

Mahesh Dattani's *Me and My Plays*

Reviewed by Prof. Jagdish Batra

Mahesh Dattani is widely acknowledged as a leading playwright in India. His plays have been a creditable addition to the genre of Indian English Drama in our times. His collections of plays titled *Collected Plays*, Volume I and II were published in 2000 and 2005 respectively. After some gap, we have an anthology titled *Me and My Plays*. In the two plays included in this anthology – “Where did I leave my purdah” and “The big fat city”, Dattani hits hard on the human failings, whether these be personal hypocrisy or societal prejudices.

It is not the first time that he has done so; in fact, in several of his plays, like “Bravely fought the queen”, “Dance like a man”, “Seven steps around the fire”, etc., fakery in individual life forms a constant sub-stratum. His plays remind one of G.B. Shaw who also wrote didactic plays and was a critic of this very element even though such an attack happening in a drama becomes doubly fake – the actors faking a character and then the script-bound character too duplicating the duplicity of real life!

The present book of two plays begins with a longish but much desired introduction by the author in which he shares his views on dramaturgy and the philosophy that guides him. In an interesting reference to his first play *Where There's a Will* – a hilarious one employing magic realism - staged in Bangalore, whereas the audience split in laughter, the critics “did not laud my attempt at original writing, hitherto unheard of in English language theatre in India.” The reference is to his use of the Indian English accent that his actors used as per his direction. This underlined for Dattani the slavish mentality of the drama critics who were more concerned about pucca British accent without realizing that it would have been understood by a limited number of people.

Dattani also reveals that his own knowledge of the Indian dance form of Bharatnayam (he is an accomplished dancer also) helped him a lot to understand the part played by *bhava* and *rasa* in a play also. That probably explains the vastly popular play *Dance Like a Man* that is woven around the familial and societal disparaging views about dance as a profession, particularly for men.

The temporal context of the two plays reminds one of this human mentality that has not undergone any change despite big political and social changes over the past half-a-century. The characters involved belong to different communities and are driven by vastly different “compulsions” to adopt a duplicate self. That raises hypocrisy to a universal level.

The play “Where did I leave my Purdah” is set during the time of the country's independence that came along with the bloodiest Partition that the world had ever seen. How the communities that had been living cheek by jowl before independence became strangers and brayed for each other's blood is vividly brought out by Dattani. That would be an oft-beaten track, but then Dattani's love for the stage brings in real life stage actors as characters in this play. They belong to three generations: Suhel, Nazia, her sister Zarine whose daughter is Ruby, and Ruby's daughter Nikhat. The play *Shakuntala* is said to be the favourite of the audience in Lahore and Suhel has acted as Dushyant while Zarine is Shakuntala – a coveted role.

Partition of the country is announced and the actors have to shift to Mumbai. The horrors of Partition are enacted in the train by which they are travelling. As it reaches Lahore on the way to India, Muslim hooligans start butchering Hindus. Suhel, who is a

Hindu, wears the Muslim cap to avoid being murdered, but Nazia has forgotten to bring her burqa. Now, Zarine comes to her rescue and puts her own in Nazia's trunk. A great sacrifice for which she has to pay with her life. As they enter India, it is Hindus' turn to take revenge and Nazia is gangraped. She hates Suhel as he failed to save her from co-religionist Hindus.

The rivalry among actors for a coveted role is also brought in as an element of conflict. Nazia projects herself as the arch heroine Shakuntala and a founder of the Modern Theatre Company in India, effacing the memory of her sister. In a dramatic manner enters Ruby, supposedly Zarine's daughter, and demands credit for her mother. Further on, her daughter Nikhat too enters and helps her mother keep safe the items which Nazia tries to burn.

But a play must have surprises and so we learn that Ruby is Nazia's daughter from the rapists. Finally, it is Ruby who is left but she would rather stage Romeo even as credits are given by Ruby to Nazia and by Nazia to Zarine and Suhel! So, the whole point in Nazia's hypocrisy is in arrogating to herself the credit for founding the drama society, and in keeping under wraps her relationship with Ruby simply because of her ambition to somehow be counted as a great playwright and actor.

In the second play titled "The Big Fat City", the audience is treated to the contemporary craze for status linked to money. Murli who was an Associate Managing Director of a company has a live-in relationship with Niharika (Nikki). They have to pay a housing loan and need to get Sailaesh's help who is Murali's old friend. As the play progresses, private lives of different characters are revealed showing their hypocrisies.

The play projects hypocrisy as an individual's false attempt to claim with social prestige. It reminds one of W.M. Thackeray who had defined snobbery as the attempt by a tenth-rate individual to prove himself

ninth-rate! It is the power of social discourse that overawes individuals and makes them put on an act that is compliant with social values. There are a number of instances where this hypocrisy is laid bare, as for example, while talking to Sailesh, Murli blurts he was fired but is checked by Niharika. He keeps cancelled credit cards in his purse only to impress others. Similarly, Lolly pretends she is not interested in TV roles as opposed to theatre. Nikki can't tell mother-in-law that she hates being with her and misrepresents Murli's bawling to his Amma as his pain due to itching disease! Again, Nikki keeps Anu, a single girl, as a tenant in her flat against the rules of the RWA, and so she tells them that Anu is her cousin. Moreover, she presents her boyfriend as her husband to avoid the Society rule disallowing single women as tenants in the block.

There is a murder also and a cover-up bid in which pay-off is negotiated. Money is important in the world and so Anu, whose husband is killed, will not reveal the identity of the "murderers" if she is paid a good bit of money. There are other themes also, like couch-casting, honour killing of a girl by her brother, drug mafia, etc.

As an accomplished actor, Dattani knows well what would click on the stage and so his plays, despite their complexities and stage maneuvers hold the audience in rapt attention. The dialogues are short and crisp and the language simple even as the ideas are deep. A stylistic innovation is seen in the form of the characters' text messages being put out on the screen on stage which gives the audience a peep into their mind. It is the digital age version of asides on the stage. On the whole, the plays project Dattani's known unorthodox views along with his reformatory zeal and force the viewer/reader to muse over the issues. Which is what makes a play a success.

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