The Marginalized Groups in Indian Social Construct: A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract: Dattani is one of the prominent exponents of Indian drama in English (IDE), especially with his contributions in the 90s India when the drama of roots has already made its presence felt and postcolonial studies began a culture study of reclaiming spaces and places, asserting cultural integrity, revising history while questioning the aspects of subversion. This paper is an attempt on how Dattani has responded to the concept of marginality in Indian social construct in the 80s onward when Indian society has made its mark as the largest democracy in the world, yet reeling under several vexing issues, one of them being the problem of social inequality of which marginality forms part of it. He has taken up the taboo subjects like eunuchs, gay/lesbian relations, inter-caste marriages and, gender discriminations. A select drama has been taken up as to show the condition of subalternity of the marginalised groups and how the dramatist has struck the conscience of the society by exposing the hypocrisy of the middle class urban Indian society. The deft use of English as a hybrid form of indigenous language has been a powerful tool in showing the conditions of marginality and class identity.

Keywords: Marginalization, Postcolonial, Subaltern, Hierarchy, Gender, Sexuality, Hegemony

1. Introduction

The term marginalization refers to individual or groups who live at the margin of society. Their situations may be historical or cultural as they suspend between social classes or cultural groups, without being fully integrated to it. The term has different connotations and nuances in the modern era of post colonial, postmodern period and in a world that is predominantly driven by market forces. In cultural anthropology marginalization is a major subject of study in which ethnic groups and their social situations are studied. It may have various forms like class, caste, gender, community and so on at one level and at the other level groups who are subjected to economic and social hardships. These groups may still be marginalised at multiple levels in a country like India which has witnessed tremendous socio-political changes in both pre-independence and post independence period.

Of course, the forms of marginalization may vary. It is generally linked to “the level of development of society; culturally, and as (if not more) importantly, with relation to economics. For example, it would generally be true, that there would exist more marginalized groups in the Third World”, and developing nations, than in the developed/first-World nations. Indeed, there can be a distinction made, on the basis of the choice that one has within this context—those in the Third World who live under impoverished conditions, through no choice of their own (being far removed from the protectionism that exists for people in the First World,) are often left to die due to hunger, disease, and war. One can also add to this various minorities, as well as women. Within the First World, low-income drug addicts stand out as being the most marginalized. This deliberate or chosen marginalization of people carries with it aspects of a so-called “Social Darwinism” (Anup kumar: 3).The concept of marginality rose to its high prominence while modernism held its sway in the world during 19th century and:

“Man, as the Renaissance slogan had it, was the measure of all other things in the universe: while the Western norms of dress, behavior, architecture, intellectual outlook and so on provided a firm centre against which deviation, observations, variations could be detected and identified as Other and marginal”(Barry: 67).
Indian society witnessed a multilayered marginality during colonial period and in the postcolonial scenario in the 20th century. When India emerged as a nation-state, the western concept of marginality began to melt slowly, yet a profound question –whether the subaltern can speak- kept the nation haunting. Gayatri Chakraborty rightly elaborated on the issue through her epoch making post colonial discourse, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak? ‘and she meant that the subalterns are still at the periphery and Dattani in his dramatic discourse attempts to give voice to the voiceless while letting them a push from the margin toward the center.

Mahesh Dattani’s concern of marginality was in the backdrop of Indian social construct beginning at the 80s oneward when Indian society already stood the test of democracy, yet reeling under several vexing issues, one of them being the problem of social inequality of which marginality forms part of it. An effort has been made in Indian Writing in English (IWE) in general to free it from colonial hangover and since 60s the theatre practitioners attempted to give a fresh look of Indian drama putting the invisible issues in the fore unlike the traditional drama that continued to recreate either in the colonial period or in the historical past representing its mythical or allegorical essences. Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq (1964) is one of the prominent examples. Dattani falls into the category of experimental theatre that uses folk and traditional performance genres. It mainly draws attention by its contemporary relevance while representing the urban middle class society in general. The concept of marginalisation issuing from the ‘theatre of roots’ has incorporated all the hidden elements of the middle class society upon which erstwhile theories and practices of marginalization may hinge upon.

Dattani while reflecting on marginality has taken all the threads that divides the society in various strata, one of them being the issues of class struggle. The Bravely Fought the Queen is a case in point. All the three couples of Trivedi family in the play are related in terms of social hierarchy. The relationship of two brothers Jiten and Nitin and their wives Dolly and Alka are strictly on the basis of patriarchy while the third family of Shridhar and Lalitha are placed as inferior in class as they are the employees in the advertising company of the family. The condition of Lalitha is worse as she is subservient to her husband as well as to those two women. Lalitha’s character has a resonance with other minor characters on stage which reflects a similarity of classes with them and the treatment they receive. For example, the characters like Baa, Daksha and the auto driver and the space they share on stage show their inferior class.

It reminds the Marxist theory of class struggle which is always a fact of any given society. For Marx, “All history is the history of class struggle.”(Marx & Historical Materialism). The class that wins the class struggle is the one that in its time is best able to preside over the productive forces. His analysis of history is based on his distinction between the means of production, literally those things, like land, natural resources, and technology that are necessary for the production of material goods and the social relations of production. In other words, the class is determined by the social relationships people enter into as they acquire and use the means of production. Thus, the drama while reflecting marginality also reflects the modern Indian social psyche which is predominantly urban with a distinct flavor of the West as such .Time has come as Dattani showcases through his stage settings and dialogue, let alone the succinctly constructed plot and characters, how Indian drama is evolving and searching for a distinctive identity. The contemporary Indian drama, whether written in vernacular or in English, is part of the larger ‘Indian theatre’, decidedly influenced by, and drawing inspiration from many of its traditional forms, yet it is evolving to the need of the hour.

In the context of marginality what is succinct in the plays of Dattani is the aspect of subalternity what has been deliberated widely in postcolonial studies during 80s.It is very well pointed out that:

The words subaltern and subalternity of course reinforce what the quest of a critical historiography - Marxist, feminist, anti-colonial, subalternist, minority - has long been about: the endeavour to recover lives, and possibilities, and politics that have been marginalised, distorted, suppressed and sometimes even forgotten. They allow us to reinforce the point that not all ‘citizens’ (or human beings) are born equal, that many remain "second class" even when granted the formal status of citizens, and that many are denied formal citizenship altogether- today, and of course over most of human history( The Subaltern: Gyanendra).

The entire post-colonial literary theory moves around the question of subaltern condition. Dattani explores thematically the subaltern condition that continues to plague the modern India. This paper attempts to explain how Dattani as an exponent of modern Indian drama brings the concerns of oppression, marginalisation and subaltern voices closure to the real life experience that keeps happening now. Identity crisis is a major issue in
which the voices of the oppressed section of the society either go unheard or it is choked under domination, social prejudices and myth. Social dynamism is represented lively putting across the archetypal characters, queer resistance, subaltern voices, protests and thus, resounding it truly representative of totality of human experience amid domination, repression, and prejudice. He curiously shows that the marginalised or the subaltern speak as well. An effort has been made to eliminate the difference of drama on paper page and drama on live stage in which the stage is given adequate realistic setting to manifest the cause of marginalised and to capture the roots of the disease of fragmentation of human psyche in the era of declining value.

One way Dattani is convinced that the representation of the subaltern is a relational position in any society with intimate relationship of exercise of power the way power is conceptualized by Foucault who is concerned less with the oppressive aspect of power, but more with the resistance of those the power is exerted upon. The Marxist thinker Louis Althusser is in contrast with Foucault as the former ‘studied mainly how people are oppressed by the state institutions and how they build themselves as individuals through the mystifying action of the ideology’. For Althusser, individuals are just puppets of the ideological and repressive apparatus and power is seen as acting from top downwards, but for Foucault “power relations dissipate through all relational structures of the society. This enables him to build a model of the daily and mundane manners in which power is exerted and contested, as well as an analysis centered on the human individual as an active subject, not as a simple object for the power.” (Sergiu Bălan).

Similarly, in the revolutionary essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak looked into the concerns of subalternity in postcolonial study and she meant to say that the voiceless, the oppressed and the ‘other’ are the subalterns who are not allowed to speak. The term normally used to denote those who were of inferior rank in the army during the colonial period. The exact meaning of the term is disputed though attempts are being made since 80s by subaltern study group to voice the concerns of the subalterns of the society that takes into consideration the matters of sex, gender, class, patriarchal domination, third world feminist discourse and so forth. Spivak argued that marginality has been a major issue which assumes to acquire the status of discipline in postcolonial study. She is of the opinion that the subalterns all over the world remain a voiceless, marginalised section. They are forced to maintain silence against oppression.

Mahesh Dattani as an exponent of modern Indian drama, attempts to portray the archetypal characters that continue to maintain the patriarchal domination. Where There is a Will focuses on how the protagonist Mr. Hasmukh is a typical dictatorial husband, a domineering father and a rubber stamp of his father as a stereotyped patriarchal domination. His submissive wife Sonal and the son Mr. Ajit are representative of subaltern condition who cannot speak and hence marginalised. Hasmukh expresses his authority in the family and attempts to assert himself upon everything as a Big Boss. Ajit the modern young man refuses to be a copy of his father and the father plays his hegemonic power: “If you are you, then you are nowhere. You are nothing, just a big zero. No matter what you do, you will remain zero. Over the years you’ll just keep adding zeros to your zero. Zero, zero, zero” (461). Thus the marginalised are taken always valueless or meaningless in our society. Similarly, the condition of his wife, sonal; daughter and his mistress named Kiran are pathetic as well, for they are always treated as less than human beings.

Ironically, the mistress controlled the man all the way. She substituted a father figure for him and she was the real decision maker. Hasmukh has always attempted to control others will but eventually he himself was under the will of the mistress and thus Dattani so skillfully crafted the characters so as to lend voice to the voiceless and the marginalised speaks in modern Indian society in a different way. At least a beginning has been made and truly it happens. The author’s other plays like Seven Step Around the Fire, On a Muggy night in Mumbai, and Do the Needful speak about how the heterosexual society marginalise the ‘queer’ and never ready to create a space for them. The lesbian and gay people are born as human being in this earth like any other human being but they are denied their normal place and basic societal rights to love and be loved. They are socially degraded, psychologically tortured and turned into a staff that they start pitying upon themselves. What could be worse than this when one loses faith on one’s self! The condition of the hijra community as marginalised society is not new in Indian society as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have such vivid depictions galore. For example, Sita despite being the queen was marginalised and today thousands of girls are named as Sita, yet they are expected as submissive as Sonal’s condition. Further, Draupadi, another brave character, and an women of substance who could be a representative woman of modern India for her self-
assertion against the condition of marginality. She is parallel to modern urban Indian women asserting or in the process of asserting their existence as individuals and as human beings, as against any gendered identity.

_Do the Needful_ exposes the hypocrisy of modern Indian society to the extent of a crime. The romantic comedy revolves around two Gujarati family namely the Patel family and the Gowda family. The protagonist- Alpesh Patel family is a divorced man of thirty years and a gay. He finds Mr. Trilok as his soul mate as he finds all his emotional satisfaction in him. But he is denied his rights first by his own family and then by the society. He is not a debased person in terms of morality but the society takes it to be a moral degeneration. At best he could be defined as psychologically defective or mentally sick. On the other hand Lata Gowda who is proposed for Alpesh is in love with a terrorist. Certainly, the marriages of choice were impossible in society. But Dattani’s theatre celebrates the social dynamics of whole truth against any partial truth and the truth is the call of the religion of blood as put forward by D.H Lawrence in his quest for the dehumanizing effects of modernity. Lawrence confronted issues relating to emotional health, human sexuality and instinct. Dattani makes possible the total experience of human sensibility by arranging the dramatic personae to accept the hasty marriages of social custom and then smoothly deviate from it silently and they pursued their own choices of cohabitation.

Economically, the protagonists belong to upper class society, but socially they stand at the margins. Dattani does not bring them to the centre at once by showing an arranged inter-caste marriage or by an approval for the gay/lesbian relations, but he certainly problematizes the conscious of the Indian society in general about the social restraints and inhibition of such relationship and inter-caste marriages. By exposing Lata and Alpesh as exquisitely uninhibited young and honest human beings, frank and straight in their view of life, Dattani not only surprises the audience at the end by twists and turns of fortune, but also makes it a theme of global concern. It may be inferred here that Dattani dispenses justice to the socially marginalised people and empowers them to be considered as human beings unlike an historic treatment to them as something defectively human or less than human beings. His concern for the marginalised is made clear in his interview:

I write for my milieu, for my time and place middle class and urban Indians… My dramatic tension arises from people who aspire to freedom from society …I am not looking for something sensational, which audiences have never seen before …some subjects, which are under explored, deserve their space. It’s no use brushing them under carpet. We have to understand the marginalised, including the gays. Each of us has a sense of isolation within given contexts. That’s what makes us individual (Quoted in Agrwal: 3)

_Tara_ says that gender inequality is a form of inequality which is distinct from other forms of economic and social inequalities. It stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions. Through this play Dattani brings out the root of gender discrimination by making the woman, the destroyer of another woman’s life. Tara is protagonist in the Play. She is a victim of social prejudices. She has all the quality of an emerging new woman ready to defy age-old prejudices and compulsions. Here emergence as new woman is reflected in her ability to take decision and assert her identity. Further, the _Seven Steps around the Fire_ and _Dance like a Man_, reflects the otherness in Indian society which comes more as the pattern of socio-psychological way of thinking of average Indians. The play claims for the drama divine and a close connection with the Sacred Vedas themselves. The play beautifully deals with the pitiable condition of the _hizras_, their throes of life, yet how they retain a strong sense of individuality in a callously differentiated society of marginality. Dattani, while reflecting the tradition of social realism of the contemporary social problems like intercaste marriage, concerns of the _hijra_ community, untouchability, gender issues and various power relations, has created a panoptic scope and has added a new colour to the Indian drama.

Dattani’s _Final Solutions_ states that Mahesh Dattani has always been concerned with truthful depictions of the Indian society. Here, the marginalisation is on the basis of cultural hegemony. Both the communities of Hindus and Muslims suffer which disturbs the entire social set up. It reflects more on how Indian poor people with little social capital are excluded from the corridors of power and often denied their legitimate position. Dattani attempted to bring to the fore marginalised voices that reflect heterogeneity, not homogeneity with more nuances of subalternity. Thus, he has manifested the diversity within diversity.
Marginalisation is not only found on the counts of socio-economic or political conditions of the characters, but a deconstructive approach of reading would reveal the repressed unconscious within language of the protagonists what has made them the way they are having been locked within the bounds of the sentence of history. Munuswamy in the Seven Steps Around the Fire declines being addressed as brother by Anarkali, a Hijra (Collected Play: 11). Again, Anarkali thinks that Uma cannot be her sister as she is not a hijra:

Anarkali: But you are not a hijra, no? So you will not be my sister!

Uma: of course, we can be sisters!

Anarkali: Where are you and where am I? (Collected Play: 13).

Hijras in the drama have not been addressed as he or she instead as ‘it’. When the hizras are addressed as madam as the case like: “You are madam Champa evokes her guffaws (22)!" since they are not habituated of any gendered addressing. Uma, the research scholar and the social worker views the hizras as belonging to society whereas the Hijra like Champa is surprised: “You see us also as society, no?”(23). It’s a clear satire on the society’s division on marginality as the hizras are not willing to be in the mainstream as the society will always discriminate and make their life hell. Uma’s monologue through telephonic conversation with her professor bears the testimony of the gravity of the divide and a reminder for the society to bridge the gap: “Well, it seems a little too sordid and I find it more and more difficult to do a thorough research … I know there is very little written about them, and now I understand why…” (28).

Curiously, while Uma feels so concerned for the marginalised as she is doing her paper on class and gender related issues, she herself can commit a white collar crime of using a Government vehicle with the constable Munuswamy to drive to Shivajinagar to meet Anarkali’s friend Champa what highlights in a subtle way how white collar crime can be committed in our society just by being placed in higher social and economic ladder as it is given in the drama that Uma is the daughter-in-law of a deputy commissioner and the wife of S.S.P. Dattani narrates the plight of ‘Hijra community’ through the lens of Uma, a sociology scholar who is working on her thesis on social issues. Perhaps, Dattani, in this context, makes a pun on our social system and its power relationship that to unearth the secret of murder of a Hijra could be investigated only by a person of power, or by someone, who is socio-economically superior. Further, one relief is given to her endeavour that she herself is a lonely woman being not so happy in her own marriage and this motive force has driven her to empathize with the Hijra community. Making Anarkali her sister comes from this sympathy.

Her investigation for the tragic death of Kamla, a beautiful Hijra, is the kernel of the drama laying bare the condition of subalternarity. While Uma is as passionate and ardent as to the investigation for the secret of Kamal’s death, other Hijra sisters and particularly Anarkali desist her for such a venture, for they have never been taken seriously by the society, nor their wails have been heard so far! The simple everyday use of language to Uma by Anarkali brings to the fore the complex contrast: “One Hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband” (35).

At the end of the drama Uma wins her victory of getting at the truth that the cause of Kamala’s death is the result of her uncalled for love affairs with Subbu, the son of the powerful politician, Mr. Sharma and he could not accept his son to marry a Hijra, however beautiful and a choice of his son she might be. She was killed stealthily after Subbu married her secretly in a temple. Anarkali knew well that such marriage would bring kamala her tragic death: “She is dead…So many times I warned her…I tried to stop them. I fought with her. I scratched her face, hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her…I was there at their wedding…” (41).

Uma’s research is the Dramatist’s thesis statement that atrocities against women and marginalised are rampant with the nexus of police and politicians. Kamala had her wedding photograph what Mr. Sharma was on hunt to destroy: “A picture of kamala as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him …of course Mr. Sharma could not have it –totally unacceptable. So he arranged to have kamala burned to death” (41). Dattani in such dialogues and settings seems to have left moralist undertones, but he has avoided being didactic. Like Arvind Adiga’s The White Tiger, an attempt of, “…an unflattering portrait of present day India as a society of servitude and rampant corruption…as an attempt to temper the society with the vision of justice against the brutal injustice at large in a vein of what writers like Balzac, or Dickens did in the 19th
century” (Bhadury: 36), Dattani too has done the same to lend a voice through an Indianised English to the voiceless: “Anarkali, Champa and all the Hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamala…The police made no arrests…” (Collected Play: 42).

A shift to indigenous English was a daunting task as Dattani challenged the stereotype of Indian English drama making it distinct not only in its character and setting but also giving it a language which is free from colonial hangover and the same is stated by him as:

A lot of the damage colonization has done is reflected in the theater, in the English language. The way most people speak the English language, most of it is imitative, there is an embarrassment about speaking it with your own background, and there is a need to sound different, to sound British (Mee, 1997:25).

The motive of making English language quite familiar to Indians and close to its flora and fauna is double fold: to create a distinctive genre of Indian writing in English (IWE) and to create a heteroglossia for making the voiceless heard. In the use of English both the traditional English and modern Indian idioms have been mixed so as to make a feel of it as the language of the masses and whoever reads it s/he may feel a common identity with the dramatic personae. In other terms, Dattani attempted to demystify any hyphenated identity of any short. The deft use of English is also necessary to deal with the taboo subjects like eunuchs or marginal people in a way to deconstruct the age old social practices while unmasking inherent bias and prejudices against the marginal. The powerful metaphors and everyday language suddenly draws the readers’ attention to contrasting situations of Indian society which gives English language a stamp of Indian cultural product via the discourse of common people or the marginalised. Dattani himself admits the same in an interview: “It’s not that I have a political motive to promote Indian English, but it is a part of Indian culture, so it has to be given it’s reflect in India and in the world” (Mee, 1997:26).The plays of Dattani are perhaps most satisfactory when in subtle ways they suggest that there might be more to life than the bleak or tragic course of events they so often realistically and rightly present: when they leave a window open for the possibility of redemption, or a better life.

II. Conclusion

Almost all the plays of Dattani centers on the theme of marginality prevailing in our society, be it gay/lesbian relations, caste-class divide, gender discrimination or women and voiceless people. The handling of apparently taboo subjects with the deft use of language, sound and stage settings has certainly shaken the conscience of the make believe society of ours. It seriously questions as to the gravity of the injustices meted out to the marginal people and the hypocrisy of the so called urban India. The controversial issues and the challenges thereupon on the society are likely to make a change of heart of educated middle class India. After all, Dattani’s efforts will remain as a milestone in the process.

References