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The Representation of Marginalised Voices in Mahesh Dattani's Plays with Specific References to *Seven Steps Around the Fire, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Ek Alag Mausam* and *Tara*

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Abstract

Dattani's plays are peopled by the ostracised people of the Indian society. He uses theatre as a significant space to give voice to the silenced suffering of those hurled to the subservient position of the secondary citizen or a non-entity status. Five major marginalised sections of our society—eunuchs, gays/lesbians, HIV positives, physically handicapped persons and women—are given elaborate representations in four of his plays—*Seven Steps Around the Fire, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Ek Alag Mausam* and *Tara*. Dattani's literary motto, as he himself says, is to "understand the marginalized, including the gays" (Mee 21). His plays put forth a fervent plea for the social ratification of the differences by pointing to the harms involved in thinking in terms of rigid categories. In short, Dattani seems to be doing exactly what the postmodernist thinker Jean-Francois Lyotard has proposed to do: "Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (Lyotard 82).

Keywords: Marginalisation, Silence, Exploitation, Difference, Representation

According to Mohan Rakesh, "...the major function of theatre today is to help man know and discover himself in relation to his environment" (Maharshi 73-74). Mahesh Dattani, one of the leading contemporary Indian-English playwrights, dramatises certain burning issues of the modern, urban, cosmopolitan India, questioning the validity of some of the accepted social norms and stereotypes. Dattani himself says, "I write for my milieu, for my time and place—middle-class and urban Indian" (Mee 21). Using the microcosmic structure of the middle and upper-middle class urban Indian family as locale, his plays bring in the limelight

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the issues of male chauvinism, the marginalisation of the women, homosexuals, transsexuals, HIV positives and physically challenged persons, sexual abuse of children, communalism etc.–issues our society generally tends to sweep under the carpet because they are fraught and unpalatable—and thus fissuring the smooth veneer of upper-class respectability and proving the fragility of its surface placidity and suavity.

Raymond Williams in his book *Drama: From Ibsen to Eliot* has put forward the following argument: "The fact that people undergo their emotional crises in silence, or speak of them inarticulately, might have been granted; and the point then made that purpose of drama can as well be described as "expression", as "representation", with the result that dramatist is entitled to articulate the inarticulate, and to express the silence" (Williams 23). Dattani's plays are peopled by the ostracised people of the Indian society. He uses theatre as a significant space to give voice to the silenced suffering of those hurled to the subservient position of the secondary citizen or a non-entity status. Five major marginalised sections of our society—eunuchs, gays/lesbians, HIV positives, physically handicapped persons and women—are given elaborate representations in four of his plays— *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Ek Alag Mausam* and *Tara*.

Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* dwells upon the discriminations against the community of the eunuchs, the extremely marginalised section of our society—"the lowest of the low" (Dattani 10-11). They are deemed anomalous and hence abhorred and fringed. "The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable—marriage and birth—ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature" (Dattani 11). Although they wear female dress, they are considered neither male nor female but neuter gender denoted by 'it' signifying their non-human status in the eyes of the society. So it is not surprising that on hearing of Uma's reference to Anarkali, a eunuch, as 'she', Munswamy feels much amused because he himself prefers the neuter 'it'. The play dramatises a grisly tragedy in the life of a transsexual and the plight of those attached to her. Kamala, the beautiful eunuch, is burned to death by the hired goon of Mr.Sharma, the minister, after her clandestine marriage with Subbu, the minister's son, out of their mutual love. But the blame is imputed on another eunuch, Anarkali, who has to face the imprisonment and consequent tortures. The plot pivots round the sleuthing of Kamala's murder, much like the manner of a whodunit genre—quite unusual in Dattani—by Uma Rao, a student of sociology and the daughter of the vice-chancellor and the wife of the superintendent of police, Suresh Rao. She goes to the jail to meet Anarkali and their conversation unearths many hidden truths including the maltreatment meted out to a hijra in the prison. Suresh does not like his wife's too much intimacy with the hijras whom he considers as liars and "castrated degenerate men" (Dattani 10), and his contempt represents the general hatred of the society towards this ghettoised sect. According to Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, the eunuchs are "marginalized even in crime"

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(Chaudhuri 64) as is evident from Munswamy's argument that a woman of Uma's elitist background should devote herself to study such 'mainstream' crimes as "Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother...dowry death cases..." (Dattani 7). The abject helplessness of the transgenders is expressed more glaringly nowhere in the play than in the final reflection of Uma after the denouement: "They knew. Anarkali, Champa, and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamala. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers..." (Dattani 42). The play peeps into the multiple layers of subalternity. Whereas the Anarkalis are biological subaltern, Uma is a gendered subaltern dependant on the consent and money of her husband. Hence Anarkali says: "May be you are unhappy than I am" (Dattani 14). Finally, the character of Subbu represents a male subaltern whose homosexuality ultimately results in his pathetic self-annihilation.

In most of his plays Dattani seeks to foreground the differences by establishing the plurality of selves with conflicting elements within what appears to be the single and unified human self. Sandel argues: "...the appropriate descriptions of moral subject may refer to a plurality of selves within a single individual human being, as when we account for inner deliberation in terms of the pull of competing identities or moments of introspection in terms of occluded self knowledge" (Sandel 63). Dattani's adroit handling of the dramatic narrative unveils the multiple layers of human identity. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani depicts different shades of homosexual identity. Ranjit has escaped the social stigma by shifting to the United Kingdom where he can freely indulge in homosexuality. Sharad, an undaunting gay, does not care a hoot about how the society treats him. On the contrary, Bunny, the TV actor, is rather a more traditional Indian gay using the facade of a married man to evade social ignominy. Deepali, the lesbian, is quite sensible and emotionally poised comparatively. Kamlesh is in a homosexual relationship with Sharad and Ed/Prakash who is the husband-to-be of Kiran, Kamlesh's sister. Dattani believes that "being a gay or lesbian is not right or wrong, it is reality..." (Menon). In this play he shows the identity crisis, tension, angst and fear in the lives of a group of homosexuals and their need to live a life true to their genuine inclination. Sharad's words precisely bring out the grave existential dilemma in their lives: "I ask myself what I have got/And what I am and what I'm not..." (Dattani 111). Dattani also deftly uses space overcharged with symbolic significance. The contrastive juxtaposition of Kamlesh's small flat where these homosexuals have their rendezvous and the intruding presence of the larger world outside represented through the Mumbai skyline, the matrimonial procession with all its accompanying hullabaloo, the beautiful woman who weeps and the failed air conditioner serves to emote the "cabined, cribbed and confined" existence of these gay people. M.K.Naik observes aptly, "The wedding music heard constantly in the background in the final Act is an ironic commentary on the lives of those homosexuals for whom 'marriage' can only be a doubly dirty twice-four letter word" (Naik).

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In *Ek Alag Mausam (A Different Season)* Dattani dwells upon the plight of the HIV positives over whose head the curse of death is hanging like the sword of Damocles. But the fear of death in the offing is nothing compared to the social ghettoisation and contempt they are confronted with. Aparna gets infected from Suresh, her husband, and George through the blood transfusion to Joseph, Dr. Machado's son. George's father, blatantly turning him out of the house, sums up the general attitude of the society to the AIDS victims: "You may live for another seven years. But you have killed us before we have entered our graves. What face do we have left in this village? (with great effort). Don't come back. Leave. Go George. (Making a gesture as if to a beggar) Go" (Dattani II, 537). Even the doctors are no less prejudiced. So Dr.Sanyal harshly tells Aparna: "Don't be a fool... No proper nursing home is going to touch you" (Dattani II, 480). However, the only rays of hope are Dr.Machado and Jeevan Jyoti Hospital with their unflinching support to the diseased. Braving the legal restriction on the right to marriage of the HIV positives, Dattani, through the love affair between two HIV positives, Aparna and George, seeks to foreground that neither the fear of imminent death nor the social stigma and legal fetters can siphon off the zest for life. "It is a human rights issue and the courts have no right to interfere in the decisions that individuals makes—if they are aware that the person they are going to marry is HIV positive" (Kidwai).

In *Tara* marginalisation occurs through multiple layers of discrimination. Primarily this is a play about the patriarchal domination over women within which other kinds of otherisations like the discrimination against the handicapped people take place. The play blatantly exposes that in the exploitative matrix of an androcentric society the immolation of the female-child is preferable to accepting a complete female-child and an incomplete male-child, reminding us of the following observation of Sudhir Kakar: "In a daughterhood, an Indian girl is a sojourn in her own family..." (Kakar 52). In Dattani's own words, "it's a play about the self, about the man and the woman in self" and "about the male denying the female and how the cultural construct of gender favours the male." It dramatises the "coming to terms with one's own self in terms of the feminine in the self" (Mee 21). Tara continues to be discriminated even after her death. Dan appropriates Tara's predicament to forge a tragic tale of his own—an act for which he is contrite though. However, it is quite another thing that the 'narrative' turns out to be Tara's saga of suffering considerably. Even the supposedly neutral medical science becomes a manoeuvrable tool in the hands of patriarchy to perpetuate its hegemonic discourse by depriving Tara of her leg and thus her life. Tara's abject helplessness is echoed in the following words of Indu in Shashi Deshpande's novel *Roots and Shadows*: "The women had no choice but to submit and accept" (Deshpande 6). Bharati, though an accomplice with her father in the patriarchal conspiracy against Tara, is another victim of male sexism. Mr.Patel excludes her from the family nucleus by maintaining his supreme hold over any decisive role about the family. He prevents her from donating her kidney to Tara out

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of a sheer impulse not to have her the "satisfaction of doing it" (Dattani 344). Thus the mother-daughter relationship is tampered with the fiat of patriarchy. Andrienne Rich in *Of Women Born* remarks aptly: "Though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control" (Rich 45). Again the internalisation of patriarchal ideology by the females results quite naturally in their phallogocentric complicity as is unequivocally evinced through Roopa's opinion that it's more civilised to drown the girl-child in milk, when faced with the choice between a boy and a girl child, and the giggle she and her friends make on their first meeting at Tara who displays her wooden leg to them. They put on a "male gaze" in relation to Tara. Hence John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* aptly points out: "The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female" (Berger 47).

In fact, Dan, though a male, is also a victim of the patriarchal sins of his father and grandfather who are responsible for his living constantly with an excruciating sense of guilt for nipping Tara's life in the bud, enforcing him ultimately to shift to London and change his identity with the unsuccessful attempt to erase the traumatic past. Dan's condition is redolent of what Ibsen says in *Ghosts*: "The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children" (Fjelde 250). Dan's plight is most pathetic in the sense that his is the tragedy of soul, the curse of a death-in-life existence, whereas Tara's is the tragedy of body. In fact, Dattani believes in an essentially androgynous nature of human self with the male and the female aspects on an equal footing. This harmonious co-existence is also the verdict of nature. All sorts of polarisations are cultural constructs and hence aberrations and harmful. Dan's infernal suffering after his dissociation from Tara proves this point. Havelock Ellis in *The Psychology of Sex* has also argued in favour of the essential flexibility of sex: "We may not know exactly what sex is; but we do know that it is mutable, with the possibility of one sex being changed into the other sex, that its frontiers are often uncertain, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female" (Ellis 194).

In his introductory notes to *Final Solutions* Alyque Padamsee raises a significant question: "Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes?" (Dattani 161). Dattani's plays are vehement onslaughts on these age-old prejudices. They reflect the true face of the Indian society the contour of which is disfigured with the deep scars resulting from the exploitations of the marginalised people. They try to jerk the society out of its smug complacency by showing how the twinkling Taras (stars) become overcast with the cloud of stifling social customs. Dattani's literary motto, as he himself says, is to "understand the marginalized, including the gays" (Mee 21). His plays put forth a fervent plea for the social ratification of the differences by pointing to the harms involved in thinking in terms of rigid categories. In short, Dattani seems to be doing exactly what the postmodernist thinker Jean-Francois Lyotard has proposed to do: "Let us wage war on totality; let us be

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