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Some Multicultural Issues in the Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani : A Critical Perspective

Ms. Shinde Vidya Dadarao
Research Scholar
SRTM University Research Centre
Nanded. (M. S.)

Dr. K. Rajkumar
Research Supervisor
Principal
Shri Guru Budhiswami Mahavidyalaya
Purna, Dist. Parbhani. (M. S.)

Mahesh Dattani emerged as a dramatist on the scene towards the late 20th century. His major themes cover the ordinary and everyday conflicts of urban people who are caught between the pull of social values, modernity and globalization. He has totally changed the very face of Indian drama in English as well as theatre. He is an iconic figure known for dealing with unexpected areas in Indian context. His dramas deal with taboo issues such as child sexual abuse problems of eunuchs, changing gender roles. He explores the issues which are very contemporary in nature. Multiculturalism is a very prominent kind of theme in his plays. Different shades and phases of multicultural society are seen in his plays. Multiculturalism is an umbrella term which covers each and every activity of society right from birth to death and even after. The sum of rituals, social practices, customs so on and so forth. It brings the concept of culture on broad level. It envelops all the institutions of society for ex. marriage, education system, religious institutes, and social institutes. Cultural practices may differ from community to community and hence create a variety of cultures, sustaining once own culture and respecting of other people's is what Multiculturalism.

Today the world has become a global village and Society cosmopolitan. People with different beliefs, ideology, language, customs, social background and religion live together. Instead of conflict, they live with understanding and respect for other's culture and practices. Bhargava clarifies "As a fact, multiculturalism simply registers the presence of many cultures". This aspect of Multiculturalism is vividly visible in Dattani's plays shifting gender roles, progress in urban set up, problems of eunuch, the suffering of cancer and HIV Patients, social unrest resulting in tolerance, patience and co-existence in different cultures are the prominent multicultural issues in Dattani's plays. The present paper is an attempt to throw light on some multicultural issues in select plays, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *Thirty Days in September* and *The Girl who Touched the Stars*.

The most prominent of multiculturalism is paradigmatic shift in gender identity. Indian society is known as male dominated society where patriarchy plays a vital role in terms of domination and controlling the means of production. In the present time, male domination is a socially, culturally, economically, politically and above all psychologically organized set up, with which women are oppressed.

The patriarchal system has purposefully kept its counterpart away from education and other social affairs. The consequent result of this deprivation was that the women were denied the right of education, right of choice, right to franchise. The woman has always been looked down upon as a secondary creature. The fact remains that without her involvement in social or familial matter, neither of the two could be complete or existed. Woman's role in the society is decided by her biological existence. The society doesn't allocate her the role based on her ability or skill. She is even denied equality with her counterpart in the family.

For the smooth functioning of the society, harmonious and congenial relationship between the two genders is necessary. In the contemporary time, woman has created her new identity that she is not only equal to man but she has also surpassed him in many spheres of life. With the emergence of industrialization and globalization, the woman has stepped out of her domestic prison in search of a job so that she could also share the family responsibility.

It could only be possible due to her education and the estimation of her capacities. The long set paradigm of male domination of assigning certain roles and identities to woman has been shattered. It may be due to a number of reasons like inflation, unemployment, sense of social insecurity or maintaining social status. Whatever may be the reason, the fact is that there occurs a paradigmatic shift in the gender identities. The avenues which were thought to be especially reserved for men were encroached by women. Women are now the bread earners and decision makers in many families. Their opinion is listened and valued. Women are drivers, conductors, managers, professors, scientists, pilots and what not. Such achievements on the part of woman are indicative of a paradigmatic shift in their respective identities.

Mahesh Dattani's plays are no exception to this shift in gender identities. To stress the matter, it would not be wrong to say that Dattani is a supporter of the woman's liberation. He chooses a theme which could bring the gender issues for extensive debate. It has been Dattani's constant attempt to highlight the shift in gender identity. Gender identity is

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reciprocal to the social roles performed by gender. In the recent times, one's social identity is more important than one's biological identity. The play *Seven Steps around the Fire* invites readers' and audiences' attention towards the same issue. Dattani's dramatic and literary insight favours the transgender also. Talking on the issue of transgender is not openly encouraged in our society but Dattani treats them as human beings first and transgender thereafter. It is very common that the hijras are designated or called with either by the male pronoun and female pronoun. Rather, they are gifted with the neutral gender 'it', which is so embarrassing for a living creature. The example of it is seen in the opening passage of the play where Uma, the young daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner of Police and the wife of Superintendent of Police, is seen conducting research on the 'hijra' community. One hijra, Anarkali, is in the police lock-up, guarded by the policeman, Munswamy. With due respect to her name, Munswamy designates her neutral gendered pronoun 'it'. The following dialogue suffices the issue:

MUNSWAMY. You may be the hijra now if you wish, Madam.

UMA. Will talk to me?

MUNSWAMY. (chuckling) She! Of course it will talk to you.

We will beat it up if it doesn't. It will only tell lies. (Dattani, 2010: 233-234)

Obviously, there is seen a paradigmatic shift in the outlook of female character of the play, Uma who sees the hijra as human being. Her counterpart, the male character, Munswamy, still seems to bear the age-old concept of gender.

Thirty Days in September rotates around gender based issues. The play seems to be a commentary on the shift in gender roles. Shanta and Mala, the mother and the daughter, are the two independent epitomes representing traditional gender role and the contemporary gender roles respectively. Shanta represents the traditional role of a woman that of tolerance against sexual exploitation while Mala represents a shift in gender role by becoming vocal against the same kind of exploitation. The difference between the mother and the daughter is the result of generation gap. The woman of the modern generation, Mala unveils the taboo of incest and in order to restore her mental equilibrium, she consults a counsellor. This marks the shift in her role as a woman.

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Mala: (listening to the counsellor) Why not ... I do not hesitate to use my real name now. Let people know. There is nothing to hide not for me. After all it is who must hide. He should change his name not me. It is he who must avoid being recognized. In people's home, at parties, hope fully even on the streets. He should look the other way when someone spots him anywhere on this planet and I can make that happen. I have the power to do that now. If I use my name ... I wish he were her now so I could see his face when I tell him I have nothing to hide Because I know it wasn't my fault now I know now. (08)

The way in which Mala talks is bold. She is a victim of incest since her childhood. Conventionally, for the act of incest, usually the woman used to be blamed and she used to herself to be. In Mala's case, she has not committed a shameful deed at all. There is no point to hide either her name or her gender identity. It is not at all her fault when incest is committed rather she is a victim. In fact, her opponent must feel shame for attempting incest. She is not like her mother to tolerate the incident of incest silently without asserting her own self contrary to this, Mala is been upon exposing the identity of the man as the initiator of the act of incest to the whole world her comment with in itself is a testimony of paradigmatic shift in gender role.

Deepak has descended from a cultural family and Shanta already knows colonel Bhatia and his family. Deepak is unlike Mala's maternal uncle, a person who respects and values the ideas and opinions of the individual belonging to the other gender specially Mala. Deepak is not a man who could take undue advent age of Mala's condition. Moreover, he asserts that his meeting with mala should not be taken as a casual love affair.

Deepak: That just does not make sense. I have never ever given her the feeling that I am only interested in a casual affair. In fact I went out of my way to show how much I respect her as a person. (14)

When asked by Shanta about his intention in marrying Deepak affirms his intention for the same. He further says that their fathers were friends and his parents would be happy to

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RESEARCH ACCESS

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know this He doubts would be happy to know this he doubts that it is not going to happen Deepak's happiness solely rests in Mala's consent. As Deepak for the first time, shows his interest in Mala, mala starts avoiding his calls. Deepak even wants to help Shanta in getting to know about such a behavior of Mala. He doubts about something which both the daughter and the mother hide from him.

Contrary to Mala, Deepak is and epitome of the modern youth who displays a shift in his role as a male gender. He could have best options for choosing his bride better than Mala. But he shows his patience, tolerance and high level of understanding when he suggests her to see a psychiatrist or a counsellor, which Mala accepts wholeheartedly. Deepak becomes instrumental in bringing changes in Mala that she had consulted a counselor in getting her mental problem solved. Unlike the traditional man, Deepak had not deserted her on the mercy of her fate. The effect of Deepak's advice is seen in Mala's consultation with the counsellor. She herself admits that her life is full of hopes now. She could start her life a fresh. An altogether changed Mala is seen who is confident and self-assured.

Gender is deeply embedded layer of the socio-cultural identities of a person. It displays a host of conceptual meanings from both biological and sociological domains. The traditional terms that see gender as a biological product, conveying the bodily distinction of male and female are often counterpoised by the sociological perception where gender is identified as a 'doing' or 'becoming.' Mahesh Dattani's *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* challenges the 'doing' of gender roles but at the same time, questions the progressive and educated parenthood which cares for the daughter but certainly craves for a son. The play analyses the dilemma of an urban girl child who know that her existence is that of a less preferred and more ignored individual. She strives to challenge as well as change the mindset.

The Girl Who Touched the Stars is inspired by the life of Kalpana Chawla, the first Indian woman in undertake space journey but unfortunately, she could never make it back to earth as her space craft exploded on its way back. Dattani has used this tragic incident to create a rather disturbing and unnerving paly that primarily focuses on exposing the social evil of gender discrimination, misogyny and oppression on the part of woman. Mahesh Dattani deals with the theme of social exclusion in his plays not on the basis of caste but gender. How gender relationship based on sexuality causes social exclusion becomes a prime concern for him in some of his plays.

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Mahesh Dattani has established himself as pioneering playwright who explores the controversial taboo issues "that people wanted to be kept in darkness" (Dattani, 2014:32). He attempts to give voice to the deep agony of the people who have largely remained on the periphery as exploited, and sometimes as unheard and at other times as muted beings – gays, lesbians, women, the third gender, disabled and so on.

Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines the word 'celebration' as "the act, process of showing appreciation, gratitude and/or remembrance, notably as the social event."

The word 'urban' is derived from Middle French Latin 'urbain.' Likewise, it is derived from Latin 'urbanus' which has the base word 'urb' which means 'city.' Therefore, urban is anything that is 'related to the (or any) city. Urban is 'characteristic of city life. (<http://en.wikiedia.org/wiki/urban>, browsed on 01.03.2018 at 6:39 p.m.)

Etymologically, the word 'ethos' is derived from Greek word 'ethikos,' which originally means showing moral character. In the modern usage ethos denotes the disposition, character, or fundamental values particular to a specific person, people, corporation, culture or movement. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethos>, browsed on 01.03.2018 at 6:39 p.m.)

Out of the day-to-day difficulties that the individual faces and his efforts in seeking solutions to them, there created a specific urban culture that is called as ethos. It covers the fundamental values of the urban society. The individual who is an inseparable element of the urban culture tries to cherish and inculcate within himself certain value and practices such as equality, justice, competitiveness, social status, education, sense of time, search for an opportunity, inclination for progress, materiality etc. At times the values like morality, honesty, spirituality, sympathy, charity etc. seem to be the values of another planet. There is no way left for the individual except celebrating and cherishing the values which have become the part and parcel of the urban culture. It is in this sense that his dramas touch the very fabric of the urban set-up. His point of attraction is to expose the urban ethos which an individual is put in. Dattani seems to read urban psychology very minutely. Some of the characters in the urban setting of his drama are hypocrite, immoral, ambitious, lusty, greedy and corrupt. These are the vices in the personality of the characters. Since the characters are the part and parcel of the urban society, these vices are thought to be the skill of being practical. Hence, this practicality among the characters is the reason for celebration for them because without these features in them, they cannot be themselves.

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The opening of *Seven Steps around the Fire* is in urban set-up. It is the office of the Superintendent of Police where the young female protagonist is seen waiting for someone to come. Bureaucracy is the supporting pillar of urbanization. Moreover, the creation of the police department is one of the steps towards maintaining harmony and discipline in urban society. Showing the office of the Superintendent of Police in the very beginning of the drama is the technique adopted by Dattani to create a sense among the audience about the seriousness of the theme of the drama. To control the criminal activities is the sole responsibility of this department since urbanization is supposed to be the mother of all evils. One of the characters, Munswamy, the police constable, acknowledges this fact:

Munswamy: There are so many other cases. All murder cases. Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother. And that shelf is full of dowry death cases... (Dattani, 2000: 243)

Uma, the female protagonist, is directly related with the bureaucratic system because her father-in-law is the Deputy Commissioner of Police and her husband is the Superintendent of Police. As a part of her research she chooses to study the world of hijra. One of the hijras is put up in the lock-up under the charge of killing another hijra. Uma gets the scope of studying on this taboo issue due to the urban life structure. She has been living in the celebration of the urban ethos is seen through her concern with the hijra community and their problems, not as a part of her research only not as a part of her research only but as an educated and matured social individual. In a society where almost everyone has become immune to the problems of other individuals, Uma attempts to peep inside the veiled lives of the eunuchs. In city life, people lead their lives unconcerned. Uma's husband, Suresh, seems to be the proper representative of the urban culture in the sense that he permits her to take up the issues of hijras for her study yet he warns her not to be compassionate with the eunuchs.

The setting of *Thirty Days in September* is in urban atmosphere of a suburban of Delhi. A counsellor to treat the patients of mental illness is introduced in the very beginning of the play. The office of the counselor is in itself a part of the urban culture. There is reference to party house and restaurants which are the part of the urban set-up. The beginning of the drama presents Mala as a character consulting the counsellor in relation to her disturbed state of mind. She is presented as a victim of incest and child abuse. She is in a

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confused state of mind when her voice is heard on tape-recorder in the office of the counsellor.

Urban ethos helps one to become bold and self-assertive. The gender related consciousness is least important in an urban surrounding. The woman character, belonging to the urban climate, asserts her identity and does not bother to admit the reality about whatever has happened with her. She knows how to expose the person, her own uncle, who is responsible for her present condition:

The urban upbringing plays a crucial role in making Mala a byproduct of urban set-up. In the urban surrounding, Mala learnt all the possible tricks to attract the opposite sex and have her own share of life. The stage directions are self-explanatory

Their eyes meet. She looks directly at him with her wide open almost in fear. She can't help but give the impression she is interested in the man. (99)

Dattani has made every attempt to include urbanity in *Thirty Days in September*. There are certain indications through the dialogues and some statements that lead one close to what is known as urban ethos. Let's look at the following extract:

DEEPAK. Namaste, Auntie ji.

Shanta stares at him, not sure what to say or do.

DEEPAK. My name is Deepak. I spoke to you on the phone the other day.

SHANTA. Deepak?

DEEPAK. Mala's friend. (90)

Dattani's *The Girl who Touched the Stars* is skillfully designed play dealing with the theme of a village girl dreaming to become the first woman going to Mars in 2025. The play is full with incidents that take place in urban setting. The play develops on the conversation between young Bhavna, who aspires to reach the moon, and the frown-up Bhavna, who has reached her dream. She becomes the first woman reaching to Mars. Dattani's dramatic craft is worth appreciation for having intermixed the past with the present in order to expose the painful truth of Bhavna's life. Soon after take-off, the space-craft explodes and Bhavna finds

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herself face-to-face with her past in the form of her own childhood, Young Bhavna. Her vague memories of the past are the basis for the readers to know about her family members.

Depiction of urbanity becomes more crucial in the play in the sense that though the play is set in a small village but the protagonist of the play, Bhavna doesn't show any sign of her rural background, progress in life and high thoughts have been her capital since her childhood. It is with this sense that Bhavna seems to be a product of urban background. It is quite beyond common man's imagination to think about stepping on the moon. Her very existence is such which breaks every conventional bondage. She becomes a champion of change in the mindset, not only of her family but the entire Indian society. As a rebellion, Bhavna not only boldly dreams but achieves the same by her own. Her struggle to achieve her dreams reflects the struggle of an urban woman to progress in life. Her ambition of becoming an astronaut is the ambition which is rarely possible for any rural girl to fulfill. Bhavna is a character full of determination. She has a great potential to concentrate on her ambition.

The plays of Mahesh Dattani throw light on the most prominent assimilation of culture. It talks about tolerance, patience and co-existence in different cultures. Uma in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* attempts to assimilate the hijras to her own culture. Mala in *Thirty Days in September* liberates herself from cocoon and establish a culture that embraces equality between the genders. It reflects a combination of cultures which supports the well-being of an individual. *The Girl who Touched the Stars* presents a conflict between the conventional thinking & that of the modern one. The traditional outlook towards girls-child gender roles in modern society have been challenged & brought to a certain level of understanding. *Brief Candle* deals with the health issue of modern human beings. There are the people who suffer from deadly diseases like Cancer and HIV positive. All such patients realize that they have limited time in their hand. They want to make the best use of it they become forgetful of their background and remember only one thing that is common culture the enjoying the remaining days of their lives.

Dattani's plays have an urban setting. There are women characters like Mala, Uma and Bhavna, who stand as the epitomes of change in gender roles. These women do not believe in the ancient dictum of subjugation. They seem to believe in what Simone de Beauvoir confesses, "A woman is not born but rather becomes" (Beauvoir, 2011: 293). They

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not only believe in liberation but at the same time they establish themselves at par with their counterparts. Although Mala in *Thirty Days in September* is a victim of child-sexual abuse, she realizes her won victimization and decides to assert in order to defend to defend herself. She consults the counselor in order to come out of her traumatic and disturbed psychological condition. She emerges as a responsible and assertive woman. She blames Shanta, her mother, for not having raised voice at the right time against her own as well as Mala's sexual subjugation.

The theory and principles of multiculturalism stand as lighthouse while one studies Mahesh Dattani's plays. The plays of Mahesh Dattani are full of the prominent multicultural issues – paradigmatic shift in gender roles, assimilation of culture and celebration of urban ethos. Gender equality, cultural accommodation and embracing urban set-up are the foundation stones of multicultural society. In other words, gender equality, cultural assimilation and celebration of urban ethos are interdependent on one another. There cannot be the celebration of urban ethos until there is assimilation of culture and assimilation of culture is not possible without gender equality.

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Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani - 431511 (M.S.)




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Purna (Jn.) Dist. Parbhani