

Tradition versus Modernity in the Indian Marriage Custom In Mahesh Dattani's *Do the Needful*

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary Indian dramatists have made bold innovations and contributed comprehensively and commendably for the amplification of the Indian drama. Mahesh Dattani is the first English playwright to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award. He dares to expose the naked and agonizing reality of the marginalized class, like gays, eunuch, homosexuality, child sexual abuse, gender inequalities, religious intolerance, and hypocrisy about HIV victims, etc., that constitutes the contemporary Indian family, as well as afflict the society the world over. Dattani chooses male homosexuality and gives the Indian marginalized class a voice to articulate, probably for the very first time in the Indian theatre through his plays. Dattani uses this off-beat theme of gay for his first radio play *Do the Needful*, probably the first Indian play to be broadcasted by BBC, boldly dealing with this subject. *Do the Needful*, a romantic comedy play is built on the theme of tradition versus modernity in the Indian marriage custom. The paper intends to interpret the play in terms of plot that has two levels: one is the anxiety of the parents to settle marriage as a method to get rid of their social debt; other is, the conflict of both the leading characters, specific to their own choices.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Indian Society, Male Homo-sexuality

I. INTRODUCTION

The galaxy of contemporary Indian drama is excelled by the distinguished dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Asif Currimbhoy, Badal Sircar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad who have all contributed to the modernization of the face of the Indian theatre. They have made bold innovations and contributed comprehensively and commendably for the amplification of the Indian drama. They broke the barrier of regional works at national level languages and produced many good works at national level for they dramatized universal aspects of Indian human life. Play in India was considered as a plant growing in a desert, which is insufficiently watered by India's different cultures and languages, but gradually, their collective efforts developed it in a powerful mode of expression and gave a new dimension to the Indian theatre. An analysis of the postcolonial Indian English drama is incomplete without considering the prolific and immensely penetrating genius of Mahesh Dattani, who is certainly a new and unconventional voice in the modern Indian theatre. Following the tradition established by the prominent dramatists of the 20th century like Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, Dattani dares to expose the naked and agonizing reality of the marginalized class, like gays, eunuch, homosexuality, child sexual abuse, gender inequalities, religious intolerance, and hypocrisy about HIV victims, etc., that constitutes the contemporary Indian family, as well as afflict the society the world over. John McRae, Special Professor of the University of Nottingham, and the Italian director expressed his views, "Very few dramatists are able to give this sense of a whole society touching the participants in the on-stage drama – it recalls Ibsen at his social best." (CP.45) Dattani has developed a unique capacity to read the rumblings of contemporary urban Indian society and smell the perennial clash between tradition and modernity.

Unlike Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar, who have glittered in the scenario of Indian drama in English through the tropes of translation, Mahesh Dattani has written directly into English, and English may be considered as his mother tongue. *Angeli Multani* in her statement presents her tribute to Dattani's craft for using the language of his characters, "One of the most striking aspects of Dattani's characters is that they use English which is neither stilted, nor archaic, nor uncomfortably directed only towards a really elite and upper-class audience. Looking at the history of Indian drama in English, Mahesh Dattani stands out as perhaps the one of very few (if not the only), and certainly, one of the most commercially successful Indian English playwrights." (Multani 12) This leading dramatist (*i.e.* Mahesh Dattani) is the first playwright in English to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's most prestigious award for the literary excellence. The multi-layered images of the contemporary Indian social life are portrayed in his extra-ordinary sixteen plays extant in the two volumes entitled *Collected Plays* and *Collected Plays-Volume II*, published by Penguin, as follows:

- **Seven Stage Plays:** Where There's a Will (1988), Dance Like a Man (1989), Tara (1990), Bravely Fought the Queen (1991), Final Solutions (1992-93), On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998), and Thirty Days in September (2001).

- **Six Radio Plays:** *Do the Needful* (1997), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998), *The Swami and Winston* (2000), *A Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* (2000), *Clearing the Rubble* (2000), *Uma and the Fairy Queen* (2003).
- **Three Screen Plays:** *Mango Soufflé* (2002), *Morning Raga* (2004), *Ek Alag Mausam* (2005).

Nowadays, radio plays are increasingly becoming popular across the world. The main significance of the radio play is that the stage performance is not required for it and its audience is invisible and they may be located in the remote areas of the world and can enjoy it while doing their other works. The stage play needs direct or physical participation of its audience. The listeners of radio/ audio play may be more in numbers than the audience of stage play. Thus, the scope for the radio broadcast is quite wide and vast. Dattani may be the only one contemporary Indian playwright who has shown his skill in drafting English radio plays along with several stage and screen plays.

II. DO THE NEEDFUL

Usually Indian literature has ignored the theme of homosexuality. Often Indian writers have shown courage to suggest male homosexuality indirectly. Mahesh Dattani chooses this untouched issue and gives the Indian marginalized class a voice to articulate, probably for the very first time in the Indian theatre through his plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Dattani chooses this off-beat theme of gay in the male dominated society for his first radio play *Do the Needful*, broadcasted on 14th August, 1997 on B.B.C. Radio 4. It is probably the first Indian play to be broadcasted by BBC, boldly dealing with the subject of homosexuality. It is a dramatic narrative to defend the societal conflicts and familial relationship of the gays. *Do the Needful*, a family play which may also be considered as a romantic comedy, is built on the theme of tradition versus modernity in the Indian marriage custom. The marital relationship is given a new twist to suit both the wife and the husband. This distinguishes *Do the Needful* from Dattani's other plays dealing with only gay relationship. In this play, he expresses his serious concern over the society's concept of arranged marriage. The play centers on the negotiations for an arranged marriage between Alpesh, a Gujarati man who is a 'thirty plus and divorced guy' and indulges in gay relationship, yet he is compelled to marry Lata, a South Indian Kannada woman to cater to the expectations of his parents. While Lata 'twenty four and notorious' has her own reasons to remain indifferent to Alpesh, as she loves Salim, a Muslim boy, while the prospective groom is in love with a man named Trilok. To avoid the consequences of these two unacceptable relationships, both the families are anxious about their children who have ruined their family name and fame and are desperate for their hasty marriage as soon as possible. Through the following statements of Kusumben Patel, the helplessness of both the families is pointed out:

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? (125)

KUSUMBEN PATEL. It is our duty to see that they are happy. (151)

The existence of extra marital relationship and the premarital sex in Indian culture is also presented in the play, as happens in the leading female character of the play, i.e. Lata's case. As for as Lata's parents are concerned having premarital sex even with a boy of other caste or religion, doesn't matter; but it must be done behind the curtain and should not be disclosed to their particular caste or religion. When they come to know that Lata is having love affair and physical relation with a Muslim boy, they try their best to conceal it from their caste people when they could not do it; they simply became "broadminded" to select a bridegroom from other caste. But they were never interested in what Lata's choice was. They tearfully threatened their daughter to obey their decision. The plot of this radio play has two levels: one is the anxiety of the parents to settle marriage as a method to get rid of their social debt; other is, the conflict of both the leading characters, specific to their own choices. Dattani explores the crisis with a comprehensive realization of the helplessness of human ambitions and the desperation of Patel Family which is explicit in the following statement of KUSUMBEN PATEL:

If they have something to hide, then ... (*Pause.*) If not, we will find some poor Patel girl – who will be grateful to enter our household ... Who will not expect too much from you. (126)

Alpesh and Lata express their unwillingness for the family oriented arranged marriage. As Lata pleaded her mother and expressed her desperation to live with Salim. Her helplessness and her parents' wrath are well expressed in the following conversation:

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

PREMA GOWDA. You should have thought of our lives before sleeping with that terrorist!

DEVRAJ GOWDA. Lata, go to your room.

PREMA GOWDA. You have ruined our lives! (122)

Alpesh, who is a homo knows and realizes that he can't lead a sexually peaceful life with a girl. So, in a hidden manner, he told it to her mother Kusumben Patel. He finds himself lost in the chaos of personal choices and the dreams of his conventional parents:

ALPESH. Is it - - it is very important for me to get married? I don't want to get married?

KUSUMBEN PATEL. Hmm.

ALPESH (*thought*). Trilok, you can't say I didn't try.

KUSUMBEN PATEL. Why do you ask me that?

ALPESH. What if ... I don't want to get married.

KUSUMBEN PATEL. Why don't you want to get married?

ALPESH. Because I am happy being alone. (125)

When he is implicitly threatened and emotionally blackmailed by his mother with tear bombs, he surrenders and agrees to get married and says, "Yes. All right. I give up. If you like her, I will marry her." (125)

Today, Indian culture and society don't allow a human being's basic right to live of his/ her choice. The society made its own values and customs and it asked others to follow it or at least to live up to its expectations at least in day light. Only on the basis of the values and customs, the people are suppressed. Both the leading characters of this play are compelled by their parents to fulfill their parents' wishes by marrying. Though these two parents have their own caste honour they cannot uphold this in their children's marriage due their children's well known 'immoral' act. The Gujrati family comes to Mysore to settle Alpesh marriage with a Gowda girl, and on the way, Chandrakant Patel gracefully expresses the richness and fame of Gowda family: It has changed so much. Look! That is the Vidhana Soudha. It was built by a Gowda. (127)

The glimpses of dowry system that still continue in the Indian marriage custom are also presented in this play as the Patel family though it is the groom's mother KUSUMBEN PATEL or the groom himself, the thought of dowry strikes their mind, and is articulated in the following statements:

KUSUMBEN PATEL. Will they give this Vidhana Sabha as dowry? (127)

ALPESH. No. (*Pause.*) Will you bring Mali as your dowry? (156)

In their very first meeting, Devraj Gowda insists Alpesh to speak something about their press and wants to impress the Gowda family by the hypocrite as well as glorious saga of the Patel family. But, Alpesh is honest and unassuming, and he feels that nothing is worth sharing, and he thinks to himself:

ALPESH. (*Thought*). What could I say to them? Daddy had his colleague approve the loan. We paid enough bribes to get the damn thing off. We hired the underworld to have Grandpa's tenants evicted ... I have lying and liars. ... every time I speak, I am lying. (136)

The character of Mariappa, a coconut vendor presents the conventional spirit of the people who oppose any idea that brings change in the well-established norms of society. He is also against inter-caste marriage:

COCONUT VENDOR. I am a son of this soil, this is my land! ... (*To Devraj Gowda.*) And you! You we have served for so long, you give your daughters to them. Aiyo! Big people! Modern people! ... Kalyuga! Kalyuga! Our mother is being raped and her own sons are watching ...! (141)

In the night, when Alpesh was smoking cigarette at the back yard of farm house at a hidden and dark place, he was seen by Lata. Alpesh requests her not to reveal it before his parents. But he is relaxed to know that Lata is also a hidden smoker and she comes to join him. So they make an agreement-

ALPESH. Teri bhi chup,meri bhi chup. ... 'Your silence and mine as well' (142)

Their concentration on smoking is broken by a drumbeat and Lata informs Alpesh: "That's Mariappa and his gang. Drunk, Mariappa beats that drum when he is really angry with the whole world. Which is quite often." (142)

This statement of Lata also helps the reader/ audience that the lower class people who are related to the soil and they also consider it as their mother land, but in reality they are frustrated people who are quite anxious with the modernization. Further, Lata discloses the reason for this drumbeat that the fantasy world of Bombay attracted Mariappa's daughter that she ran away to Bombay to join the movies. So he feels humiliated and hides his face from the villagers and expresses his agony by drum beat. In the same way, Alpesh is also not happy with the whole society and he also wants to articulate his anguish by beating the drum: "Let's go. Now. I want to listen - perhaps he will let me beat his drum!" (143) Then the play covers the exterior part of the farm where both families show their affection with cows and nature. Meanwhile Mali, again a representative of the labor class, comes and his conversation with them expresses his attachment with cows and loyalty to his duty. Thereafter Lata and Alpesh are again compelled by their parents to go to see Gauri's calf. While moving towards cowshed, both are obsessed with finding the way to express their feelings:

LATA. (Thought) I had the chance! I couldn't lose it. I had to tell him about you, then or never.
ALPESH. (Thought) What could I say, Trilok? How would I tell her reject me? (149)

But it is Lata who initiates to reveal the truth. She tells Alpesh about her love for another man:

LATA. Look. I don't want to marry you. I am in love with someone else.

ALPESH. (Thought) That was good of her. (Pause speech) Can we sit down somewhere? (149)

Lata asks him to keep on walking to see Gauri's calf. Alpesh is lost in thinking but he doesn't dare to reveal his reality of being a homosexual. His silence persecutes Lata and she wants to know his opinion on this issue. But Alpesh is quite happy by her confession-

ALPESH. Good I am glad you don't want to marry me. Because I don't want to marry you either.

LATA. Are you saying that because you feel hurt that I am rejecting you?

ALPESH. Bullshit. I am glad you brought it up. If you hadn't, I would have. (149-150)

After making their intentions clear to each other, both start discussing over how to avoid this marriage. Alpesh suggests her to tell her mother that she doesn't like him or tell the truth that she loves someone else. But both the characters don't have courage to disclose their reality to their parents:

ALPESH. I think we have a problem. I can't really say no to this arrangement either.

LATA. One of us has got to do it! It will have to be you.

ALPESH. I don't know. I don't care.

LATA. Oh! This is no use. If we do get married, I will give you hell! That's a promise! (151)

When Lata finds that though Alpesh doesn't dare to reject her, she finally decides to run away to fulfill her dream of living with Salim, ... I had to run away. (151) While running away from her house, she thinks only for herself and wants to say her last goodbye to everything related to her. "... For once I was thinking of myself and myself only ... Until I thought of Gauri." (152), and then she decides to see Gauri for the last time. She moves towards the cowshed where she hears the sound of someone groaning and when she goes to Alpesh's room, she is shocked to see Alpesh being homo and exploiting Mali for sexual pleasure:

LATA. You! (Thought) They were...doing it! (Speech) You are a homo. (P.153)

Mali is highly frightened and begs Lata not to reveal it before anyone and his plead shows how the gay people are worried to hide their identity and humiliated by the society:

MALI. If the villagers come to know, I will not be able to go to the market. If appa doesn't kill me, I will kill myself! ... (153)

Mali stops her to run away and insists her not to dishonour her esteemed family and requests her to marry Alpesh. Only then, Alpesh accepts his inability to give her sexually happy married life and remarks: "How ridiculous! I can never make you happy." (155) When Alpesh comes to know that Lata is running away, he is very much happy and wants to help her in any way: "Oh, great! So you are running away! Thank you. Mali and I will help you get on a bus..." (155). This incident boosts Lata and she changes her plan to run away.

LATA: Why should I run away? Mali has made me see sense. (155)

LATA: What was that Hindi expression you'd used? Something about your silence and mine as well ...

ALPESH (weakly). No.

LATA. Think about it ... If we do the needful ...

Pause.

ALPESH. No. I mean, no, I can't marry you.

LATA. Are you going to say no to your parents then?

ALPESH. No. (Pause) Will you bring Mali as your dowry? (155-156)

Now Lata comes to an agreement with Alpesh as they should marry for the sake of family and patriarchal dominance but later they may meet their respective love mates because Alpesh is a homo who is not interested to have sex with a girl and Lata is interested in Salim, but they can't challenge their parents' decisions. So if they marry, she can have life with Salim, Alpesh also can be homo. They decide to marry each other as per their parents' desires under the hidden agenda of teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup.

At the end of the play, Lata and Alpesh go out but to the different places. They discuss about their reunion after their business is over and the play ends with Alpesh thinking of Trilok and Lata thinking of Salim.

LATA: (Thought) Salim!

ALPESH: (Thought) Trilok! (158)

Like all the best love stories, the hero and heroine end up getting married, but the road to marital bliss is full of the most unexpected twists and turns. The dramatic narrative shows the tension and unrest prevailing in the minds of all the characters. The two families meet, one from the north and the other from the south; they are united in this play with much mutual one-upmanship, and gradually, the hidden demerits of the Indian arranged marriage custom is portrayed in the play through the matter of dowry, inter-caste marriage, and the reluctant voice of the gays. Originally a radio play, that deals with the shared spaces between women and queer men under the pressure of social norms to conform and live in ways alien to their nature. The dramatic narrative progresses through interior and exterior spaces. Actually, they are the two levels of the mental spectrum of parents and mental spectrum of the children, but the interior space dealing with individual's free will and choice is hidden. It is yearning to express under the weight of exterior space dealing with the society/parental mindset. What parents think good/proper is revealed through exterior mode. And what Alpesh/ Lata thinks is revealed through interior channel. Exterior device can be deemed as the curtain to veil the internal reality of human mind and psyche. The play alerts us about the excessive parental pressure for conforming to the tradition and conventions of society. The title of the play is very brief and attractive. It is very suggestive and also a little ironical. At last these two families of Lata and Alpesh did the needful. Now the two characters who are suffering with the same problem (Being given freedom) meet as part of their parents' doing the needful. Chandrakant Patel uses this title phrase "to do the needful" in his letter to Devraj Gowda – "It is better that we meet personally for all parties concerned, to do the needful." (120) On the other hand, Lata extremely dislikes this phrase – "Do the needful.' I hate it when they say that." (123)

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The play *Do the Needful* decodes the complexity of homosexual relationship in our Indian society which looks contemptuously at such relationships. The main characters of the play Alpesh and Lata are quite unconventional in their outlook and their parents are people of quite conventional bent of mind. With the radical vision of Mahesh Dattani, he expands the range of Indian theatre and brings it close to the revolution in modern theatre at global level. India may be considered as a blind follower of the Western lead and it appears through his plays. Now the Indian society, gradually, has started accepting the fact of the existence of the marginalized class, like gays, eunuch, homosexual, and lesbian. Dattani not only makes a suggestive experiment with his dramatic art to explore the hidden recesses of human consciousness but also has achieved its target of universality. Within the framework of dramatic structure he tries to investigate the identity crisis of the gays who occupy no honourable space in social order. In *Do the Needful*, Dattani deals with the traditional theme of Indian marriage. The marriage negotiation of Alpesh and Lata indicates the changing trend of Indian society in which marriages take place. The dominance of modernity, rationalism in socio-cultural realm of life and milieu gives birth to the inter-caste marriage. Though this play has been written for the British audience, he chooses the Indian setting and the Indian system of arranged marriage, as he is worried of the deterioration of Indian culture. Dattani is capable to represent the inner conflict, and what is going in the leading character's mind through the technique of 'thought' and it expresses the inside story of the characters before audience in a very excellent way. This thought technique is frequently used throughout the play. In the negotiation for marriage, the self-expression of Lata and Alpesh's inner conflict and helplessness are also presented through this technique that helps the audience to be familiar with the emotions and thinking of these characters. The following quotes underscore this aspect of the play:

LATA (*thought*). Salim, I know you are allowed four wives - ... I will have to be content keeping you as a lover. ... What if you have to go back to Kashmir? ... I will have to find another lover. I can have more than four ... (126)

LATA (*thought*). I had the chance! I couldn't lose it. I had to tell him about you, then or never.

ALPESH (*thought*). What could I say, Trilok? How would I tell her to reject me? (149)

Alpesh wants to conceal his homosexual identity in order to get married to Lata who comes to know about Alpesh's true identity later. However, she marries Alpesh so that she can continue her love affair with Salim. Alpesh's homosexuality is revealed to Lata when she surprises him and the gardener of her family having sex in the cowshed, just as she is about to run away to Salim. At first horrified, she subsequently decides that the best way to deal with the situation is to marry Alpesh, so that they can lead separate sexual lives and also keep up the appearance of a happy couple. If Alpesh is given his freedom by the society and state to be homo to lead a sexually satisfied life, he would never agree to get married. But really as a subaltern, he gives fullfledged freedom to his wife though he has horn on his forehead. Through the broad dimension of inter-caste marriage between Gujarati and Kannadigas, Dattani explores the attributes of the forceful marriage custom that covers the Indian society and ultimate revelation of extra-marital affair. In spite of being a homosexual individual, Alpesh is forced to marry a girl; and in spite of being a lover of a muslim boy, Lata is forced to marry Alpesh. Another very remarkable point regarding Salim is that Dattani conveys the typical Indian traditional mentality

concerning a muslim boy. He may not be a terrorist, but if involved in any act which is not allowed by the society, he may be considered as a terrorist in India.

The ultimate message of the text is that the people should do the needful act not according to the traditional rules but according to individual's choice/ will; otherwise marriage will always be a cage. Forced harmony will ultimately bring the conflict which no one can control. It is presented in the conversation of Alpesh and his mother as follows:

ALPESH. What happened with my last marriage...

KUSUMBEN PATEL. Yes? What do you want to say?

ALPESH. You don't want it to happen again, do you?

Pause.

KUSUMBEN PATEL. Are you threatening me that it will happen again?

ALPESH. I am suggesting that you should be prepared for that. (Pause.) She wanted the separation. It was not in my control!

KUSUMBEN PATEL. Oh. I see. And you feel ... it might happen again?

ALPESH. It might. (126)

Through the experience of Alpesh, Dattani concludes that gays suffer because they don't have courage to face society and can't make their relationship acceptable.

IV. SUMMING UP

The plays of Dattani offer fine post colonial analysis. He focuses on the tension and turbulence of the characters resulting from demolition of human hopes and aspirations under the name of healthy socio-cultural practices. His contribution to social factors, economic advancement, political agenda, cultural consequences, religious needs and subaltern's reluctant voice is tremendous. He longs to focus on an ultimate change in the society; change is the main motto that he tries to follow. He has adopted the genre as a more practical means to present serious familial, social, cultural and political issues, and the issues pertaining to oppressed ones, marginalized class to bring Indian theatre nearer the real life conditions. Madhu Jain is right in looking at "thoughts of Dattani as an authentic contemporary voice whose plays are rooted in contemporary urban experience." This play is a fabric of complex relationships, which exposes the fact that the institution of marriage today has lost its sanctity and is nothing but a compromise to promote personal ends. It also brings to the fore the ideas that gender terrorism affects the lives of the gay, who are forced to live their lives within the norms of a heterosexual society, and the young are forced to be norm-bound. "Change doesn't happen overnight," says Dattani, "we grow liberal after not because we want to, but have to". (Vandana Dutta, 157)

Thus, the play *Do the Needful* focuses on the shared spaces between women and the gay in the society which predominantly promotes the patriarchal family set up and discourages any change that challenges the established and existing structure of it. This shows that Alpesh and Lata are compelled to marry each other by their parents. So they both compromise to "do the needful". This psychology is prevalent in almost many Indian homosexuals. The play makes the audience/ viewer/ reader look at this reality from a fresh perspective.

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