

Cities of Hope and Despair: Shattered expectations in Dattani' s

'Seven steps Around the Fire'

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Abstract: The present paper aims at the portrayal of shattered expectations of the marginalised class. Dattani is a man of fine intellect who prefers to highlight the plight of the oppressed ones. His plays tackle the plays that generally discuss the tabooed subjects efficiently. Dattani's plays deal with the lives of urban class. The cities of hope turn out to be the disastrous places where the victims only suffer in the hands of the established and powerful people of the society. The paper also intends to portray the arbitrary nature of the oppressor. The plays project the power in full strength over a common man. The target of the paper is to depict the silent social voices that often do their best in the deterioration of the lives of those who come under the scrutiny of the privileged class. The paper however aims at the basic human instinct that hopes for betterment but gets nothing more than humiliation. Dattani shows that education has not improved the basic nature of a man, who has to choose between barbarism and humanity; however he chooses the first one.

Keywords: Society; Oppression; Marginalised, Weaker section.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is far from the maddening crowd, who prefers to project the real in reel for the betterment of the society. He talks about the ground realities of disfigured life that generally is a helping hand in the dismantling of the society. The characterisation of the plays is always strong so as to sow a seed of further development in the social norms. Dattani is aware of his capability of sermonizing the audience through the dialogues and life style of the characters. He himself admits that:

"I also know that I have lot to say and am probably not saying it well enough. But my characters have a lot to say too, and they seem to be doing rather well at having their say. Every time a critic says something awful about my writing, I realise that they are pointing out something that I have wanted to say and have, as usual, been hop less and unconvincing. Every time audiences have applauded, laughed, cried or simply offered their silence in response to some moment in the play, I am completely aware that it is my character that has done the work for me". (Dattani, Preface)

Dattani's *'Seven Steps Around the Fire'* is a remarkable story that boldly projects the hypocrites of the society in disguise. The society as a whole has different types of people who can be the oppressed and can be the oppressors at the same time. Both types of people hide their real selves and misled the others. The culprit never comes out in open and so does the victims. Both the categories are equally responsible for the society's degeneration. The improvement can never happen naturally, someone has to come out of the safe zone to start the protest against the ills.

Discussion

The play '*Seven Steps Around the Fire*' is an agony of a transgender who dares to opt for happiness rather than being in the sorry state of the transgender class. The story reveals the shattered expectations of a common person who has right to live and be happy at the same time. The arbitrary killing has become a part of vulnerable crimes. The people at top positions consider it their rights to kill anyone in the name of honour. The society has never supported and justified this kind of killing, but as a whole the societal norms give rise to the prevailing atrocities. The silent society give rise to more further deterioration.

Seven Steps Around the Fire was first transmitted as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio on 9th January 1999. The play's first performance has been on 6th August 1999 on stage at the Museum Theatre by MTC Production & The Madras Theatre, Chennai with Anuradha Ananth, Victor Paulraj, Kartik Iyer, Sourabh Ahuja, Sudhir Ahuja, P.C. Ramakrishna and Asim Sharma, directed by Mithran Devanesen.

Dattani provides a dramatic and terrifying beginning to the present play. The starting of the play highlights the fact that something inhuman has taken place. He often begins his plays stating something interesting and. His style of writing has a great convincing power. The first few lines of the play read as:

"Sanskrit mantras fade in, the Ines chanted during a Hindu wedding. Fire.

The sound of the fire grows louder, drowning the mantras. A scream. The flames engulf the scream". (Dattani, 7)

Dattani deals with the sensitive issues very easily. Being a social realistic writer, he is comfortable when he pens down the bloody facts on white clean paper. The pathetic social condition gives rise to insecurity. Dattani, in the *Preface*, says:

I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally. Where does one begin? By ending this preface and carrying on with the business of holding a mirror up to society. (Dattani, xv)

The play is a mourning saga of humanity that shows how brutal the society becomes when it comes to its honour. The playwright depicts how an act of an individual makes the whole society a culprit in the eyes of the victims as it's the societal pressure that forces an individual to follow its norms. Dattani works have got acclaimed worldwide. Chaudhuri appreciates Dattani's art and says:

Dattani obviously seems to have a point to make to his audience.

But rather than directly preach, the playwright dramatizes and

populates the performance stage with characters one begins to identify with,

facing genuine, real life problems. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy

and sensitivity to India's queer culture (51)

The play artistically portrays the deterioration within the minds of the people who boast of equality, women empowerment, etc. The scientific developments, improvement in technology have given rise to the number of people to settle in the cities with a ray of hope. The hundreds of people migrate to cities in search of jobs with a number of desires to get fulfilled in the new cities. But they forget, the basic instinct of a man never changes. The basic

selfishness remains active in one's self, it can harm anyone if comes in between the selfish motto and humanity. The present play deals with the fact of life that many people face similar situations one or the other day in their lives. They never think of their terrible end and do not even realize that the marginalized people don't have right to live if their life becomes a threat to some powerful person. They might get crushed for the prosperity of the self-centered people.

Seven Steps Around the Fire reveals how an oppressor commits a crime and still leads a good respectable life. He does not have any kind of remorse, even does not consider himself responsible for his son's lunatic condition. Mr. Sharma projects the powerful class of the society that gets clean shit for every sin or crime. They are called the privileged class. This is the irony of the situation that a minister who is supposed to save and work for the people is doing the other way round with majority of support.

The story of '*Seven Steps Around the Fire*' is an awful one that presents the height of barbarism. The play is all about the selfish interests of a powerful man that crushes the expectations of his near and dear ones. Dattani highlights the fact that honour of the family is much more important than any one's life. Uma and Anarkali are the main characters, supported by Munswamy, Suresh, Champa, Subbu, and Salim along with the antagonist Mr. Sharma and the victim Kamla.

The story moves further through Uma, who is a daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner and wife of a Superintendent of police. She takes up the murder case of Kamla who has been a transgender as her case study.

Uma faces a lot of problems while she investigates in the case of Kamla. Munswamy asks Uma not to go the Hijra for any kind of information or help, but she is determined to take this case rather than the other one. Munswamy insists her again and again to drop the case but in vain. Uma is a sober lady, has a sophisticated nature that can melt the heart of any stone hearted person. Anarkali is very rude to her in the very beginning but she also understands that Uma is not like the other selfish people of the society. The conversation between Uma and Anarkali shows the latter's hatred towards the straight people.

Uma. I would like to meet Anarkali. Where is she?

Munswamy. Anarkali, come here.

Anarkali. No! I don't want to meet any journalist.

Munswamy. I will come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig!

Anarkali. I am not in a mood.

Uma. I am not a journalist.

Anarkali. I don't care if you are the mother of all whores in Bangalore. I said

I am not in the mood! (Dattani, 8)

The above conversation also clears the fact that there is not any scope of improvement in the relationship of the transgender and the straight people. The increasing enmity is the result of societal restrictions that are generally imposed on the marginalised ones that result in hostility. When a person is over burdened with rules, regulations, along with hatred in the eyes of the society, rebel begins, and it's always from both the sides.

The more Uma comes to know about Kamla, the more she gets attached to her. She has a kind heart that feels for the people in need. She hates crime but can do nothing. She is a silent

part of the society who can see everything but cannot speak loudly and make people know the facts about the hypocritical attitude of the powerful ones. Uma doesn't leave any stone unturned in finding out the main culprit of Kamla's murder. She provides monetary help to Champa, head of Hijras, to set Anarkali free from the prison on bail. She even visits Mr. Sharma's residence to observe fear on his face so that she can get any clue about the murderer of Kamla. She also gets to know that the police have wrongly arrested Anarkali for Kamla's murder. She collects evidences in favour of Anarkali. She talks to Champa to clarify her perception. Champa confirms Anarkali's innocence in the murder of Kamla. She says:

Champa. What a question to ask!

Uma. She-she did not kill Kamla, did she?

Champa. Yes, yes. That won't suit you. No. she did not kill Kamla.

They were sisters.(Dattani, 24)

Uma brings out the truth but nothing happens that makes her more vulnerable at the deteriorating condition of the society. She says:

Uma. The photograph was what Mr. Sharma was after. A Polaroid picture that Subbu and Kamla had taken soon after their private wedding in some remote temple. . . A picture of Kamla as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him. The probably did not know that Kamla was not a woman. Of course Mr. Sharma couldn't have it--totally unacceptable. So he arranged to have Kamla burned to death.
(Dattani, 41)

Munswamy's character shows a common man does not hesitate in insulting the transgender. He says:

Munnaswami: She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it does not. (Dattani,7)

Anarkali, a transgender, is arrested for the murder of Kamla who is as a sister to Anarkali. Uma tries to ask her a few questions but she replies in a very humiliating way. She is beaten up by the police.

The scene of beating up Anarkali depicts the partial social scenario of the urban class that Dattani mostly aims at. The 20th century India has coped up with numerous issues mostly related to society. The people who belong to rural areas came to the cities with enthusiasm to do something for them and their family but the callous city has never provided anything to them except a good lesson.

Uma projects the image of silent social reformer whose aim is to stand for justice and against the arbitrary rule of the rich class remains futile. Her efforts go in vain as the whole society all together targets at saving the culprit. She asks her husband about Anarkali 'a confinement in male prison. Suresh, her husband replies in a very detached manner. He even does not bother talking about them; they are of least importance to him. He enters in to another conversation with Uma that shows how practical he is in his attitude towards the marginalised class.

Uma. Why do they put her in a male prison?

Suresh. They are as strong as horses. Wear the purple one.

Uma. I wore that last night.

Suresh. Again. (Dattani, 9)

Dattani through Uma and Suresh portrays the two sides of a same coin. The society has good as well as bad people, the increasing number of the latter poses a challenge for the righteous ones. At every step, Uma comes to know about the Hijra community in a negative way. Suresh says:

Suresh. Good. Don't believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars. (Dattani, 9)

Dattani, being a problem play writer, pens down the problematic area. The story of the play is based on the hope against hope. The individuals' dream of their future and their efforts to get the aim fulfilled go in vain if somehow their goal clashes with the privileged class, the dreams are to be buried, sometimes with its carrier as well. Anarkali and Kamala have been good friends. Kamla is extremely pretty. Everybody likes her. Even Champa also tell that Kamla has been always her first choice for the head of hijras. Kamla has been leading her life happily unless Subbu, son of Mr.Sharma comes in Kamala's life. Subbu's entry in her life brings about a bad omen in her life; she pays for it until she dies.

Subbu, the only son of Mr. Sharma, a minister, falls in love with Kamla. Even after knowing the fact that she is a transgender, he does not step back but decides to marry her. He is shown a young man in love with a transgender. He belongs to the class that does discriminate on the basis of unnecessary things. He wants to provide equal respect to Kamla by marrying her but such people are not tolerated by the fanatics, they conspire against him and get the desired results.

He knows that his father can never approve of his marriage to Kamla, so he marries her secretly, but as the luck would have it, Mr. Sharma gets to know about the marriage and his

anger has no bounds. Actually, Mr. Sharma belongs to that stratum of society which boasts of having ideal family conditions and the revelation of Subbu's marriage with a transgender can ruin his and his family's reputation. Finally, he decides to end the living game and gets Kamla killed, seeing this Subbu loses his mental balance that he hardly cares of. He is rather busy in tracing the last proof of the marriage that is a photo of Subbu and Kamla in garlands. He sends Salim to Champa to threaten and warn her for dire consequences if she does not hand over the photo to him. Salim tries to torture Champa so that he can fetch the photo of Subbu with Kamala.

Salim storms in, sending the bells tinkling wildly

Champa. I told you not to show your face here!

Salim. Shut up, you old bag! I told you to send me her things. Where is her trunk?

Champa. Quiet, you fool! I have a guest here. A Memsaab. Madam, this is Salim. Do salaam to madam.

Salim. Salaam.

Champa. Now go away.

Salim. First give me her trunk. (Dattani, 26)

Mr. Sharma, at any cost, wants the photo so that he can destroy the last proof of any connection of Subbu with Kamla.

Seven Steps Around the Fire highlights the oppression that results in the murder of Kamla. The class of transgender is the most neglected one. They come on two occasions- wedding and child birth. They do not get warm welcome. They remain uninvited guests. They are considered weak even in respect to their work and appearance. Their dreams are hardly

noticed and their being is no importance to the whole society. They live and die as marginalised. The play is an eye-opener for the so-called civilised society that often becomes responsible for the plight of some innocents.

Dattani succeeds in his efforts to make audience visualise the terrible condition of the poor transgender. The marginalised class can hope for no improvement. The society as a whole does not approve the identity of transgender that is really a sorry state of affairs. The playwright rather proves the degeneracy in the character of the people who have stopped feeling for the agony of the other. . Beena Aggarwal feels the same. She says:

His use of stage craft is extremely intricate and it makes the text echoing multiple connotations. For dramatic representation is neither a matter of the description nor of presentation but it is a matter of evocation. It is only with appropriate performance that the experience becomes vital. (30)

Uma is the main character who has taken up Kamla's murder case as her thesis project. It is she through whom all other characters of the play are introduced. She investigates the case very boldly but no outcome is projected. She is very innocent and does even realizes that Mr. Sharma is not going to be punished at all, he keeps enough money with him to buy anyone's conscience. She tells the whole story to her husband. She says:

Uma. Of course Mr. Sharma could not have it-totally unacceptable. So he arranged

to have Kamla burned to death. But Salim had to tell him about the picture. Mr. Sharma simply had to have that picture. He sent Salim to threaten Anarkali and Champa. . . He did get the picture eventually. . . after losing his son. What a price to pay!

And now he will be arrested and tried for murder.

Suresh. I don't know. . . how do you know all this?

Uma. I have my resources. (Dattani, 41)

Even after telling the whole truth to her husband, he does not consider Mr. Sharma guilty for any crime. He rather gives him respect and thanks. He says:

Suresh. Sir, that is the truth. I have my resources to verify all this. Of course, they are all sworn to secrecy so. . . And Mr. Sharma's gratitude will be expressed in ways that will be, I am sure, more than adequate. . . (Dattani, 41-42)

Uma comes to know that the society is not going to do justice. All swim in the same boat, so no need to waste time. She also realizes the blatant truth and prefers to keep the things hidden. Jeremy Mortimer says:

But it's Uma, a post-graduate student of sociology, who is the sleuth in

This relationship, and using rather unconventional means, she uncovers

The truth behind a murder in the city's hijra community. (Preface)

The title itself suggests that cities turn out to be as mere sweet dreams that can never be achieved specially by the marginalised class who does not enjoy any right. The development of the cities attract people from everywhere, they enter the place with gleaming eyes and throbbing heart. They forget that even a single flaw of theirs can bring a doomsday in their life.

. A. Nicoll believes that:

“Many modern tragedies depend not on certain personalities presented in isolated surroundings, but on individuals placed in the midst of social powers from which they derive their joys and sorrows”. (97)

Conclusion

Dattani ends the play leaving the audience stunned and contemplative. The various incidents in the play confirms the basic human nature that salute only the big one, be it Salim, Champa, Anarkali, or Suresh. Almost all characters know about the murderer of Kamla but they prefer to keep quiet. The ending throws light on the fact that a few people's death does not hamper the daily routine of the people. Uma gets a shocking revelation of Kamla's death. She really gets dishearten after knowing that almost all the people related to Kamla know the culprit but they decide to keep mum. The brutal murder of Kamla and the people's ignorance towards it throw light on the very practical behaviour of developing society. The power always plays a deadly game and the common masses bow down their heads before it, trying to save themselves from their wrath. They forget together they can.

Dattani's technique of describing the scene minutely helps the audience to connect to the characters. The colloquial language makes the play more realistic. Even the problems of his plays are very close to the Indian hearts. In the end, Uma says:

Uma. They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all Hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written

off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people. . .

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