



Mahesh Dattani's Clearing the Rubble: Gender and Class Discrimination

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani has held senior position in theatre groups of institutions. The dramatic canvas of Dattani is coloured with real life conditions and the vivid experiences related with urban cosmopolitan and middle class Indian. Most of the issues taken up by Dattani in his plays, are radical, unconventional, contemporary and free from taboos. Clearing the Rubble is a radio play. It was first performed in 2004 and was broadcast on BBC world service in 2001. It is based on earthquake(Bhuj) victims and communal discrepancy.

This play is based on the Bhuj earthquake and shows how discrimination on the basis of caste and religion has been practiced even by the rescue team, though nature has lashed upon them indiscriminately robbing them of their home, food and loved ones. This paper analyses how Dattani voices plight of the victim of gender discrimination and double standards through the play.

Keywords: class discrimination, gender discrimination, social discrepancy, caste

Research Paper

“Social class is a group of people based on any factor other than birth and having a specific social status attached to it.” (Kumar 81).

Class discrimination indicates the discrimination of one man from the another in the name of caste, creed, religion and status. It is another important factor of social classification in Indian society. Discrimination has deeply set in the minds of people. Many writers have touched the issue from their own perspective. As a playwright of social concerns Mahesh Dattani performs his responsibility very well and reveals the hidden truths of society. Actually, he does not write to entertain people but writes to sensitize people. Dattani takes up the issue of class discrimination in his radio play Clearing the Rubble.

The play Clearing the Rubble is a heart-rending story of the victims of the earthquake in Gujarat (Bhuj). It starts with a letter of the journalist, Jeffrey, to Nora about his experiences in Gujarat (Bhuj) during disastrous earthquake in 2001. Now Jeffrey is going to Gujarat again to meet a boy Salim, who met him during rescue operation after the earthquake. In this letter he also mentions Salim's mother and his two sisters who suffered most because they were Muslims and poor. It was a disastrous earthquake and death was dancing everywhere. People were dying due to the lack of fundamental things. Jaffrey saw a miserable picture of victims who were suffering more only because they were in minority. Rescue teams were helping in other villages but no help had been sent to Salim's village, moreover nobody came to see them because dwellers of the village were all Muslims. Jaffrey was shocked to see the partial attitude of rescue team and government even in the time of misery. Villagers died due to lack of proper facilities and care. Salim's family also died and when Jaffrey comes to meet Salim he finds that he has also died not by earthquake but by manmade barriers of discrimination.

The entire tragedy is presented through the letter. In the starting of the letter, Jaffrey tells about pathetic condition of village. Jaffrey... I look out of the window. I see what I have seen for miles and miles. No sign of any building. All of them reduced to heaps of rubble... I see silhouettes of piles of rubble everywhere. There is not a whole building or hut to be seen anywhere. (Dattani 66-67)

The letter gives a vivid account of a place that looked like hell. People having no food, no water, dying due to the lack of medicine and treatment. A Muslim boy asked help from Jaffrey. He wanted to save his mother and sister, buried alive in the rubble. No rescue team was there to save them. Jaffrey was unable to understand the situation but Salim's revelation clears everything that they were Muslims by caste, that's why nobody came to help them. The sight of another earthquake hit village was different as Jaffrey observed:

There are vans full of relief material everywhere. There is enough activity going on to show that all efforts are being made to rescue people or rehabilitate displaced families. (Dattani 71)

It explicitly proved discrimination against Muslim poor. Relief team even stopped Jaffrey to take the truck to the Muslim village. Jaffrey warned them to write on their discrimination against minorities:

"I am a journalist and I am writing on the communal and caste based nature of your operations... Are you preventing equipment and supplies from reaching Muslims and Dalit populations?" (Dattani 71-72) Jaffrey condemns the discrimination as inhuman. Caste is not the measurement of anybody's character, then how can people categorize it.

Salim's mother Fatima recalls how her daughter Mumtaz suffers humiliation. She was stripped in the hospital, where she used to work, on accusation of theft. The regulators of society often target women of lower community and caste. These women easily become victims of social, religious, cultural and political prejudices and of men's lust. They hardly get any support from family or society. This is what happens with Mumtaz. Nobody comes forward to rescue her, not even her colleagues, friends and even her mother Fatima doesn't help her out after knowing all that. Instead, she compels her to return to her work. This incident throws light on the pain and agony of routine life of a minority girl. They are not left with any choice but to bear this humiliation throughout their life. "Dattani intends to indicate that religion and caste-consciousness is so down deep in the blood of the people that it hinders the call of humanity" (Parmar 172). The communal and caste biased nature of society makes the marginalized sections live a life which is beyond endurance.

Specially a lower caste girl is doubly marginalized. Firstly, under the religion and caste, and secondly on the basis of gender. Mumtaz is a perfect example of a doubly marginalized girl. Neither society nor the family treats her fairly.

Fatima is prejudiced and gives more importance to her son Salim rather than daughters, Mumtaz and Saira. The best thing is always given to Salim and daughters are always ignored. She has always been unfair to Mumtaz even prior to her father's death. For instance, when Fatima starts working as a labourer, she needs someone who can help her in managing home and work together. She leaves the household responsibility on Mumtaz. Who is only seven years old. Mumtaz is not ready for such a big responsibility, but she has to sacrifice her childhood so that her brother can focus on his study and to live up to the families' expectations. This clearly shows that how deeply gender discrimination is rooted in lower section of society.

The family of Fatima faces humiliation at every step of life. She also recalls that her son Salim had to tell a lie about his caste and his father's profession in school because nobody wanted to give admission to the son of a cobbler. It is worthwhile to quote the words of Rev. Sherring here, who states that the caste in India is: Indissolubly blended with the social life of the Hindu and is as much a necessity to him as food to eat, cloth to wear, and house to live in. (Sherring 217)

Salim faced severe harassment in school as well as in village. Fatima asks Salim in her thoughts:

...You felt ashamed of being a Muslim and the son of a cobbler. Is this true?... We are but a speck of dust in this world of humanity. I know you proud of yourself. But you were not proud of us. You told your friend that your father was a farmer... you lied. You should have told them. You were a cobbler's son and your father was an honest man. But you betrayed him. (Dattani 77)

It is a heart-rending story and shocking too. In this age when man has reached on moon people are still divided in the name of caste and religion. Salim's pain is revealed by his revelation that he is always treated as untouchable or an animal. It is a type of escape from his identity and his father's profession.

One day, there was a dead rat in the class room. The smell was so strong that no one could enter the room one of the children told the teacher that I should be sent into pick up the rat and clean the room. I did not want to do it. The bigger boys called me a cobbler's son and said that it was my job to do these things. If I could touch the hide of a cow I could pick up a dead rat. The teacher did not say a word. Everybody after that, the boys would mock me, look at me with a smile, telling me that I didn't know my place. (Dattani 79)

After this incident Salim felt humiliated, he would feel that the boys are always mocking him. After this incidence he was not able to tell anybody about his family and caste, wherever he went for studies. The irony is that, this stigma of being called untouchables does not leave them even after their death. When they are alive, the society does not accept them and treat them as human beings. Even government is indifferent to the fair distribution of compensation to the poor. As there is no record of their birth, they are considered as non-living things. And when they die, the government wants a proof of their existence. They remain marginalized no matter, dead or alive. Lee Maracle in her "Notes on a Life" has presented the agonized cry of marginals as: We have been handed a set of names and they all have race's based, colonial based, conquest-based meanings and the assumption is that the others out there get to name things... they hurry to name it so we don't name it ourselves... they name it, define it and apply the rules to, then they own it and we just fit into it. (Maracle 157)

The Play reveals the sham equality of rescue teams as well as of the government. Fatima's pain is that she lives with those who have no feeling for poor and people of low caste.

Fatima: My Allah, Please forgive me! Please show compassion. Both my daughters are with you now. I am coming too. Take me away from this unjust world now. I will hold the bodies of my daughter till I follow them to your world. I have no more strength to call out to those people who help others but not us. I cry out for you now. Only in your world is there justice. I want to be in your world. (Dattani 65)

Dattani takes a dig at the people and society for discrimination against the poor and the minorities. The play is not drafted to depict the plight of poor and helpless people in the time of natural disaster, but it is written to highlight humiliating life of the underprivileged women. Through the humiliating experiences of Salim and his sister Mumtaz, Dattani has successfully displayed the humiliating lives they have lived because of poverty, caste and minority status. The discrimination prevails everywhere in society; even in schools. Salim's parents send him to school with the hope that education will improve their status. But the irony is that, it is at school that he realizes that he is inferior to others.

Dattani says that caste and religion should not be the cause of humiliation imposed on innocent people. He presents ugly face of society. The title of the play not only suggests to clear the rubble from the village but also to clear the rubble of evil and discrimination from our minds.

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