



Exploration of dilemmas in familial relationships in Dattani's *Do the needful*

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Abstract

Homosexuality is a sensitive issue which is bitterly unaccepted in India. Many social activists have come forward to voice out for their dignified entity so as to accommodate them in the society for their peaceful stay. Mahesh Dattani through his plays has tried to bring out the plight of the homosexuals in order to sensitize the readers about the trauma faced by them due to the rigid conventions and dogmas imposed by the society. On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, *Do the needful* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* are some of his remarkable plays which take the lead of presenting the homosexual relationships and their state of minds. The present paper is an attempt to explore the dilemmas in familial relationship in the classic play *Do the needful*.

The depiction of real life situations of Indian society in the plays of Mahesh Dattani is a crucial contribution to society and literature as well. His audience and readers become intensely sensitized towards the pain, sufferings and also the happiness of his characters. This is aptly reflected in the portrayal of his characters named Alpesh and Lata in *Do the needful*. Dattani holds up a mirror to society about their conduct towards the minority group and the marginalized sects. Mahesh Dattani is a powerful artist who brings out explicitly some as yet untouched upon, but prevailing social issues of Indian society in order to generate sympathy and empathy for them. The real color of Indian society which pretends to be culturally bound, in reality doesn't leave any opportunity to let down its own culture. Dattani skillfully uses internal monologues to bring out the turmoil faced by the principal characters and he successfully brings out the real feelings of the characters in their cultural context by introducing the particular words in various languages other than English language to highlight the real emotions of the characters.

Keywords: sensitize, homosexual, culture, empathy, internal monologues

Introduction

Do the needful is a splendid piece of art by Mahesh Dattani, in which he exhibits his concerns for the traditional customs prevailing in society. It was his first radio play and was well accepted by the audience. Mahesh Dattani has sketched all the characters in the plays with extreme sensitivity. The selection of the names of his characters are very simple and common and often found repeated as well in his own plays e.g. Salim in *Do the needful* and in *Seven Steps Round the Fire*, and Lata in *Do the needful* and in *Dance Like a Man*.

Marriage is one of the most sacred institutions of any religion but in our country the compulsion of getting married somehow, according to the norms of society brings the pressure on the parents which leads to a sorry state of affairs. This play brings mixed phenomena of double standards. The parents (Gujrati Family) of Alpesh, a divorcee, are desperate for his marriage at the cost of compromising with their cultural norms with a girl belonging to another caste i. e. Kannadigas against his will because they want him to settle down in life on grounds of his marital life. Similar situation is set for the character Lata of the same play who is also forced into marriage at the age of 24 to conform to the social norms though against her desire.

The title brings out the Indian parents' devotion towards their children in doing the needful for them. They hope to see their children settle down with a suitable partner and become outstanding and respectable members of society. Arranged marriages have been successful in Indian society for centuries

but in modern time there has been a shift in attitudes. Young people are rebelling against doing the needful according to their parents' dictates and if forced, are ready to *Do the needful* but without compromising with their own wishes. The concerns of marriage are plotted very realistically, through the conversation between the parents (Kannadigas) of Lata, the female protagonist of the play. She has an affair with Salim, a Muslim boy, disliked and condemned by her parents. In order to extricate her from such an unsafe liaison with a person from Muslim community, they decide to bind her in the ties of marriage with Alpesh (Divorce). The concern and societal fear is greatly expressed by Lata's parents, Devraj and Prema Gowda in the following lines which justifies the title:

Devraj Gowda. Then I will confirm with them?

Prema Gowda. We need to get the gate painted. And buy a microwave.

Lata. Please Amma! Please don't insist I agree to this! You are ruining my life.

Prema Gowda. You should have thought about our lives before sleeping with that terrorist.

Devraj Gowda. Lata, go to your room.

Prema Gowda. You have ruined our lives (Collective plays 122).

The aspect of homosexuality is finely knitted in the plot of the play. Trauma and pain of being parted from a loved one is well demonstrated through the leading characters of the play.

Do the needful discusses the various concerns of daily routine with a sensitive message in a very graceful manner which gives the audience awareness about the social adjustments through their bonding with the characters.

Dattani is an outstanding artist, the way he brings two families with different cultural backgrounds together and creates the situation of inter-caste marriage is very stimulating for the audience. Alpesh's father and Baa have just one concern in their life and that is the second marriage of Alpesh. Alpesh is a homosexual and he is in a relationship with Trilok. Alpesh's first marriage fails due to his homosexual association:

Homosexuality is romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behavior between members of the same sex or gender. As a sexual orientation, homosexuality is "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions" to people of the same sex. It also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions (Wikipedia).

In Indian society homosexual are not accepted with dignity. This fear stops Alpesh from announcing his homosexual relationship with Trilok. Therefore, reluctantly he agrees to meet Lata as projected in the following lines:

Alpesh. Yes. All right. I give up. If you like her, I will marry her.

Kusumben Patel. It is not a question of what I like or don't like. When we are begging, what is the point in hiding the begging bowl?

Alpesh. Baa, I want to ask you something.

Kusumben Patel. Yes.

Alpesh. Is it.....is it very important for me to get married?

Kusumben Patel. Hmmm

Alpesh. Trilok, you can't say I didn't try (Collective play 125).

The cultural milieu of the said play also contributes much to maintaining the progress of the play towards its ultimate ending. The Kannadigas and the Gujaratis have great contrast in their lifestyles and cultural orientations but keeping in mind the prosperity of their children, they overlook all those contradictions. It is brilliantly brought out that if the daughter in law or son in law is chosen with the agreement of the parents, the cultural difference and even the difference in the caste could be ignored. Generation gap and combat between opposing views of life can be noticed in the play. Music of M.S. Subbalakshmi, L. Subramanian and music of the album I love Bombay version of I love Paris could be heard in just one play which shows the diverse taste of choice of music as well. Dattani's choice of words from different languages is used to convey the differences in cultures among the various states of India. The Patels find themselves at a loss when confronted with the words of different language spoken by the Coconut Seller and the Mali. The easy familiarity between the Coconut Seller and the Gowdas comes as a cultural shock for the Patels who are unaware of the severe scrutiny that Alpesh is

subjected to. If Alpesh and Lata are children of two different cultural backgrounds, how are they expected to live a lifetime together as their parents have planned? The Gowdas objection to Salim on differences in background seems odd on seeing this. When the Coconut Vendor is knocked off his bicycle he curses heartily in Kannada, abusing the north Indians for having come to Bangalore and ruining the city; his volatile words are luckily not understood by Chandrakant Patel, for it would have created a lot of ill-will. The following words are shouted out by the Coconut Vendor showing his anger towards the people from North India who have invaded his mother land.

Coconut Vendor. Those sons of demons! Who asked them to come here? (Shouts after the car.) Go away!..... We don't want you, you sons of whores! Born in the most inauspicious time!..... Kaliyuga! Kaliyuga! Our mother is being raped and her own sons are watching...! (Collected Play 141)

The play has its own style and flair when it comes to the switching to the different culture, place, space or character. The monologues of Alpesh and Lata bring out the dialogue with their inner-selves. Alpesh suffers in his first marriage and the audience gets to know the reason for this through his desperate longing for Trilok. Thinking and dreaming of Trilok sustains him through the agony his parents are putting him through. His soul reaches out to his partner with his unspoken words. Lata also silently gives vent to her feelings for Salim and it is Dattani's masterful technique of inner dialogue which inform the audience about her personal life. Though both Trilok and Salim do not appear in the play they are brought to life by the monologues of Alpesh and Lata.

The uniqueness experienced at the end of the play when Alpesh and Lata agree to the marriage having different desired goals in the pretext of the bonding of being with their chosen partners. The unexpected revelation of Alpesh's homosexuality in front of Lata, orients her towards this marriage. Alpesh and the Mali (Gardener) are found in compromising situation by Lata. The following conversation makes it clear to the audience about their sexual orientation:

Mali. Aiyo!

Scramble.

Alpesh. What are you doing here?

Lata. You!

(Thought.) They were..... doing it!

(Speech.) You are a homo! (Collective plays 153)

Mahesh Dattani has given a vivid portrayal of both the generations who are working towards their own selfish aspirations. On one side the parents of Alpesh and Lata are striving to find the best match for their children to settle them in society so that they get the proper position and status in society and on the other side we see Alpesh and Lata, who are both mature enough to take decisions for their personal lives but due to the circumstances at one point they agree to the marriage but decide to continue with their private lives. Lata wants Alpesh to take the responsibility of saying no to her parents and even Alpesh desires the same from Lata. But at

last both get married and pave the way of not sacrificing their love for the sake of such a namesake marriage. They share a comfortable relationship with each other as is revealed in the following concluding lines of the play:

Lata. Where do we meet up?

Alpesh. You've got my cell phone number, haven't you? Give me a call when you're through.

Lata. What do we tell baa?

Alpesh. You'll do the shopping, right? Just let me know all the shops you have been to and tell her I took you there. Here, use my credit card at Benzer's. I will go there tomorrow and sign the vouchers. Don't go the temple, the poojari knows my dad. He is sure to tell him I wasn't with you.

Lata. I won't have time anyway. I have enough to do.

(Thought.) Salim!

Alpesh (thought). Trilok! (Collected Plays 158)

Mahesh Dattani always depicts interesting and burning issues of the society. The noticeable features of his plays are their simplicity and vivacity. Special focus on the title of *Do the needful* showcases cultural diversity, impact of regional language and psyche of the leading characters which maintains and holds the audience's interest all through the play. Undoubtedly, this play reserves its place among one of the best radio plays written by Mahesh Dattani.

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