

Mahesh Dattani's Clearing the Rubble: Voice of Marginalized



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ABSTRACT

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Mahesh Dattani has established himself as one of India's most promising English playwright. He has made his name not only in the world of Indian English stage craft but also in the world. This paper deals with one of his radio plays *Clearing the Rubble*. Dattani is a playwright who makes very distinct use of dramatic technique to represent the theme of his plays effectively. This paper tends to highlight this distinct art of Dattani's craft which most of other analysis have left almost untouched. The study shows how Dattani voices plight of the victim of gender discrimination and double standards through the play. Textual analysis research method has been employed for the analysis of the play.

Keywords : Feminism, double-standard, discrimination, supernatural machinery, flashback technique, radio performance technique.

I. INTRODUCTION

The play is set in Bhuj, a region in Gujarat, in 2001, when a massive earthquake has devastated the land of Bhuj, it turns out that the main focus of the play is not on the natural calamity but on social discrimination. It seems that the play mainly deals with the various kinds of prevailing discriminations – the discrimination based on gender, religion, caste, region, and social status. The natural calamity is used as a means of connecting people of two distinct worlds and of highlighting the existing social and

political favouritism. The play also underlines how patriarchal society subdues motherhood.

The Analysis

Clearing the Rubble is a radio play for three voices: Toby Jeffrey, Fatima, and Salim. It seems that the play is crafted not to represent the life of poor and helpless people in the state of natural disaster, but to highlight deprived and humiliating life of the poor women, especially girls. The mortifying experiences of Salim and his sister Mumtaz display what humiliating lives they have lived because of poverty, caste and minority status. The discrimination prevails

everywhere in society; even in schools. Salim's parents send him to school with the hope that education will improve his lot and his family status. On the contrary, it is at school that he realizes that he is inferior to others.

The humiliation which Mumtaz suffers is more serious. The contractors of society often target a poor and weak woman of lower community and caste. Such women often become victims of social, religious, cultural and political prejudices and of men's lust. These women hardly get any support. Their families even force them to live with the pain of being humiliated. This is what happens with Mumtaz. She has been stripped naked as a punishment against the charge of stealing money. This incident takes place at the hospital where she works. Surprisingly, nobody comes forward to rescue her. Even Fatima doesn't help her out after knowing all that. Moreover, she forces her to return to her work. This incident throws ample light on the pain of routine life of a minority girl. They are left with no choice but to live with their agony. "Dattani intends to indicate that religion and caste-consciousness is so down deep in the blood of the people that it hinders the call of humanity" (Parmar 172). The communal and caste biased nature of society makes the marginalized sections live a life which is beyond endurance.

The double standards are more deeply rooted in the lower and the middle sections of society than the sophisticated section. A minority or lower caste girl is doubly marginalized, first, under the religion and caste, and second on the basis of gender. Mumtaz perfectly represents the plight of a doubly marginalized girl. Neither society nor the family treats her fairly.

Mumtaz is the middle child of her parents. Morally, being the eldest child and the only son of the family Salim should share the burden of the family after the

death of his father. But, this doesn't happen. Fatima has a dream for him. She dreams that one day Salim will grow up and will earn enough to support the family. He will end their suffering. Fatima shares her dream with Mumtaz:

If we had suffered a little to send Salim to school, when he grows up he could earn much, much more. We will be more wealthy, and you will find a husband who can support you well. That is the honour I was seeking (CP2: 75).

In order to turn her dream into reality Fatima has to send Mumtaz to work instead of Salim. Fatima explains: "If I had asked Salim to stop going to school and work, that will be the end of us. All that hard work and suffering will be of waste. It would all be the same forever" (CP2: 75). The utterance suggests that Fatima deprives Mumtaz of her childhood and makes her work hard only because she wants get her son educated.

Fatima always gives preference to Salim over Mumtaz and Saira, the youngest daughter. The best thing is always given to Salim as if he is the only person who deserves. Fatima is unfair to Mumtaz not only after the father's death but also prior to that. When Fatima, for instance, starts working as a labourer, she finds herself unable in managing home and work together. Someone is needed to do the household works in her absence. The only person whom she finds fit for the job is Mumtaz who is only seven years old. She is not ready for such a big responsibility. But, Mumtaz has been forced to sacrifice her childhood so that her brother can get enough time to focus on his study and to live up to the mother's expectations. Dattani succeeds in showing how deeply dichotomy is rooted in lower section of society. Mumtaz perfectly epitomizes the life of poor girls who are victims of gender discrimination and prejudices.

Fatima is fully aware that she is unfair to Mumtaz. Fatima has foreseen the future of the family very early. She has realized that Salim will not live up to her expectation. He is different. He is not as obedient as Mumtaz is. Moreover, he regrets that he is born in a cobbler's family. He hates to be a member of the family instead of being sympathetic to his mother and especially to his younger sister, Mumtaz. Fatima's disappointment finds expression in the following lines:

I can tell you now, because it is the time to do it . . . I gave you the best of what we all could. You did not see the hard work that I had to do so that you could buy your books or take some sweets for the schoolmaster. You did not see that your sister was spending the whole day to fetch water for you to drink or wash your feet the next morning (CP2: 76).

The above utterance foregrounds the fact that Salim doesn't help the family in any way. Neither does he have the feeling that he owes his mother and younger sister a great debt of gratitude. Fatima is cognizant of this fact: "I know you are proud of yourself. But you were not proud of us" (CP2: 77).

However, Salim realizes after his death that he was neither a good and responsible son nor a brother. He enjoyed the privilege given to him by the family without being of any use to the family in return. He was nothing more than a burden to his family, especially to Fatima and Mumtaz. He himself admitted that he never thought about the family. He was always busy thinking about himself. Salim, the spirit of Salim, confesses:

I never thought about Mumtaz and what she went through for me . . . I wish I had paid more attention to her . . . I know now . . . she wanted someone else to share the burden, or take it off her shoulders. I was a burden. To both of you (CP2: 78).

What is significant to note here is that Fatima and Salim both admit that Mumtaz is far better than Salim. Like a son, she shoulders the responsibility of taking care of the family. She helps her mother in supporting the family with her earnings. Unlike Salim, Mumtaz feels a strong sense of responsibility towards her mother and the family. She executes her duties well despite all the sufferings and humiliation she has to go through. She has faced more hideous humiliation than Salim has, but she never thinks of separating her identity from the family as Salim plans to do. She suffers in silence. She never expresses her grievance to anyone. Mumtaz's nature and sensibility transform Fatima. Fatima who doesn't leave any stone unturned to make Salim a *Sahib*, begins to realize that she is trying to make a castle on quick sand. That's why, she admits to Salim in the end that Mumtaz was her dearest child: "You were not my favourite child. Mumtaz was the one I loved the most. I say this to you now, not to hurt you. But to let Mumtaz be at peace" (CP2: 77). It is the difference between Salim's and Mumtaz's potentials which forces Fatima to admit that Mumtaz is her dearest child.

It seems that Dattani succeeds in dramatizing the notion that women's role in gender discrimination is as vital as men's and other aspects of patriarchy. Fatima becomes the instruments of the subjugation of her daughter because of her biased notions and prejudices. Fatima has prevented Mumtaz from living honourable life because she wants to give her son the best. As Bharati, in the play *Tara* deprives Tara of the second leg which naturally belongs to her. Moreover, she, along with Patel, makes Tara believe that she is a girl and she should learn to live up to the expectations of womanhood. Like Bharati, Fatima is also unfair to her daughter. She always gives Salim the best. Fatima forces Mumtaz to make sacrifices for her brother. Fatima deprives Mumtaz of her childhood and leaves her alone to sink into the sea of humiliation because she doesn't want to give any

trouble to Salim. One of the chief causes of Tara and Mumtaz suffering is the prejudices and biased notions of their mothers.

Mahesh Dattani structures the plays around the themes that foreground injustice against women. The degree of discrimination varies with the social, cultural, religious and communal status of the family. *Tara* highlights the plight of a girl child in the upper class society, whereas *Clearing the Rubble* explores the suffering of a minority and lower caste girl child. The difference between the two families of the two plays on the basis of their culture religion and social status can be understood by the simple fact that the family represented in *Clearing the Rubble* is a cobbler's family whereas Patel is the general manager of the biggest pharmaceutical company in India, whose father-in-law was an M.P. On the other hand, Fatima is a housemaid in the Patel's family and has also worked as a labourer. The difference between the social statuses of both families is very vast. Despite this, the daughters of both families have similar lives. Tara and Mumtaz are both deprived of the life which they deserve. Both are victimized by their families for being girls. Dattani has tried to unearth the fact that gender discrimination against women prevails in each and every section of society.

Theme and Technique

Dattani is an innovative playwright. He is known for dramatizing the subjects that are usually put on the periphery and for experimenting with techniques. Theme and technique of his plays are so craftily woven that they become inseparable. *Clearing the Rubble* is a radio play. In a radio play playwright has limited means of expression. Sound, voice, music and dialogues are the only means that a radio playwright may use. Dattani has utilized these devices very effectively in his radio plays. *Clearing the Rubble* epitomizes his radio craft.

Like *Tara*, in *Clearing the Rubble* Dattani makes a character of the play narrate the action to the listeners. It is clearly evident in the play that Jeffrey is going to narrate an event which had occurred a year back. Dattani employs flashback technique to bridge the gap between the present, 2002, and the past, 2001. Like Dan, Jeffrey plays multiple roles in the play. He is a narrator and a participant character in the play. Jeffrey is casted as a narrator when the play fades in the interior of Kutch Express. When the play fades in Malliya, Kutch, to explore the tragedy, Jeffrey participates as a character in the play. Thus the play moves between the past and the present.

Dattani is known for discarding old dramatic devices. He has done the same in this radio play. He has employed "thought" technique instead of "aside" or "soliloquy" to explore the psyche of the characters. The technique makes it possible for the characters to express their feelings directly to the audience. "The plot of the play is presented through this technique barring one letter device. The feelings of the all the three major characters are presented through 'thought' (Parmar 174).

The use of supernatural machinery in drama is an old practice. Dattani makes very effective use of supernatural machinery in his plays like *Where There's a Will*, *Clearing the Rubble* and *Brief Candle*. There is hardly any difference between the supernatural characters and the living characters in these plays. The distinction can be established only on the basis of sensuousness. The supernatural characters, except Vikas (*Brief Candle*), are not visible, hearable, and touchable to other characters. Dattani doesn't endow the supernatural characters with super natural powers. He represents them as if they are a living being. Salim in *Clearing the Rubble* is a victim of earthquake disasters. It is shown in the play that he has lost his life in that disaster. Like living characters Jeffrey and Fatima, Salim shares his experiences with

the audience through voicing his thoughts. He is presented as if he is a normal human being. Salim is not caricatured as a bad spirit/ghost who has an ugly horrible face, long limbs and the like. The only ghostly feature he is endowed with is that he is invisible to other characters of the play. The use of supernatural machinery and other dramatic devices enable Dattani to make the audience peep into women's world to observe their plight more closely.

The play uses "flashback" technique to relate the present to the past. A character is made to play the role of an organizer of the action. The play moves between the past and the present. Dattani has to depend on dialogue to voice the theme of the radio play. In *Clearing the Rubble* Dattani employs "thought" technique to explore the psyche of the characters. Techniques Dattani employs to represent the subject of his plays distinguish him from other Indian English dramatists.

II. CONCLUSION

The message of the play is loud and clear, it is not men against whom women have to fight for their rights, neither men have to fight women for their freedom. It is social, cultural and religious norms and practices which actually shackle men and women to manhood and womanhood. Therefore, men and women should join hands with each other in order to get rid of the shackles. Contemporary Feminists have realized that they can't obtain the desired equality without men's support. Natasha Walter in her book *The New Feminism* (1998) asks feminists to work with men to change the society and not against them. She calls women to join hands with one another and with men to establish equality in society. Some other feminists, like Naomi Wolf and Lynne Segal, also hold a similar view. Dattani has represented this aspect more powerfully through his play *Tara*. The play demonstrates that men and women are like two integral selves, masculine and feminine, of a person.

The absence of one makes the other incomplete. Like the two selves, men and women are complements for each other. Neither men nor women are complete on their own. L. Saraswathi makes a valid observation in the following lines;

It can be taken to be the author's message that only a society, which perceives man and woman as equals and their roles as complementary to each other, will prosper. A society that discriminates on the basis of gender, that hands out raw deals to women on account of their being women is one that has to force the consequence in the long run (4).

Men and women both are dependent on one another for their identities. Without men there will be no value of women, and without women there will be no value of men. Therefore, neither of the two genders should hold that the one is superior to the other.

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