

Autobiographical Elements And Construction Of Self In Selected Plays Of Mahesh Dattani

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South Asian Literature includes both vernacular literature and Indian Writing in English. It embraces poetry, drama, prose, novels etc. without emphasis on a single genre only and treats variety of local themes that are embedded in the cultural backdrop of the writer. As far as Indian writing both in vernacular and English are concerned, apart from tradition and partition, gender identity, representation and changing roles with changing times have been the popular themes so far. And as it is said, every work of art is the byproduct of both the mind who creates and the heart that lives through the same, so the autobiographical element comes in inadvertently.

This paper tries to trace that autobiographical stance in Mahesh Dattani's selected plays and insightfully gathers his idea of 'self' through his artistic representation. He does not try to rush for solutions. With open-ended exits, his characters keep ransacking your faculties of mind playing hide and seek with your common sense and social understanding both. Thus, his idea of self is no way a work of fiction purely. It is more like a journey of growth where creation and creator both experience a transformation of thoughts and perception at the end.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Crisis, Self.

South Asia is an abode of rainbow cultures and traditions and an acknowledged contributor to World Literature. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, etc. are a few names to mention among a long list of South Asian Countries that flaunt a diversity of culture within their own boundaries also. To add to that, literature coming from their Diaspora has multiplied the impact with which South Asian Writings have made their presence felt on Global Platform.

These countries share a bunch of common experiences in terms of foreign invasion, colonization, gender violence, religion, unity in diversity, political instability, identity crisis etc. that reflects through the pen and paper of the writers belonging to the region. Apart from English, a medley of vernacular languages has added richness as well as a local touch to the treatment of themes and issues. Some of the writers who have made notable contribution to the corpus of South Asian Literature are Mahashweta Devi, Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Ajeet Cour(India), Tasleema Nasreen(Bangladesh), Kishwar Naheed (Pakistan), Manju Kanchuli (Nepal) etc.

This body of literary expression is not restricted to a single genre. It ranges from poetry, novels, plays, to cinema etc. as human experiences find expression in multiple shades and shapes provided one knows how to translate that Pandora's Box of un-addressed emotions into life like characters and events. Among variety of styles, autobiographical writing has attracted the interest of the writers, poets and playwrights of the times as soon as the themes of their subject have shifted from history and mythology to modern and post-colonial identity. With advent of feminism, women writers of the times like Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, and many more to name have used this mode of writing. In case of Modern Indian Drama, playwrights like Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Badal Sircar and many more have used this tool effectively making a fabulous mix and match of both fiction and fact to unravel their life experiences.

As defined by The Literary Encyclopedia, an autobiography is 'the story of a person's life as told by him or herself'. It may be a self-narration using the first person ('I') or the writer may chose to share his personal experiences through fictional characters that remain his mouthpiece throughout.

Misch highlights that autobiography as a mode of expression is picked up by both women and men as it ‘springs from the most natural source, the joy in self communication and in enlisting the sympathetic understanding of others; or the need of self-assertion...it abounds in fresh initiatives, drawn from actual life...’ (4). Thus, this type of writing gives a vent to the inner struggle of the mind of the author providing a ‘catharsis’ in true psychological sense.

Where as in case of a novel, generally, it is the single voice narrative that dominates; drama makes it very difficult for a playwright to hold onto the autobiographical leanings amid continuous play of dialogues, actions and conflict. However, “Never has the use of single narrative voice (through the sutradhara or through subtler means) been used in more exciting ways than in today’s theatre. Mahesh Dattani’s (2000) ‘Dance Like A Man’ and ‘Twinkle Tara’ begins with the single narrative voice of the narrator/writer Chandan before bodying forth into the drama of characters, obviously born from the fictionalized author’s personal concerns.”, says Sunjoy. (73)

Mahesh Dattani is a renowned name in the field of Modern Indian Drama in English. A staunch advocate of LGBTQ communities, and an open critic of normative sexuality as a parameter of one’s social identity, he has always picked up the issues that are not allowed to come up citing reasons of social stigma attached to them. He seems to speak through the inner recesses of the minds of his characters mostly that are contemporary, true to their representation, and a byproduct of the society that has no complete solutions to its varied struggle. Therefore, they do not appear with magical twists and turns of events, rather, they grow through the journey of self-discovery just like another face in the crowd. The only extraordinary feature they have is that they are very ordinary, which makes them look very appealing to the audience and readers both.

The first volume of his collection of plays is dedicated to his parents. Talking about the autobiographical leanings Sunjoy expresses, “Of the several indicators, the dedication to his parents in his *Collected Plays* subtly voices the author’s personal concerns shared between parents and son and sharply focused may be in ‘Dance Like a Man’: ‘For my parents Guju and Wagh: “Look I am dancing like a man”.’ (73,74)

His play ‘Dance Like A Man’ portrays the struggle of an artist who is a trained classical dancer. The hint of personal element catches one’s attention the moment you realize it’s about male classical dancers in late eighties and early nineties as Dattani himself is a trained

kathak dancer. The clash of tradition and modernity sets for in the very outset through an archaic architectural set up which is old, rigid, and ‘rotten’, but still holds a place in contemporary living in the name of heritage. It suggests a Gujarati family frame, which is embedded into its cultural roots.

Jairaj, the male protagonist bears the brunt being a classical dancer throughout his life and career. His father, Amrit Lal Parekh expresses his obvious displeasure about his choice of profession. He himself being a social reformer is a well-known name in his area. And it tears him to pieces thinking what made Jairaj fall for such disgraceful profession. Dattani has worked hard on details like long hair, walking style etc to convey the essence of the ‘self’ that is grappling hard for recognition in Jairaj. His identity fails the test of social recommendation irrespective of inherent brilliance of an artist since he is a misfit into normative manhood. Amrit Lal Parekh, the father figure, speaks patriarchy loud and clear when he makes a deal with Ratna, Jairaj’s wife to dissuade him from dancing saying,

“A woman in a man’s world may be considered being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is –pathetic.” (140) (CP II)

Here one is reminded of Judith Butler who seconds the idea of Catherine Mackinnon, that reads “If gender hierarchy produces and consolidates gender, and if gender hierarchy presupposes an operative notion of gender, then gender is what causes gender, and the formulation culminates in tautology.” (xiii) Highlighting the narrative strategy Sunjoy adds further, “Technically the narrative coalesces, collapses the past and the present by separating and simultaneously bringing together the three generations, traditional rituals and contemporaneity, framing changes and conflicts, tensions and breaking points, and yet an underlining continuity.” (74)

In his another play named ‘Where There is a Will’ we find yet another dominating father figure named Hasmukh Mehta, brandishing values dear to patriarchy, even after his death. One finds similar authoritarian figure in ‘Tara’ as well. Dattani keeps revisiting these patriarchal spaces in his plays as if calling for a verbal duel (among values that individuals hold collectively) and (supposedly) claiming a space for himself somewhere.

In ‘Tara’ Chandan keeps struggling for his own identity, that does not go hand in hand with his father’s idea of a manly world. Tara exhibits amazing sense of business but forced to do away with that being a woman. On the other hand, Chandan who aspires to be a writer is

admonished every now and then by his father being 'sissy'. Although, the play revolves around female protagonist, the story picks pace through the character of Chandan only who as a narrator introduces us to the underlying conflict from word to word.

Dattani describes 'Where There's a Will' as 'the exorcism of the patriarchal code'. The choice of words somehow suggests displeasure deep down with the patriarchal codes of conduct that are no change friendly at all.

Like many of his contemporary dramatists Dattani has not chosen vernacular as medium of expression though he has made good enough use of local idiom to let the audiences identify the cultural backdrop of his characters. His being more comfortable with English and calling it 'our English' at times implies his Post-Modern identity, which is gradually finding a space and solace in contemporary tastes and tribes.

Talking about the dramatic technique here, the use of a dead person as narrator is very smart who becomes a metaphor for tradition that keeps dragging you back more and more in the name of sticking to roots. Moreover, this tradition does have a share of accusations like Hasmukh Mehta, who himself lives an immoral life but maintains an outward moral stature finding fault with others. Dattani does not conclude the play with evident teachings and preaching. He unfolds the chaos and let his characters pick up the threads of their lives one by one doing 'the needful'. Patriarchy receives the final blow at the hand of the woman (Kiran Jhaveri) who Hasmukh thinks has used to his own advantage so far.

Dattani has always been vocal about LGBTQ rights not only in local context but globally. In the cover story magazine article of Indian Today, he openly talks about the regressive sexuality in local contexts as he adds, "Men have yet to discover their own psychic G-spot even as they grope to find women's. True sexual pleasure is rare and transitory. But with it comes a rarer state of true love, which is equally transitory. It acquires permanence in memory. People stay in love because they once fell in love. Those who love, move on to enriching, fulfilling relationships. For the rest there is the role." Moreover, this role-playing has roots in normative sexuality that legitimizes itself on grounds of biologically productive relations.

Dattani's ambiguous sexuality and his continuous interest in picking up LGBT themes echoes his own concerns though slightly but effectively. His plays like 'Mango Souffle', 'Seven Steps Around the Fire', 'Do the Needful', and, 'Bravely Fought the Queen' are based on homosexual relationships and eunuchs.

In a note to the screen play Sanjeevan Shah writes that the play was an instant pick for making a film as “It (Mango Souffle) was modern, witty, limited in location (to suit our budget) belonged to Mahesh, and conveyed the virtue of being oneself regardless of consequences.” (169) One can always read between the lines for lurking self-narrative through suggestion may be.

His liberal cosmopolitan approach towards gender and sexuality comes to front when Dattani candidly admits, “...To me, gender never was an issue. I am not conscious of masculine or feminine expression. I am who I am. At times it may be categorized as feminine, at times as masculine. It does not bother me. But peculiarly, it’s a big deal to others.” quotes Aditi De. And similar thought process comes to fore in ‘Mango Souffle’ as well when Kamlesh and Ed are engaged in a dialogue. Where Ed expresses his anxiety about being noticed publically holding hands with a man, and Kamlesh throws a casual reply,

KAMLESH. “*If only they could see how beautiful we are together.*”

Here, he appears to be a mouthpiece of the author who is quite comfortable with his own reality as suggested.

Thus, Dattani’s use of autobiographical element is subtle yet appealing. He does not emerge as ‘I’ but you find uncanny resemblance of his plays with his life and situations. His idea of ‘self’ is quite dynamic as his characters do not cling to their past or succumb to their present. They fight, they move and eventually they grow. Use of flashbacks, lights and economic use of stage has a lot to say about a modern man’s life where so much happens within such a small span of time.

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