrical performance appears to be a handy tool for representing experiences which are true to life, and refer to characters with a touch of reality to a context that may otherwise regard as alien. Finally, staging deliberately attracts viewers to involve themselves in the narrative's social purpose, thereby making drama with social issues a collaborative work between a conscious reader and the oppressed protagonist.

Dattani aims for radical change of human perception and conventional social system through his plays of social consciousness. Staging deals with different objectives of a drama. Dramatic texts should not be read just as political commentary in literary form to resist the powerful or as social message through literature. Although critics generally prefer to concentrate on the social role of realist theatre, select plays of Mahesh Dattani here appropriately function as a means for complete version of a social condition. Staging of the discrimination and marginalization underscores the human nature of the characters and their contexts so that viewers become totally aware of the social inequality in which the narrator lives/lived.

The representation of physical violence, mental shock, and social exclusion is an essential element of the marginalized narrative's presentation because it traces the human—a being who faces subordination because of a traditional social system. The dramatist selects components in her/his story from real life and sketches those emotional experiences for the sake of the audience through the performance of the protagonist-narrator who suffers social discrimination. This is not fake account, but rather a detailed picture of the nature of the painful incident that the audience is prompted to record in mind. Performance here is the enactment through narrative, of emotions when sharing individual or community experience in present society. A dramatic performance of individual suffering serves as an important tool for retelling the human nature of suffering that the body undergoes. The narrator's performance is the interaction of artistic and social drama. Dattani's emotionally thrilling description (the aesthetic part of the narrative) of the gender discrimination is linked with the courses of action that offers realization of marginality in particular oppressed community (the socio-political aspect of the narrative). This element of dramatic performance in Dattani's plays emphasizes the basic human nature of the protagonist. Thus, life in urban middle-class society - generally considered as a refuge for all or as a personal space - is revealed as brutal, unjust and oppressive. The narrator shifts the pain outward from the individual body (of character) to the community body (of marginal), exposing the risks, discrimination, and brutality of the personal space of home or the safe space of the modern society.

CONCLUSION

Marginalized voices in the select plays of Mahesh Dattani can be integrated into Human Rights Narratives in the context of Indian social construct. Dattani's dramatic writing generates evidentiary documents about human rights violation in contemporary India. Theatre focusing on the issue of oppression occupies a key role to demand human rights and is located within what may be called a commentary of protest and resistance. Dattani's theatre provides an alternative narrative tradition revealing the devaluation of human rights of individuals and entire marginalized communities only to contradict the dominant narratives of equality for all and the achievement of democracy in India. Dattani points out that the discrimination against the marginalized is mainly the consequence of a conservative social structure, in as much as patriarchal culture, social discourses and practices. Gender politics rely upon narratives that construct the marginalized (women, hijras, gays or lesbians) as an inferior human being within the context of contemporary Indian society. Dramas build solidarities through the charged content of marginalized narratives, and offer awareness about the hidden issues within traditional gender norms in Indian society to organize social activism by those who are conscious by what they perceived. Theatre is an informal tool to merge an emotionally charged acting or narrative into a larger discourse of rights. Readings of marginalized narratives in

dramas must forever go beyond the immediate textual representation of suffering or oppression to the unspoken field: the oppressed and the neglected communities who are available to readers only through the social realist theatre.

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