

Human Relationships in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani



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Abstract

Being a social animal, an individual needs to develop a connection, a bond or relationship with the people and the environment around him. Good relationship is the most significant component for a contented life as it gives a sense of deep fulfillment. All human beings yearn for a sense of belongingness and close relationships with the people around, irrespective of their age, sex, religion, culture and language as it is a universal need to belong. Having a close relationship with someone improves one's physical and mental health as well as brings happiness and harmony within the individual. It is because of this sense of belongingness that people now-a-days are more active on social media and connected with one another on Face book, Twitter and Whatsapp. Moreover in a state of distress, one needs someone with whom he can share his problems and emotions and can relieve himself from the burden. In this way a good relationship helps in shaping the overall personality of an individual as it affects all the components such as social, moral, emotional and physical.

Keywords: Belongingness, Relationships, Harmony, Emotions, Personality.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is acknowledged as one of the brightest stars in the galaxy of Indian English drama. He was awarded with the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for his matchless and unparalleled contribution to drama. In his plays, one may discover the plight of a common man and depiction of real life situations. The relationship of a man within the society has always been given prime importance in Dattani's plays. His plays are entirely rooted in the urban milieu and highlight the dynamics of familial relationships.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the paper is to critically analyze the man-woman relationships such as conjugal relationship, relationship between homosexuals, relationship between members of the family belonging to different generations and communal relationship in the selected plays of Mahesh Dattani.

Full Text

Mahesh Dattani is known for writing problem plays about genuine issues. His plays present the contemporary issues in its crudest form. To prove his point authentically, Dattani has chosen the Indian urban milieu where a number of relations particularly between a husband and a wife are devastating. The arranged marriages depicted by him are often marked by growing dissatisfaction, superiority complex, rigidity, angst and conflicts between husband and wife. Due to lack of mutual understanding and a fair amount of trust, these marriages result into unhappy and worthless conjugal bonds. The major factor behind the failure of this relationship is the inappropriate brought up and clash of thoughts and values. *Where There's a Will*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *Dance Like a Manare* the poignant examples of poor relationship between a husband and a wife.

In *Where There's a Will*, the husband-wife relationship between Hasmukh Mehta and his wife Sonal has been represented its crudest form. There is no love and trust in their conjugal life. They both have found themselves cold and passive to each other. Hasmukh does not hesitate while calling his wife Sonal as 'good- for- nothing'. Hasmukh says:

I soon found out what a good-for-nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life. Mud. Twenty-five years of marriage and I haven't enjoyed sex with her. (CP 473)

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the relationship between a husband and a wife is again in question and Dattani criticizes the Indian mentality for not having a child after marriage. The couple, Suresh Rao and

Uma has different considerations for living a fulfilling life. Uma is a researcher and conducting her study on hijras and her husband Suresh Rao is Superintendent of police. They have a dubious relationship and suspect each other for not having their child because in Indian scenario, a marriage is considered as failure if it does not procreate a child. This is the reason why Uma wishes to pursue her research and wants to become an independent woman in her life.

Dance Like a Man is one of the most significant plays of contemporary age. The plot of the story revolves around three generations, their jealousy and their conflicts within themselves and outside. In this play, both the husband and the wife are passionate to become worthy Bharatnatyam dancers. Initially they start their practice together but later on the wife joins hand with her father-in-law Amritlal Parekh and ditches her husband. As a result they both fall apart and could not bring trust in their relationship again. This is how Dattani puts it:

Jairaj. Whose fault is it that only you get invitations to dance? Ratna. Surely not mine. Jairaj. For one full year. For one full year I refused to dance—turning down offers because I didn't want to dance alone. Ratna. I didn't ask for such a sacrifice. Tell me what you want in return. I'll do anything except sacrifice a year of my life in return. (CP 443)

Dattani has successfully presented the dilemma of human mind. This play is a perfect example of revealing the complex human relationships and the conflicts among the members of the family pertaining to occupation, marriage, contradictory ideas and the subjugation of a woman in the male dominated family set up. Talking about Dattani and his plays Pranav Joshipura comments:

In all (plays) of them, he provokes our thinking, compels us to think afresh about the problems he presents and appeals to us indirectly like an artist to change our conventional attitudes and assumptions about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. (Joshipura 1)

Marital relationship and extra marital affairs particularly in urban middle class represent the stark realities and hollowness prevalent in these relationships. In *Where There's a Will*, it is not that Hasmukh has only the bitter and unhappy relationship. He was in love with a woman outside his marriage and has all that faith and trust which is required to be there in one's relationship. But that comes in the form of extra marital affair. It is this relationship where he confides all his secrets and discusses his problems with his mistress, Kiran Jhaveri who later becomes the owner of his property for next twenty years. Each and every relationship has been clearly specified by Hasmukh's scheming daughter-in-law, Preeti. She remarks:

The whole world is saying, 'Hasmukh Mehta didn't have faith in his own family. He didn't get along with his wife. His son is a spendthrift. His daughter-

in-law is a scheming little witch. That is why he left all his wealth in the hands of an outsider.' We've got to show them that he was... influenced. By this woman. (CP 493)

Next relationship which comes under Dattani's scanner is the dichotomous relationship between the members of older and younger generations. In his plays, while the older generation believes in traditional values, customs and authoritarianism, the younger generation exhibits boldness, freedom and modern sense of disposition. This generation gap ultimately becomes the cause of conflict in their relationship.

Dance Like a Man and *Where There's a Will* reveal the distorted relationship between fathers and sons where the sons become the victim of their patriarch fathers. *Dance Like a Man* is a story of a modern son, Jairaj, who wishes to be a classical dancer but is sidelined by the orthodox and stereotypical father, Amritlal Parekh, whose conscience does not allow him to make his son a dancer and can't let him to behave like a woman.

Similarly in *Where There's a Will* the father, Hasmukh Mehta possesses an estranged relationship with his son Ajit. The play reflects the patriarchal hegemony resulting thereby the son has to live as a servant in his own house. Hasmukh Mehta is the central character around whom all the relationships have been portrayed authentically. He has bitter relationship not only with his wife but his son is also not happy and contented. Both the son and his father have their own grievances for each other. His son, Ajit grumbles:

Ever since a boy, you have been running my life. Do Do this, do that or don't do that, do this. I was scared of you! Then, when I grew up, I learnt to answer you back. (CP 487)

In both the above plays i.e. *Dance Like a Man* and *Where There's a Will*, Dattani focuses on the patriarchal mindset. Catherine Thankamma observes:

In both plays he presents powerful pictures of dominating fathers destroying their sons for not rising up to their expectations. In *Dance Like a Man* the father-in-law joins hands with his daughter-in-law to destroy his son's career as a dancer. In *Where There's a Will* Hasmukh Mehta tries to get even with his son by making his mistress the executor of his will. (Thankamma 85)

The most sensible relationship possessed by homosexuals has also not been untouched by Dattani in his plays. The success of his plays lies in the fact that he presents even the most controversial and taboo issues in frank and candid manner. Using his incredible knack, he makes the homosexual feel comfortable, special and inseparable part of society. At the same time, he criticizes the heterosexuals for being so rude, unsympathetic and neglecting them as the marginalized section of the society. This is all because of the perverted mind set of the society which considers them as abnormal and worthless section of society. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* highlight the predicament of the homosexuals.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is another play which deals primarily with human relationship and that too between two individuals of same-sex. All the characters in the play are either homosexuals or bisexuals. Dattani seeks support from other critics such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for choosing such kind of revolutionary theme. There are so many intrigue relationships which are closely entangled with one another. The play is all about gay and lesbian relationship and it seems that Dattani himself encourages these relations. He believes that homosexuals are as normal as heterosexuals and have full right to live their life on their own terms and conditions. There is a constant fight/struggle within themselves for the self-identity. There is a clash between what they desire and how actually it is being recognized. Ekta Sharma in her thesis acknowledges:

His (Mahesh Dattani) plays become the outcry of the queers, sexual minorities such as gays and hijras, the marginalized members of society, the excluded and subalterns, who in their futile efforts to be connected with society are reduced to pathetic creatures with their guilt-ridden, tortured psyche and opposing socio-ethical background. (Sharma 121-122)

John McRae in his note on the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* seems analogous to Ekta when he says:

It is not simply the first play in Indian Theatre to handle openly gay-themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victims to the expectations society creates" ('A Note on the Play', *Collected Plays* 45).

Since the homosexuals like and possess love for each other, it does not affect their relationship if they cannot reproduce a child. Just as in heterosexual marriage, the couple procreates a child similarly in homosexual relationship one can adopt a child who can be nurtured with love and care. Though all of them yearn for (longings for) same sex relationship yet they seem to believe in heterosexual relationship too. Ed, one of the gays tells Ranjit:

Look around you. Look outside. Look at the wedding crowd! They are real men and women out there! You have to see them to know what I mean. (CP 99)

The entire plot of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* revolves around the homosexuals and bisexuals except the one character Kiran. The other play also portrays the queer orientation of the characters such as Nitin and Praful in *Bravely Fought the Queen*.

Bravely Fought the Queen is the play where the various relationships are interpreted from three different perspectives: between two women, two men and a man and a woman. The relationship/enmity between husband and wife i.e. Jiten and Dolly have reached to such an extent that he even hits/ beats Dolly when she is pregnant at the order of his mother Baa. It is an irony when a mother-in-law is seen envious and cruel to her daughter-in-law even today when a woman is so independent and intellectually capable. Baa does not hesitate to call Dolly's mother

as a 'keep', 'mistress' or a 'whore'. One can imagine the kind of society if a woman is jealous of another woman. On the contrary Dolly is sincere, kind and benevolent. She has always been courteous to her mother-in-law in spite of all the injustice meted out to her or to her sister Alka. For the sake of maintaining peace in the family, she pleads Alka for not misbehaving with Baa.

Dolly. You insult your husband's mother in front of him and say you don't – you had planned it all!

Alka. No.

Dolly. You planned it! You waited for that chance of dinner time. You deliberately got drunk...

Alka. I wasn't...

Thus there are two sisters who reflect different temperament and attitude. One is straight forward and revolutionary in her ideas while the other is shown as meek and submissive who remains happy to be subjugated just not to bring upheavals in the family. On the other hand, Jiten is a womanizer and gets a prostitute to gratify his sexual needs through one of his employees, Sridhar. Nitin is a homosexual and in a relationship with Praful, Alka's brother. Baa was also unhappy and frustrated with her married life. Due to this frustration, she could not maintain a healthy relationship with her daughters-in-law. Thus, Dattani is trying to find out the reasons behind the degeneration of human values and fragmented relationships within the family. Out of several other factors, modernization has come out as the biggest one; modernization in thoughts, in culture and in behavior. As B K Das points out:

All traditional values are thrown into the wind. Man and woman became individualistic, selfish and self-centred in the contemporary society. Norms of behavior have changed. (Das 73)

Thus the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* is perfect example to represent human relationships within and outside the family, homosexual relationship and extra-marital relationships.

Similarly the most controversial relationship between an individual, Subbu, son of a government Minister and a hijra, Kamala has been depicted in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Generally the hijras are victimized and considered as the unwanted part of the society. This unacceptable relationship ultimately results in the death of Subbu because it was not normal for a man to choose a hijra as a soul mate. But the love between them was absolutely pure and unconditional. Just to save her from societal criticism, Anarkali, another hijra, tried to scratch her face so that Subbu start to dislike her. She asserts:

I fought with her. I scratched her face, hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her. (CP 41)

It is not only an unusual story but a bold and daring step taken by the playwright Mahesh Dattani. He seems to challenge the Indian mentality where the feelings and desires for love are measured and judged by the outward appearance and beauty of an individual. Love is an emotion which is aroused from the inner core of the heart. Beauty is not tangible; it

lies in the eye of the beholder. Basically he just wants to prove how society perceives relationship and categorize them into acceptable and unacceptable ones. Their relationship is as natural as of those possessed by any heterosexual couple.

Dattani has a clear vision for his country and that is why he could not stop himself to depict the most important relationship between two communities: the Hindus and the Muslims during the post partition period. Not to be surprised and strange, he again comes up with the realistic issue and challenges the socio-political scenario for such kind of conflicts and clashes. His play *Final Solutions* represents hate and acrimony between these two communities and seeking for harmony, mutual understanding, co-operation and love for each other's sentiments. He probably wants to prove that always both the communities have to suffer at each other's hands. It's not only the Hindus who were ill-treated by the Muslims but the Muslims were also hated by the Hindus. However, Daksha, mother of the protagonist, Ramnik Gandhi owns harmonious relationships with her Muslim friend Zarine. It suggests the phase of peace and harmony between the two communities too in the past.

Conclusion

By and large all his plays deal with unhappy human characters who are entangled in complex web of human relationships. They often portray a light of hope highlighting his people friendly approach and vision of human society. The members of the family seem to be found in search of meaningful family ties

as family is considered the heart of Indian life. Dattani delineates every minute detail of complex human relationships among the members of Indian family. To a larger extent, he has even succeeded to cover every aspect of human relationship be it between husband- wife, parent-child, two homosexuals, extra-marital affairs, between two communities and the differences in views and opinions among the members of the family on different issues due to generation gap.

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