

A Quest for Identity and Sense of Self in Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*: A Post Modern Reading

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's Play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* is a journey of a women who tries to cope up with her haunting past. Nazia Sahiba is a gang rape victim, and has seen her sister Zarine being killed in front of her eyes. The scar of partition and the trauma associated with it can be overtly seen in Dattani's characters. The 'burqa' plays an important role and becomes a metaphor for different identities and their manifestations. The paper traces the journey of self-identification of its three main women characters and draws a parallel between Henrik Ibsen's Nora and Dattani's Nazia. The quest of Nazia is a quest of a postmodern woman trying to gain a foothold in the ever slipping sand of identity.

Key words: Postmodern, Partition, Identity

Dattani's play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* is a baffling sketch of a conflict between sense of self and the 'other' within a boundary. It is a play which documents the tormenting past of Nazia Sahiba, the play's protagonist, and the identity crisis faced by her and other female characters of the play. How Nazia resists the brutal attack on her soul when she gets gang raped in India, and how she manages to cope up with the memory of her sister being killed by Muslims in Pakistan makes one wonder at the courage and passion which she has for life. Prof. Bijoy Kumar Das writes:

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. (Quoted in Thakar, 2018, p. 2)

The play opens with an aged Nazia enacting her death scene. Vinay, a young first Assistant Director gives her mouth to mouth resuscitation and Nazia rejoices that she has won the bet. Vinay is trying to take her for her shot but she is not ready because she has just one line to deliver. Nazia was a name to reckon with in the past but now her stature and fame have been reduced to playing the roles of grandmother. Her past is something which she wants to cherish and yet abhors it at the same time. She says:

Hah! Rishi sir's close up! Tell him Rishi's grandfather used to come to my green room and escort me – now see. See what you made me do. You made me live in the past. Okay! Okay! (Dattani, 2014, p. 56)

She realises that the place, the people associated and the canvas is too small for her. Her dreams and her art are bigger than the small canvas of Sanjay in which she is relegated to one dialogue, just one dialogue. The fact that her true self lies in theatre, and that she is someone who was meant for theatre alone, finally dawns upon her. Nazia realises her true self which is of utmost importance in a woman's liberation. Nazia says:

This is it. There is always a time in your life that the truth strikes you. (a moment of realisation for her) Why didn't I see it? What am I doing here? I don't belong here (taking off her wig) No more grandma roles for me. I'm going back to the theatre! Dancing! That's it. I am leaving. (Dattani, 2014, p. 58)

Individuality and women's liberation, two strong postmodern ideas, merge in Nazia's character. She decides to leave the set of the movie and goes to the warehouse, the

Modern-Indian Theatre, which she started along with her husband, Suhel. There we are introduced to Ruby, her niece whom she despises. Ruby also does not seem to love her as she thinks that her mother, Zarine, should also have a share in the fame which Nazia enjoyed. She is annoyed and irritated that Nazia has not given credit to Zarine, Nazia's sister.

Where Did I Leave My Purdah? is a quest of three women who are trying to find their identity. While Nazia's quest is to establish an identity of hers with all the glories of the past, Ruby tries to establish the identity of her mother, Zarine. She wants Nazia to give her mother due credit as the person behind the establishment of the Modern Indian Theatre. Simultaneously she is struggling to find an identity of her own soul. She wants to know who she was and who her parents were. Nikhat, Ruby's daughter also wants to know who her grandmother was. Nikhat could not get her mother's love as Ruby was always lost in the past. Nikhat says that Ruby was never at peace and was lost in her own world:

Oh, you were always around at home, trying to compensate and making sure I didn't go through the same feeling of abandonment. But even when you were holding my hand waiting for the school bus to pick me up, you were thousands of miles away. (Dattani, 2014, p. 126)

The story of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, and that of Nazia blend into each other seamlessly to paint the picture of a woman of the past and a woman of postmodern times. How Dushyant remembers and accepts *Shakuntala* to ease her of the pain is a mirror image of how Nazia accepts her past in order to ease her pain. Ruby's daughter Nikhat, like the ring of Dushyant, makes Nazia remember the past by having a striking resemblance to her grandmother. In *Shakuntala* the woman is lost and waits for her husband to remember her; in Dattani's play Nazia is lost but she does not wait for people to find her; rather she herself explores her identity through her passion for theatre. The plot and canvas of the play is so vast that it transcends the

boundaries of time and history. Dattani experiments with the way of presentation and emerges victorious. In a note on the play, Lillete Dubey writes:

Audiences have responded to the play in an amazing way, understanding with ease the different time zones and realities the play operates within, and have enjoyed thoroughly the challenge of connecting the dots and unravelling the various threads of its non-linear structure. (Dattani, 2014, p. 50)

From *Shakuntala* to the present time the reader passes through the devastating history of partition and the effects which it had on the people of the subcontinent. It underlines a scathing commentary on the concept of religion which destroys and damages even its own followers. What Dattani highlights is a face of religion manifested through its angry and restless followers. It literally destroys the life of Zarine. The other manifestation of religion is the one through which Zarine allows herself to be destroyed because she swear on the Koran that she will protect Nazia.

When Nazia talks of her career in theatre she echoes the sentiments of Nora of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* who wanted to find her own identity rather than being a little dove to her husband. Both the plays talk of women who leave the confines of a relaxed family environment to explore and exploit their own talents with which they were born. Nora leaves her family and Nazia leaves her country in search of their soul. Suhel does not come forward to save Nazia from getting gang raped and Nazia is annoyed at this incompetence of Suhel. A parallel to this incident can be drawn in the incapability of Helmer in coming out in open and accepting that it was him for that Nora borrowed the money. This inaction and incapability of their male counterparts annoys the protagonists of the two plays. Nazia knows that people pity her and they sympathise with her but it is not sympathy which she wants. Like Nora she too wants respect which will quench her thirst. She says:

Oh, so I am helpless! And I need you to help me? So you can take control over my life. (Dattani, 2014, p. 98)

This line reiterates the sentiments of Nora when she says:

Exactly as before! I was your little skylark, your doll, which you would in future treat with doubly gentle care, because it was so brittle and fragile. (Ibsen, 1879/2005, 80)

She wants to have an identity of her own and not be a shadow of others' identity. Nazia has killed for Suhel and Nora has taken money for her husband. Both have done something for their husband and nothing for their own souls. Nazia is struggling to find a place in the contemporary world and create an identity for herself. She is technology savvy and uses voice search, an iPod, writes mail, wants to direct a new version of *Abhigyan Shakuntala*. All this is her effort to cope with an identity crisis which she is facing as she is aging and losing out on fame. She realises that she is not 'that' Nazia which she once was. Shakuntala of hers was getting lost and she was puzzled and confused about her future. Somehow she wants to revive that Shakuntala which brought her fame and applause. Throughout the play we find Nazia trying to adjust to the new world forgetting her past. It is her attempt to run away from her past which she does not want to carry as a baggage. She tries to mix herself with the present as a defense against her past. Nazia is a woman who is energetic, vivacious and a go getter. She does not want to cry on her situation but make it better. In the spur of a moment she realises that she has to leave her home, her parents and her country if she wants to live a life on her own terms. She kills one of the rioters for the sake of her love for Suhel. Suhel, later converts to Islam and marries her. The notion that Suhel did not do anything to save her from being raped probably made her love weak. She herself is a woman of action and cannot survive with a man who was not able to at least try and save her. Later when she accepts that Ruby is not Zarine's daughter but hers we see an amalgamation of a motherly instinct and aggression in her, even in her action of denouncing Ruby. She suckled her, fed

her, comforted her with lullabies but she cannot have her as it reminded her of the pain and humiliation which she went through. In a way not holding Ruby was a sort of love which she had for her. She was afraid that she might strangle the little child. Will it not be called love? Was it not her love which stopped her from killing the child therefore not having the baby around? She could have killed Ruby but she did not because though, a rotten piece of flesh, Ruby was her flesh. Thakar Rishi A. in his paper, *Mahesh Dattani's Where Did I Leave My Purdah? – A Saga of Passion and Pain*, writes:

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. (Thakar, 2018, p. 2)

Nazia, despising Ruby is her defense mechanism against the haunting memory of her gang rape. Dattani portrays a tormented woman who tries to stand firm and confident. Nazia struggles to collect pieces of her life and does not succumb to the destiny. The tormenting relationship of Nazia and Suhel is a consequence of the partition memories. Partition remains in Nazia's subconscious and she tries to push it back but all in vain. It remains embedded in her memory and prohibits her from coming any closer to Suhel. When Dushyant touches her she shivers and is not able to bear the pain. The story of Shakuntala flows swiftly and mixes with Nazia's story only with a difference that Nazia has forgotten herself or rather wants to forget her past. She does not want to delve into the old memories even at the cost of her relationship with Suhel. When Suhel says, "You never gave your own sister a chance to play Shakuntala." (Dattani, 2014). Nazia does not respond. Every time the name of Zarine comes Nazia tries to avoid it. She survives the tormenting past and its haunting memories, and survives in all her majestic grandeur weaving a new adaption to *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. She says that although she played Shakuntala yet it was always Zarine who took over her. She continued with Shakuntala

because she was fulfilling the promise which she made to Zarine that she will let her play the part of Shakuntala once they reach India. Shakuntala made Zarine accompany Nazia and this character connected the lives of two sisters both on the stage and off the stage.

The apparition which Nazia saw on the stage was her own subconscious self in which she was convincing herself for playing the character of Shakuntala. The images of past where she cajoled Zarine to come along with her by offering her the character of Shakuntala haunted her. The vision of Zarine being killed by her own men and she being raped haunted her. Although Nazia tries to forget the past yet she admits that it is not easy. She exclaims:

You think it is so simple?... Things don't get finished. They just hide in as dark corner like a ghoul and grab at you when you are not looking. And sometimes you have to beat the shit out of the ghoul to make it crawl back into the dark corner. (Dattani, 2014, p. 89)

She realises her true calling and she realises that the mere removal of stuffs from the past will not help her erase the memories of her past. The psychic distress when she sees Ruby comes to the front and plays a role in reliving her past. Her subconscious which kept her motherly instincts at bay from her conscious manifests itself when the apparition of Zarine says:

Take care of the baby. Rabiba. What a lovely name! She is all yours! Only yours! (Dattani, 2014, p. 102)

It is actually her inner core which she wants to shun and leave. This is what she thinks about the child, that the baby is hers, but this reality pains her so she turns herself away from the reality and hides it from her conscious self which fades into her unconscious only to come back every time she sees Ruby. Nazia has tried to create a barrier between her past and present but the moment she decides to break it and turn back to theatre she is relieved of her past. Both she and her daughter find their

identities and so does Zarine, after her death. Finally when she accepts her past and lets go whatever she held for so long she feels relaxed and is able to create a new world, a new adaptation, *Shaku*. The cobwebs act as a metaphor and symbolically represent her repressed self. They project her past which keeps coming back to her. She says

Look at these cobwebs! No matter how often I clean them all, they keep coming back. (Dattani, 2014, p. 107)

Her obsession of removing the cobwebs is her continues struggle of forgetting her past. She was in conflict with the reality that she is no more 'that' Shakuntala which she once was. There was an identity crisis after coming to India and with the passage of time. When she is talking to Suhel on the phone Dattani mixes the past with present and we see young Nazia and Suhail. Nazia says:

Of course I wish I were as beautiful as I was. And I wish you were too. We were both beautiful but – what's the point now? It's over. No point. Cobwebs. (Dattani, 2014, p. 92)

This concept of beauty could also mean her honour which was destroyed once she came to India. This conflict, whether she is still beautiful or not, even after her body and soul being rampaged in the name of identity left her helpless. Her religious identity took away her individual identity and broke her into pieces. Dattani enters into the fragile foray of religion and paints two sets of pictures and emerges victorious as a harbinger of postmodern theatre. Nazia's emphasis on the word 'postmodern' is an echo to Dattani's presentation of postmodern times. The Modern Indian Theatre becomes the Post Modern Indian Theatre for Nazia. It is a symbolic journey which she undertook from modern to post modern times. Nazia is a woman who is tormented by something. She is frustrated, disturbed. Dattani's play mesmerises and bewilders at the same time. Identity is dealt at two different levels, first is the quest for the identity and the other is the manifestation or symbolic representation of

identity in the garb of a black piece of cloth, the burqa. Nazia is perplexed at the thought that identity destroyed her sister. Purdah or veil becomes a synonym for identity. In the absence of this identity Zarine loses her life at the hands of her own men, the followers of her own religion. Nazia says:

The rioters wanted to kill everyone on the train. A train full of Hindus. Except for us. The woman next to us told us to wear our burqas. That would save us... (Dattani, 2014, p. 129)

At a time when people were killing each other the burqa was an identity which could have saved them. Partition remains a gaping wound which makes many bodies bleed even after years. In the words of Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin:

For both men and women the trauma of Partition violence was difficult to articulate and this often made for a hesitant, disjointed or sometimes even "wordless" telling. (Menon and Bhasin, 2007, p. 55)

They further assert that sexual crime against women is:

The most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by "dishonouring" their women. (Menon and Bhasin, 2007, p. 41)

The fact that Nazia loved a Hindu got shrouded behind the identity of a black cloth. The skull cap gave an identity to Suhel and saves him in Pakistan but the same Muslim identity – burqa, destroys Nazia's honor and she gets raped in India. It shows that how our identity goes on changing and how at every given time we are in conflict with our identity and the accepted identity of majority. The agony of loss of human life is projected in the destruction of both the sisters in India and Pakistan equally. Nazia is struggling to have an identity and decides never to cover because that identity gave her a scare which haunts her. The identity of being a Muslim or a Hindu, judged by a black

piece of cloth, leaves the sisters shattered and destroys them completely. Nazia says:

I was still wearing that piece of black cloth. But we were in another country, with a different set of demons (Dattani, 2014, p. 132)

The same identity saved her in one country and destroyed her in another. Nazia's anxiety and recklessness, which Dattani makes visible through her temperament, can be a result of this identity crisis. She feels different and aloof and is fully aware that people see her as a rape victim and this gives her a feeling of alienation. Dattani projects her psychic troubles through dialogues such as: What do you get out of tormenting me? What do you want? (Dattani, 2014, p. 114)

Or when Nazia talks to Suhel when they are back stage as Shakuntala and Dushyant: I know how you, Rati, Chandra and the others look at me. I don't need your pity. (Dattani, 2014, p. 98)

Or when she tells Ruby to hate her: No! Don't Do that! Don't pity me! Hate me. I will never acknowledge you as my child. I never want to! (Dattani, 2014, p. 135)

Ruby was the result of that identity of Nazia and she would have strangled her with the same black piece of cloth, same identity. She says:

...that I could just take my veil, wrap it around your neck and snap that tiny neck – get rid of you and my pain. Not because I hated you but because I hated myself... (Dattani, 2014, p. 135)

The Journey of Nazia from playing Shakuntala to adapting Shaku comes full circle against the backdrop of the Modern India Theatre reviving into the Post Modern Indian Theatre. Shakuntala of Kalidas gets a new identity at the hands of Nazia who finally carves an identity for her own self. She does not succumb to the situations or does not wait for others to give her an identity but creates one for herself and gives the same to

Shaku. Her vision of life and quest for self can be felt when she says:

You see, this is the interpretation I always wanted for Shakuntala!
Not this whiny little creature whose entire future depends on
whether her husband can remember having slept with her or not.
(Dattani, 2014, p. 112)

Nazia gives an identity to Shakuntala and releases herself from the pain of the past by finding an identity of her own which was not connected to any external associations rather her own individual self. The same black piece of cloth, which gave them an identity, becomes a shroud for Zarine and Nazia says that she “never worn a veil again (Dattani, 2014)”

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