The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Study of Human Relationships

Summary

This incisive study of a wide range of human relationships in Dattani’s plays aims at removing imbalances and filling up gaps in criticism available largely in the form of articles and only a few selected full-length works. Existing scholarship on his theatre appears to be seriously deficient in its depth and range failing thereby to offer a fair, consistent and comprehensive view of his mind and art. The relationships which come up for critical examination in this study include those between husband and wife, siblings, different generations, queers and the miscellaneous ones.

An overwhelming number of marriages in his plays, particularly the arranged ones, are characterized by simmering discontents, frustrations, anxieties, tensions and conflicts between husband and wife, caused largely by their emotional, temperamental and attitudinal incompatibilities, further traceable to sources like unhealthy socialization, economic status and sexual orientation. Distorting and disorienting effects of restrictive and oppressive patriarchal values, clashing with the individual’s propensities and choices, particularly those of women, make marriages rather dysfunctional, thus underlining the necessity of mutual trust, acceptance and respect for happy and meaningful marital ties. Relationships between Hasmukh and Sonal in Where There's a Will, Uma and Suresh in Seven Steps Around the Fire, Jairaj and Ratna in Dance Like a Man, Bharati and Patel in Tara, Nitin and Alka, and Jiten and Dolly in Bravely Fought the Queen are some of the examples laying bare these stark realities of marriages in the Indian urban middle class.

Relationships between or among siblings, not a common theme in modern drama, further reveals his insights into human behaviour when he probingly dramatizes the shifting emotions and complex motives in bonds between brother and brother, brother and sister, and sister and sister. The dramatist has brought out, with full force and insight, the sweet and sour realities of this bonding, bringing to light the significance of childhood experiences in shaping an individual’s personal, familial and social
relationships through the examples of bonding between Tara and Chandan in Tara, Sonal and Minal in Where There’s a Will, Kamlesh and Kiran in On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Dolly and Alka, and Jiten and Nitin in Bravely Fought the Queen.

The treatment of conflict between the older and the younger generation, representing traditional values, aspirations and authoritarianism on the one hand and modern sense of individual freedom and inclinations on the other, testifies to Dattani’s dramatic credo of enlightening and provoking the mind of the audience by exposing rampant hypocrisies in relationships. Dattani traces them to generation gap, educational differences and changes in the social and cultural milieu, subtly underlining at the same time, the ways of achieving healthier relations based on sensitivity to and respect for the aspirations, inclinations and values of each other. The dramatization of conflict between fathers and sons in Dance Like a Man and Where There’s a Will, caused by an utter indifference of the patriarchs to the aims and interests of their sons, artistically emphasizes the need of adopting a more humane, flexible, tolerant and accommodative attitude by the old towards the younger generation for their happy and harmonious family and personal life. Baa, in Bravely Fought the Queen, represents the older generation of women, sadistically inflicting emotional pain on Alka and Dolly, her daughters-in-law, mainly because of her own frustrated and agonizing marital experiences.

Dattani’s special knack at exposing hypocrisies and dealing with the taboo issues in a frank, compassionate and diagnostic manner further comes into play in his delineation of the bonds among queers – lesbians, gays, bisexuals and eunuchs. Dattani boldly questions the dominant heterosexual society for stigmatizing and even ostracizing this marginalized section as unnatural and perverted. His plays bring onto the stage, the desperate yearnings of the gays and eunuchs for human relationships, sensitizing thereby the audience about the plight and predicament of this category of human beings. All the characters, except Kiran, in On a Muggy Night in Mumbai and Alpesh and Nitin in Bravely Fought the Queen and Do the Needful respectively represent this sexually deviant group throwing light at the same time on the social, psychological and biological factors determining their orientations.
Through a series of miscellaneous relationships like those between peers, friends, boss and subordinates, communities and even strangers, Dattani enlarges the range of his subject, revealing a vast variety of human ties which one forges and lives through in one’s life. One of the most important among these social ties is the one between the individual and his or her peer group. The study shows how a healthy peer relationship can boost one another’s self esteem but some sort of rejection in this relation may lead to dejection, depression and alienation. The relationships of Tara and Chandan, the two disabled children, with Roopa and Nalini hint at the fault lines which can cause tremendous psychological upheavals, stresses and pains. With a special knack to go beneath the surface, Dattani exposes shocking corruptions plaguing even the noble medical profession. How all ethics and morality are surrendered without any qualms and inhibitions for material considerations is powerfully dramatized through doctor-patient relationship in his play *Tara*. His tendency to question the conventional stereotypes is further evinced by the relationships of Kiran as a mistress to Hasmukh and her role as a mature, understanding, intelligent friend and guide to Hasmukh’s family. Dattani has also brought on stage, the important social arena of work place wherein mainly the power motif distorts relationships between the employer and the employee like Jiten and Nitin on the one hand and Sridhar on the other in *Bravely Fought the Queen*.

His view and vision of Indian society is too critical, comprehensive and realistic to leave out one of the most important relationships between different communities like the Hindus and the Muslims. Once again, he goes to the social, political and psychological roots of tensions and conflicts which have been the bane of Indian life for a pretty long time. His play *Final Solutions*, in particular, is a powerful plea for mutual understanding and respect in the democratic spirit of tolerance, acceptance and accommodation of each other.

Though his plays tend to deal largely with unhappy relationships, the audience often leaves them with a light of hope and faith in human potentials to understand and overcome challenges and obstacles obstructing their search for fulfilling and meaningful
family and social ties. His humanistic vision and affirmative outlook add a special effect to the dramatic power and appeal of his theatre.