

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mahesh Dattani's 'The Tale Of A Mother Feeding Her Child': A Critique Of Centre Versus Margins

Dr. Ramesh Sharma

Assistant Professor of English
Government Nehru Sanskrit College Phagli
Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, 171004

Abstract

The present paper proposes to depict the reality of the society of modern times in a socio-realistic play 'The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child' by Mahesh Dattani. The main thrust of the paper is to throw light on the pathos of the marginalized section of society. Mahesh Dattani is a well known playwright who is known for his courageous attacks on the cruel and inhuman attitude towards the weak and marginalized categories. The paper examines how a society can be cruel enough to deny equal rights to their fellow beings on the basis of caste discrimination. The dramatist has struck the conscience of the society by exposing the hypocrisy of the Indian society. Dattani wants to give a message through this play that the marginalized sections of low-caste should be given human status that, man is a man and he is born equal to all other men. This play gives an exotic image of our country and barely scratches the surface of Indian reality. He has made Herculean effort to retrieve the true and realistic inside view of India and her people.

Keywords: Marginalised, discrimination, hypocrisy

Introduction

Caste system is a particular institution of Indian society which makes it very orthodox and complex. Caste Discrimination against untouchables still exists in rural areas in the private spheres, in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources. It has largely disappeared in urban areas and in public sphere. Some untouchables have successfully integrated into urban Indian society, where caste origins are less obvious and less important in public life. In rural India, however, caste origins are more readily apparent and untouchables are excluded from various spheres of social life.

'Class' is another important factor of social stratification in Indian society. "Social class is a group of people based on any factor other than birth and having a specific social status attached to it."(92, Kumar) Thus

RESEARCH ARTICLE

class defines the social status of people on various grounds other than the birth, and which accords people as socially superior and inferior.

Some masterminds corrupt and deform these social systems for their selfish purposes and give this pure philosophy a different colour of their prejudices, and it turns against mankind, retarding its mental, economic and cultural development. So both these systems as have been made chaotic and ugly in Indian society are condemned, criticized and wished to be relinquished by the social reformers and religious leaders.

Not surprisingly, many modern Indian writers have been fiercely opposed to social oppression, caste prejudices and injustices. In this regard Dattani's plays have been welcomed in the domain of Indian English Drama as 'Fresh arrivals' in the last decade of the twentieth century, as his plays deal with the contemporary issues. Dattani's plays are about the marginalized sections of our society, women, gays and hijras (eunuchs). It is their conflicts and frictions issuing from patriarchy, religious intolerance, gender and sexuality that he tries to explore. According to Dattani all of us "want to be a part of society of the mainstream but we must acknowledge that it is a forced harmony."(342, Chandra) It is the intense realization of this forced harmony which weaves the fabric of his

writings. They expose the communal politics and violence of the people of the urban society, on the one hand, and the hypocrisy and class discrimination of the people on the other hand. He digs up concerns that the middle class lives with but has not come to terms with. He digs up contentious issues as, "In acceptance, he believes, lies the catharsis and the solution". Moreover, he quips, "Isn't it important to pursue truth for ultimately all art is but a quest for truth."(Oct.25, 2009, Singh) Dattani, like other creative writers expresses his experience of disillusionment and alienation born out of spiritual despair. It is this experience which takes hold of man when there is loss of cultural values and senseless materialism which breeds corruption, barbarism and moral depravity. Thematic concerns of Dattani do not revolt with modern writing which expresses, "the themes of Individual's predicament in the form of rootlessness and crisis of identity mainly lying behind in desperate affirmation and traditional culture have been explicitly expressed."(128, Asnani)

Discussion

Mahesh Dattani's The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child

The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child is a radio play which was commissioned as part of 2000 tales, a landmark drama series marking the six hundredth anniversary of the death of Geoffrey Chaucer, poet and author

RESEARCH ARTICLE

of The Canterbury Tales, and was produced by BBC Radio Drama. There were twenty one writers commissioned for this, and their starting point was to write a story which might be re-told to a group of travelers who are forced to spend the night together at a service station on a motorway in England. 2000 Tales, says Jeremy Mortimer, (Executive Producer of BBC Radio Drama), "...created a vibrant, entertaining and challenging piece of contemporary drama which reflected topical concerns as defined by the leading writers of today." (561, Mortimer)

The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child is the story of Anna Gosweb who tells the story of her journey back to a village in India where, twenty years earlier, she had had an affair with a local man, Jaman. She arrives to find the village in drought and resolves to save the man's family.

Anna had visited India at the age of nineteen, twenty five years back. It was then she had met Jaman in Goa. Though Anna did not know his background and could barely understand the few English words he spoke, but she was having a wonderful time with him. It was Jaman who escorted her to the beaches and protected her from drug peddlers and conmen. Though the affair between Anna and Jaman was of short duration, "...just one of those one night things". (568, Dattani) but it

brought turning point in the life of Anna as she became mother of a girl child Jennifer.

Anna never resented for this relationship and was glad to have Jennifer. Here it will not be worthwhile to say the difference that exists in the Eastern and Western cultures about the attitude towards extra marital affairs. Where Anna was glad and satisfied with her one-night relation with Jaman, it was quite shocking and disheartening for Jaman's wife as the secret of Jaman's unfaithfulness and betrayal is disclosed, and the reality is revealed to her. If an Indian woman follows the example of 'Sita' and 'Savitri' they also expect their husband to follow the example of 'Maryada Puroshottam Ram'. When they are betrayed they are disheartened. Anna fails to understand that whether they had the wrong idea or she was naive enough to think it did not matter. However, she realizes that it mattered a great deal to Jaman's wife that she was her late husband's girlfriend.

Dattani in this play has used his arts for the service of humanity. He aims to bring home to the readers the living conditions of the poor and the heartlessness of the rich and at the same time to suggest that true comradeship of man for man exists only among the very poor people. Class and caste barriers have no significance for Dattani, and he regards all mankind as one. If there is only one division, it is that of the rich and the poor, of the haves and the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

have-nots and his purpose is to focus attention on the plight of the have-nots, arouse sympathy for them, and thus pave the way of their betterment. But things have not changed any better and the social deformity of Hindu society has survived all the social reforms and revolutions.

Jaman, the chief character of this play is the representative of those illiterate, low-caste-labourers whose plight remains that their lives are spent in paying off the debts of their fathers and forefathers. If only one drought occurs, harvest of another years to come are spent in paying off only the amount of interest and their future generations remain always under the heavy debts.

Although Jaman was poor financially, he was not lacking in terms of self-respect. He did not beg for financial help, until he was compelled seeing his wife and children dying. The letter he writes to Anna not only reflects his self-respect which did not ebb even in difficult times, but also his love for his wife and children and the difficulties low caste people and villagers were facing during those droughts, though it never reflects his hatred for higher class people as the latter calls them, "brethren":

... Our Gods have failed us, or should I say that they did not succeed in reaching us. They were too busy favoring our brethren

in the cities and of course, the higher caste people of the villages. I have never begged you or anyone else for anything in all my life. I cannot bear the humiliation any longer of seeing my wife and child suffer so ... (566, Dattani)

Caste discrimination does not merely interfere in social or domestic life, but also in moral and political matters. It acts as a powerful barrier against the human existence and emotional integration of the different communities.

The visit of Anna Gosweb through all the difficulties to Gujrat on the one hand reflects her love, care and thankful attitude towards Jaman, on the other hand her presence in the play helps to expose our hypocrite society, that advocates and declares its being secular, casteless, and raceless society, but in reality encourages casteism. Low-caste people do not complaint against this discrimination as they are taught and grow up in such claustrophobic atmosphere that they accept such discrimination as part of their life and believe that they are meant for it. The detailed account of land, that Anna gives when she comes closer to Saurashtra clearly states that higher caste farmers were having patches of green land, while people from the low-caste were not getting proper drinking water. This is reflected more clearly by Anna as she says, "How in the world did they ever drink that water" (570,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dattani) when she is offered water by Jaman's daughter Shanti. Thus, life is the total denial of existential freedom to them. What is awful about the Indian society is that the existence of a whole group of people being ignored in the name of their caste.

Anna, while giving the description of the streets of Kapaswadi admits that, "every home in that settlement belonged to low caste people". (570,Dattani) She narrates that:

... People were not allowed to draw water from the well closeby. Now that the wells had dried up it didn't matter any way. They had to walk three miles every day to fetch a pot of water from the relief tankers. There were too many villages affected by the drought and not enough tankers to go around. They only made it to the upper caste neighborhood. They had to wait their turn which came after the others had their fill.... (570,Dattani)

The incident that brings Anna closer to the family of Jaman, occurs when Shanti almost faints and is taken to Kapileshwar where the relief workers were helping patients. But, the orthodox and discriminatory notion of the dogma of casteism, a scar on Hinduism, also follows them in their journey. Caste prejudice rules with a rod of iron, and introduces an all pervading despotism of higher class and

caste people. It is this despotism that stops Jaman's wife a little away from the bus. Earlier, Anna feels annoyed for taking this caste thing so seriously, but she comes to know better with what happens later in the bus. Anna manages to find two spots together after she elbows out a young man who was heading for the seat before them. The upper caste people cannot even tolerate untouchables in public spheres such as bus lest they might get polluted. Unfortunately, years of discrimination and continuous violence against low caste people has made them so timid that they remain marginalized with no voice of them at all. Like Jaman's wife remains passive and terrified during the whole course of action and remains clung on to Anna for the rest of their journey into Kapileshwar. More than sixty years of independence, untouchability is alive and thriving in India's hinterlands. Pockets of social change have been but mere drops in an ocean of casteism and prejudice. To quote Shobha John:

Dalits are still segregated with little access to temples, water sources and upper caste areas. And ironically, enough even in Radhanagar in Hoogly district, the birthplace of social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy, there are separate crematoria for Brahmins and non Brahmins. (TNN/Aug. 3,2009)

So B.R. Ambedkar's dream of an India where untouchables are not a subdivision of Hindus, but a separate and

RESEARCH ARTICLE

distinct element on the national life remains interrogative to fructify.

Conclusion

The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child, emphatically bring casteism, classism, untouchability, discrimination and inequality in India against a vast section of its populace as are ordained by scriptures, which are held and hailed as sacred as well as divine. Jaman Gopalia represents those marginalized labourers who endure discrimination, segregation and social ostracization. The whole play is a voice to the marginalized people. The playwright has excellently delivered the message. The society hardly allows the marginal to become part of the mainstream. But the play has become a voice to all the voiceless sufferers.

References

Kumar, Anand. "Indian Caste System". Indian Society and Culture. Delhi: Vivek Prakashan, 1998, 92.

Chandra, NDR. Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions, Vol. 2. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2005, 342.

Singh, Nonika. "Master Playwright". The Tribune, Spectrum Sunday. Oct 25, 2009.

Asnani, Shyam M. "Quest for Identity in Three Commonwealth Novels". In A.K. Shrivastava ed. Alien Voice: Perspective on Commonwealth Literature. Lucknow: Print House, 1981, 128.

Mortimer, Jeremy. "A Note on the Play", The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child in Collected Plays, Vol. 2. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000, 561.

Dattani, Mahesh. Collected Plays. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000.

John, Shobha. Times of India. "After -60- years of Independence, Untouchability Alive and Kicking in India". TNN, 3rd August 2009.