
Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* – A Saga of Passion and Pain

Abstract :

In the play under analysis in this paper *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* Dattani conveys his vision through his women protagonist who exhibit exemplary resilience despite confronting the turmoil of partition. The play highlights Dattani's attempt to explore how every society ascribes meaning to women's bodies; in effect, women's body becomes a space of control. Nazia Sahiba, the female protagonist of Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* is an extremely passionate woman. She suffers from her troubled past incidents. She cannot forget the murder of her sister Zarine by Pakistani Muslims and her own gang-rape by Indian Hindus. However, she does not lose interest in life. She struggles and comes back to normal day-to-day life by her desperate passion for theatre. Through her performance, Nazia tries to attain an ideal world. Her passion for life enables her to overcome her personal pains.

Key Words: Pain, Passion, Partition, Saga, Taboo

Most of the writers have explored the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during and after the Partition which constitutes the thematic corpus of Partition Literature. Nevertheless, Dattani deals with the theme of partition in an innovative manner in his play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* (2012). While trying to unravel the tangled skein of relationship between religious communities, between women and their men, between women and their families across the two new nations formed after partition, Dattani perceives women at the intersection of these forces rather than at the periphery. Rather than portraying women as pathetic and pitiable creatures the dramatist highlights his women protagonist as powerful, vocal and resourceful.

Mahesh Dattani is a well-known dramatist for his sympathetic treatment and dealing of unconventional and taboo themes in his plays. Dattani's plays successfully incorporate diverse themes like hijra marriage, gay relationship, extra-marital affairs and communal disharmony. Dattani in his plays has focused on those contemporary issues which remain invisible to general eyes. In his Preface to Collected Plays, Dattani confesses:

I know that I am an artist. I don't need to underline it in my works. I write for my plays to be performed and appreciated by as wide a section of the society that my plays speak to and are about. I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally (xi-xv).

Dattani's insight into human nature and human relationships has startled his audience and readers alike. Prof. Bijoy Kumar Das rightly says:

Dattani's plays deal with contemporary situations with a rare touch of honesty, sincerity and objectivity. He presents situations and events authentically to recreate the characters as they are seen in the contemporary society ... Dattani's themes strike us for two reasons - novelty and authenticity. Therein lies his strength and the hallmark of his achievement (59-60).

The last one of the trilogy beginning with the play *Dance Like a Man* and the screen play *Morning Raga*, Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* is a rare addition to his artistic exploration of human nature. Dattani has continuously treated his women characters with immense sympathy and apathy. Dattani proclaims in an interview with Sachidananda Mohanty:

I relate to Tennessee Williams because he writes about vulnerable women in a very violent society. I think I tend to do that as well, although I don't see my woman as vulnerable, in the sense that they do fight their battles (CP 173).

Nazia Sahiba, the protagonist of Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Prudah?* is that sort of a woman who desperately longs after winning the battle of life. From an outer look, Nazia seems to be eccentric, whimsical, hypocritical and selfish woman. She perennially bears an indifference and detachment for everything and everyone surrounding her. However, with the gradual unfolding of the play, we come to understand her true nature. Under the veneer of rationality and detachment, Nazia is extremely passionate woman. Her

love for Suhel, feelings for her sister Zarine and hatred for her own self are of humungous stature. She is quite obsessive of her Drama Company and dramatic performance. For Nazia, “the company is the most important thing” (79) and to her, “the role is everything! Worth dying for!” (88).

In spite of being an octogenarian, Nazia seeks to achieve an ideal life. Her quest has been artistically projected by Dattani with the help of the dance metaphor. Dattani has clarified that dancing stands for him as a means of leading an ideal life. Regarding the dance metaphor in the play *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani comments in the essay ‘*Me and My Plays*’:

Dancing, in the play, represents the ideal world, almost impossible to attain in one lifetime. Yet it is a world that the protagonists strive for at all costs (39).

In the play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, Nazia has a troubled past – a kind of nostalgia. She was forced to migrate to India from Lahore. The Pakistani Muslims murdered the Hindu passengers of the train on which Nazia with her lover Suhel and sister Zarine was travelling to India. Nazia forgot to bring her burqha and Zarine gave her own burqha to Nazia to protect and defend herself. It happened coincidentally that without the burqha, the Pakistani Muslims took Zarine to be a Hindu and murdered her. Nazia considers herself responsible for Zarine’s premature death. Later on the same day, Nazia was gang-raped by Indian Hindus. Her daughter Ruby was the outcome of that brutal gang-rape.

What makes Nazia different from others is her indomitable spirit and her passion for life. She was not devastated by that brutal incident. She uplifted herself from the initial torpor through her drama company and dramatic performances. Nazia’s effort to cleanse her past is symbolically represented by Dattani. She is intermittently found to remove cobweb. Cobweb works as a powerful metaphor for Nazia’s troubled past. She emphatically pronounces “Cobwebs! I hate cobwebs ... What are these?” (69). Despite her efforts, her past always returns to torture her present. She says, “Look at these cobwebs! No matter how often I clean them all, they keep coming back” (107). Even if Nazia fails to forget her past, she never succumbs to her past. She believes in going ahead in life. Past can hardly chain her flight.

Nazia’s character has been gifted with passion, a rare virtue of human life. Her passion for theatre has guided her all through her sufferings. She is engaged in a pursuit of ideal life. A few unfortunate experiences can hardly dent Nazia’s spirit. She is unstoppable

and indomitable as she is passionate to live life to the fullest. Even when she is on her wheelchair, she pronounces:

Dance away! And act like life is one big performance with a standing ovation waiting at the end of it! Spin me around! Oh this wheelchair is too small for all the life that's left in me (142).

Watching her mother's passion for life, Ruby says, "Proud of you, Mother! I am so proud of you!" (142). We readers too are proud of her. In fact, Nazia embodies the true identity of a MAN. She does not bow down in front of pains. Rather, she possesses the spirit to overcome her sufferings and to construct a new identity for herself. In the conclusion, we can quote Lillete Dubey's words in A Note on the Play:

And so was spun the story of the irrepressible, irreverent, iconoclastic and utterly human Nazia, who is inspired by a legion of Amazonian legends that have blazed across the stage, living, loving and even sacrificing all for their art (48).

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