

Social Realism in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Social realism is that branch of realism that is known to describe the realities of society. Realism emerged stronger than ever before in the Victorian period and has been known to target the follies of people and society since then. In the modern or post modern era the problems of the society have changed but their impact on people has remained same. Various writers have portrayed the harsh realities of modern day society and as the fiscal problems were transformed into moral ones, playwrights like Dattani found it their duty to present them to the readers. Dattani is known for putting forward the issues that directly concern the society. He has dealt with various subjects over the years like gender biases, discrimination towards homosexuals, greed, futility of relationships etc. He has written a number of plays including *On a muggy night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, *Where there's a Will* and so on. In this paper I have tried to present my views on social realism in the plays of Dattani. I have included *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *Tara* for my research work. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* throws light on the poor condition of eunuchs in the society and how they are deprived of basic rights like justice. The theme of gender bias is shared in *Tara*. We live in a 'modern society' and get carried away by all the developments around us, but Dattani through his queer observation, pulled characters from the same society we live in but never thought existed.

The stereotypical answer to most of our questions is 'That is how the society works.' The most important thing all Indians take pride in is our rich culture and a lot of people live under the illusion that it is free from any stain of infidelity and also that we are all honest citizens who treat our relationships higher than anything else in our lives. Very few times we realize that above all we are human beings who are bound to commit mistakes. The burden on our heads is not such of our relationships but most of the times it is the concern of our social image that leads us to moral degradation. We find a lot of characters in the plays of Dattani who struggle through the same patch to arrive at a point where all can agree to their decisions and live peacefully and be respected in the society; instead they end up wearing masks for the rest of their lives.

The prominent theme in all of Dattani's plays is the unending adjustments and compromises people commit for the sake of a dignified position in the society, against all the odds. Dattani has been very successful in exposing the loopholes in the social structure of our nation and dealing with the subjects which people still feel are alien to our land. The preference of a male child in a family has always been an issue in a lot of important works but we do not expect such hideous motives in the upbeat cities of nation especially in a well educated family but this is one of the brutal realities brought out in the plays of Dattani.

Dattani is a contemporary writer and wrote in an age which can be thought as a time when people are considered well educated and women are well treated but what is considered a rare incident is in fact the true picture of the society that represented the downtrodden condition of woman in the society. Dattani very skillfully presented all these follies in his plays and left us wondering whether it is the same society that we talk and read about. Underneath all the development there lies a gloom that is still untouched by knowledge and awareness. Through his plays Dattani has also tried to portray the prejudiced minds of the people who are still hardhearted and unsympathetic towards trans-genders and homosexuals and who still feel that people from another religion are 'terrorists'. The fact that people find it difficult to accept uncommon things creates an adverse situation in our society.

Dattani is among the first writers of post-colonial times and he mirrored the changing face of the nation. We can easily pick fast paced lives, well settled and rich families, in his plays, but the striking aspect lies in the fact that he is able to portray the sinister characteristics in the otherwise mundane lives and stereotyped families. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* presents two interwoven stories, one in which Uma is married to Suresh Rao, Chief Superintendent of Police. She is incapable of conceiving a child and has undergone numerous check-ups, but when once she asks her husband to consult a doctor he denies it as it would be insulting to question his masculinity and he cannot have any defect because he is a 'Man'. The parallel story unfolds while Uma is seen working on her paper 'Class and Gender Violence' during which she is exposed to various mysteries related to the murder of Kamala, a eunuch.

It is said that eunuchs are only invited to weddings and births but sadly none is destined for them. Kamala secretly marries Subbu Sharma, the son of a minister and when the minister finds out about this he burns Kamala to death. The Fire that acted as a witness for Kamala's marriage became a reason for her own death. Uma meets Anarkali and Champa who were close to Kamala and keeps asking them questions regarding the murder but none of them answers her even after knowing the truth because according to them there is something

bigger than the truth and that is the position of elite class in the society. Moreover we are told throughout the play that nobody cares about the murders of people who have inferior position in the society and that they are good for nothing. When the minister arranges a second marriage for Subbu, Uma invites these eunuchs to the wedding of Subbu and in the end scene we find Subbu committing suicide out of guilt on the day of his own marriage. Therefore the 'pavitra agni' becomes the reason for the death of two persons who could have lived happily if the society was any little hardhearted.

We all strive to find love all our lives but where do these gender biases come from. The concept of trans-genders is not a western one, we read of Shikhandi in Mahabharata who became a reason for the death of Bhishma Pitamaha. Shikhandi was born in a royal family and if it was not because of him the whole epic would have been different. Eunuchs are called upon every sacred occasion and their blessings are considered necessary for all. Their pettiest expectations from the society are respect and dignity, which although they truly deserve but are deprived of. The basic qualities we all need to possess to be called human beings are humility and morality and none of them is seen when we deal with people who do not belong to our own community or are different from the common people.

Love should be the primary reason to get married, but apparently the society doesn't work that way. A society in which we live needs a class, community, and gender that can be described easily. We find Uma talking to her husband when she asks him to consult a doctor when they are not able to have children; very efficiently Suresh disposes off the request because that will hurt his masculinity. A man in this society cannot imagine being infertile. It is too much for him to face the question as it will hurt his male ego to question his fertility but it is established that a woman can be barren or have any curse on her head which makes it convenient for the society to blame her. We have always been living in a patriarchal society and the subject is strongly evident in the plays of Dattani. He portrayed the realism in our society where a man can get away with two murders if he has a strong position in the society. Dattani, through his plays not only brought to spotlight the condition of women but also the suffrage of deprived classes. We are well aware of the position of women in the society and think about it all the time but seldom have we felt empathetic towards those who belong to the minority. The class of eunuchs is not only been a deprived but a harassed one as well where they are pushed into obscene activities to earn a living and are ripped off the right to a decent living.

The concept of preference of a male child over a female finds place in Dattani's *Tara*. The play tells the story of two conjoined twins who are separated through surgery. It is a short play of two acts and the main characters are Chandan and Tara. The plot revolves around the surgical separation of the twins and how the parents, though well educated, put the life of male child ahead of their daughter. The surgery involves separation of siblings from lower body including their internal organs and limbs and the parents decide to give both the limbs to the son even after being well aware of the critical condition of their daughter. Chandan's body cannot accept the leg and hence it is detached from his body in a gradual period of time. Apart from the limb the other organs are also transplanted in Chandan's body not realizing that the resultant medical condition will lead to the gradual death of Tara. Throughout the play we find Patel making plans for Chandan's future about how his career will bloom in and what should he study and even Tara is not left out from feeling the coldness of her father but instead of crying about it she chooses to live a happy life. Tara is portrayed as a strong, smart, intelligent girl who, if given a chance, could have achieved something great in her life. But that great could not have satisfied the parents, who wanted a male child, doesn't matter if he was not so brilliant and smart but a boy was all that was needed in the family because he would carry the family's name. The only mature character in the play other than Tara is Chandan who moves to London in his youth as the burden of guilt is heavy on his heart.

Tara revolves around the idea of preference of a male child in the family. The Patels are well educated people living in the metropolitan cities of India but still carries the Indian spirit of the importance of a male child. Tara represents a liberal society in a rapidly developing nation but caught in the prejudiced minds of people. When the world is progressing and fighting for equal opportunities for men and women, our Indian society still finds it hard to give a girl a fair chance to win the world. We all believe that female foeticide is a heinous crime but even after giving birth there are a lot of women who are deprived of equal rights and are not given a dignified position in the society because people, no matter how modern and well to do, still think in the back of their heads that if it is a girl she cannot be equally strong, intelligent and capable as a boy. The overwhelming guilt of Dan pushes him out of the nation where he expects that his sister's death will not haunt him any further but he cannot escape the biggest grief of his life. Tara raises the issue of preference of a male child in the 'modern' society.

We live in a society where girls are not only at par with boys but a lot of times ahead of them, we worship women deities but refuse to respect the human counterpart. The Indian society is full of such superficial theories where women are considered 'Devis', but, they never get the deserved place. Not just female foeticide, India is a land where crime against women is a common phenomenon; women are harassed, molested, tortured and burnt alive for dowry, where rape victims are blamed for wearing provocative clothes and the criminals are

free to move around. India started with being a land of Sati practice and as times changed so did the crimes as well. Now no one needs a dead husband women are burnt alive for the sake of money and treated with acid on denial of marriage proposals. Centuries have passed but the condition of women in the country has not changed much, the crimes have changed faces but the intentions remain the same and Dattani focused on these issues in his plays.

Social realism is that branch of realism that deals with the realism prevalent in the society. The social flaws and hypocrisies are highlighted by bringing in spotlight the sad realities that were always in front of our eyes and yet we were blind towards them. Dattani is a modern playwright and hence he not only described the old flaws but also wrote about issues like homosexuality which is still considered western and people are reluctant to talk about. Dattani has written a lot of plays where he dealt with a wide range of issues that are still affecting our society in adverse ways, may it be a preference of male child, or suppression of the voice of eunuchs, or secondary treatment towards homosexuals. Dattani presented in *Tara*, how a girl child is still considered a burden, an inferior person who is not even given a fair chance to survive in the world. A mother is said to be the most understanding and loving person for a child but even she chose her favorite among her own children. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* emphasizes on the condition of eunuchs in the society and how they are deprived of basic rights in the society. The play makes us question the whole system of law and order where people are not given fair trials just because they are not part of a larger community and furthermore they are given the worst deserved treatment for entering in the world of the 'normal people'. The brutal crimes are overlooked if the people of 'elite' class are involved and especially when the crimes are against the downtrodden of the society. No matter we believe it or not but the reality of society even today lies in fact that even if we call it a democracy, not everyone in the society is equal, not everyone in the society are given fair chances to live, and worst of all not everyone in society are treated as human beings.

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