

Murder in Dattani's Three Plays:

Seven Steps around the Fire, The Swami and Winston and Uma and the Fairy Queen

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Abstract: In my paper I intend to focus on how the theme of murder has been presented in Mahesh Dattani's three plays, *Seven Steps around the Fire, The Swami and Winston* and *Uma and the Fairy Queen*.

Keywords: Murder, religious fanaticism, international relations, Dattani

'Murder' has continued to be a powerful thematic motif since time unknown in the history of world literature which has played a major role in the development of the action of the story or the plot. The tragedies produced in Europe, including the classical and the English plays, have put forward the theme of murder as an important source of the main action that leads to the struggle and sufferings of the protagonist which ultimately leads him or her to climax accompanied with catharsis and the restoration of the old orders. In the last couple of centuries the theme of murder has become an indispensable part of a whodunit. It has proved to be the easiest way to construct the plot of a thriller. Dattani's plays include the emotions of the world class tragedies and also the agility of the modern detective fictions. Murder is an important theme in Dattani's thrillers and the uniqueness about it is that apart from involving human psychology and modern society murder in Dattani's plays also brings into consideration several other issues of modern India that are related to its national politics, government, corruptions and matters relating to international levels that concern India seriously. In Dattani, murder is politicized and sometimes is given a religious colour. Dattani has also shown how a high profile murder can become an origin of a possible Indo-Pak conflict. The serious issue of international terrorism has also made its way into the dramatic plot of Dattani's thrillers.

Dattani has also presented the murder on a symbolic level as well. It involves the murder of human values, relationships, love, hope and social harmony. The murder of Kamla, a eunuch, in *Seven Steps around the Fire*, shows the symbolic murder of a whole community. Mr. Sharma, the minister, acts as an agent of the oppressive society which is not ready to accept the existence of the eunuch community which is a marginalized section. In *The Swami and Winston* communal craze becomes a camouflage under which religious fanatics, like Sitaram Trivedi, use religion for their personal gains. But, in doing so, the communal harmony, which is an important characteristic feature of the Indian nationalism, is murdered. This also gives rise to the symbolic murder of faith and tolerance that must exist among different communities and religious sects in society. *Uma and the Fairy Queen* gives rise to a number of national and international issues. While, on the one hand, it deals with

the relationship between the mother (Nila Ahmed) and the son (Feroz), on the other, it also points out the fact that the government as well as society must investigate thoroughly, any crime or killing, before labelling it as a terrorist strike. This is so because such claims can have a dangerous consequences and effects on India's diplomatic relationships with other countries. It can also hurt the sentiments of any particular community and thus the communal tensions may be aggravated which will in turn lead to riots and several other murders.

Mahesh Dattani's themes are related to the context of the Indian society. But they are also related to human nature and values which are common and universal irrespective of any community, country and culture. Therefore, we can easily relate Dattani's themes and issues with those found in the writings of the foreign writers. Murder has been used as a sensational issue in world literature since time immemorial. Before going into the plays of Dattani it is important to have a brief look into the use and application of the theme of murder in world literature through ages which will help us to relate them (the concerned plays of Mahesh Dattani) to the world drama. Right from the beginning we have seen that murders have been portrayed regularly in world literature. In Greek literature the great dramatist Sophocles has devised the plot of his famous tragedy *Oedipus, the King* which is based on the tragic incident of Oedipus unknowingly killing his father and marrying his mother. We have seen the theme of murder and revenge in Italian writer Seneca's plays. This motif of murder and revenge is later incorporated by the University Wits and other English dramatists in their writings in the Elizabethan period. We see this pattern in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, Marowe's *Edward the Second*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and in the writings of many other English playwrights of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. The major action of the plays written by these playwrights starts with the incident of murder. Dattani's thrillers are basically whodunits in nature. They do not portray the emotions so vividly and eloquently as is seen in the aforesaid plays. But Dattani's plays show great depth in studying human psychology, relationships and tragedies that are equally magnanimous like the above instances. As far as the revenge theme is concerned the play *Uma and the Fairy Queen* deals with it. In this play Feroz's unintentional killing of Michael (Feroz's mother Nila Ahmed's present fiancé) can also be taken as a reflection of his hidden desires in relation to her mother Nila Ahmed (whom Feroze considers to be an adulterer) which can be compared to the Freud's Oedipal Complex. The other two plays *Seven Steps around the Fire* and *The Swami and Winston* deal with other motives that are there behind the murder. Revenge is not the only drive behind murder. This we witness in several literary works. In the modern age T.S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* has emerged as an important poetic drama which depicts the murder of Saint Thomas Becket. The murder is related to religious complicacies and lust for power. The American dramatist Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* depicts how murder (unintentional) can bring an end to the sufferings of life. In *The Zoo Story* Albee depicts the absurdity of the human existence where lack communication and schizophrenia lead human being to utter frustration where the character chooses to kill

himself for the sake of communication. Absurdity of human existence is not directly reflected in Dattani's texts. But in *Seven Steps around the Fire* we see predicament of the eunuchs in society which is equally absurd, meaningless and illogical. A detail study of the predicaments of the eunuchs by Dattani shows that society creates absurd situations for some marginalized classes for whom the existence remains at stake. Similar kind of situation is dealt by Dattani in case of the homosexuals in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. The play falls short of depicting a murder though the situation is equally serious for another marginalized class, the homosexuals. The theme of murder is observed on a larger scale in world poetry as well. In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* we see the depiction of the Trojan war, bloodshed and killing. In the Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, we see the theme of revenge, murder and bloodshed. In the Old English period we see the pagan epic poem *Beowulf* depicting murder and heroic exploits of Beowulf, the hero. In the later Victorian age we see that Robert Browning has dealt with the complex human psychology. In his famous poem "Porphyria's Lover" we see that the lover murders his beloved Porphyria to perpetuate the moment of his meeting with her. During the early twentieth century, war poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and others have presented the horror of war and murder through their poems. Presentation of power, violence and cruelty can be seen in the writings of the modern poet Ted Hughes as well. In case of Dattani the theme of murder, violence and cruelty becomes prominent in the play *The Swami and Winston*. Communal riots and sectarian violence is the evil portrayed over here. Unlike the aforesaid epics Dattani's protagonists are not fighting for the country or mankind, but the murders depicted in his plays are related to some issues which concern the national interests of the country. While in *Seven Steps around the Fire* the eunuchs symbolically represent the marginalized classes of society in general who face discriminations, in *The Swami and Winston* and *Uma and the Fairy Queen* Dattani presents the communal problems and India's international relations respectively. While writing a thriller Mahesh Dattani keeps the socio-cultural-political issues at the centre, thus, making the incident of murder a secondary matter. Here lies the difference between Dattani's thrillers and the other detective stories. Mahesh Dattani's three plays *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *The Swami and Winston*, and *Uma and the Fairy Queen* murder is dealt along with other related issues. The domain of the eunuchs, the Hindu-Muslim tension, cross border terrorism, cross cultural marriages, Indo-Pak relationship, diplomatic issues, and society are some of the major issues that are deliberately dealt with by Dattani in these three plays. Murder initiates the action of the play. The related issues continue to construct the thematic motif and the plot of the play. We can understand the main issue that Dattani is going to discuss: the social system produces the antisocial elements and society, virtually, stands responsible for these crimes. Uma Rao, a PhD scholar in Sociology, wife of the superintendent of police, Suresh Rao, and daughter of a vice-chancellor, is the central character in all these three plays. She is the detective who investigates the murders and tries to find out the actual reason behind the crime. Through *Uma*, Dattani reveals different levels and agencies through which society acts

to dominate the individual and thus to mould that person according to its own needs. A detail study of each of these plays will help us to understand the necessity to realize and locate the real problem. This will also reveal that murder, though an important issue, is not an indispensable part of these plays. It could have been any crime, other than the murder, which could have initiated the action of the play. The various social issues and problems become the centre of concern. While talking about *Seven Steps around the Fire* M.K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan observe,

Seven Steps around the Fire is partly a detective play, in which Uma, the wife of a police officer, solves the mystery of the murder of a *hijra*, who is secretly "married" to the son of a minister. The play offers many insights into the lives of the *hijras*, and their beliefs and customs. (Naik, 209)

The question of the eunuchs and the immense poverty are the two major issues that Dattani is dealing with in his thriller *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Like the Muslims (in his another play *Final Solutions*) and the homosexuals (in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*), the eunuchs also form a minority community in this society. The society is afraid to recognize them as a part of it. The domain of the eunuchs remains almost invisible to the normal world. We even do not know their real identity. While writing about the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* Erin B. Mee tries to give a definition of the term *hijra*, *Seven Steps around the Fire* (1999) focuses on the murder of Kamala, a *hijra* (the *hijra* are a community of male eunuchs who, dressed as women, sing and dance at weddings). (Cody, 328). They can neither become a family nor can produce children. Moreover, they can never take up a camouflage like the homosexuals. They can only dance on the occasions like marriage and childbirth. Ironically, they can never take part in any of these occasions. Uma, the detective, is working on her thesis paper where she is dealing with the issue of violence in India. She is eager to provide justice to the eunuch Kamla who has been murdered brutally. In Dattani's plays the act of murder initiates the action which in turn brings forth the issue of the eunuchs. But this murder does not become the major issue for discussion. While talking about the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri observes,

Seven Steps around the Fire is another radio play commissioned by the BBC, where Dattani uses an unusual genre—that of a whodunit—to explore themes that once again focus on the 'invisible' zones of social behaviour. This time the play revolves around the 'third' gender—the community of eunuchs and their existence on the fringes of the Indian milieu. (Chaudhuri, 62)

Seven Steps around the Fire deals with the killing of Kamla, a beautiful eunuch, who was in love with Subramanyam (Subbu), the son of the government minister Mr. Sharma. Kamla and Subbu got married secretly. Subbu's father could not accept this marriage. He was against the marriage of his son with a eunuch and got Kamla killed. Gender becomes a decisive factor in this case. While talking about Kamla, Rina Mitra observes,

Her deprivation in terms of essential femininity instead of arousing sympathy and a feeling of compassion is looked down upon; she is discriminated against and ultimately

murdered. (Dhawan, 127)

While discussing the murder in *Seven Steps around the Fire*, Dr. Laxmi Sharma, in her article *Social Issues in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani*, observes:

This is all about marriage of a beautiful hizra Kamla to a son of a wealthy government minister named Subbu . . . The heart rendering story about a hizra that she is murdered simply because she had fallen in love with Subbu a young man having a status of importance in society, fills us with horror and sense of injustice. (Sharma)

A number of complexities and questions arise from this murder. First, Mr. Sharma is a representative of the oppressive society which is not going to accept the eunuchs as a part of the mainstream society. The eunuchs remain confined to their own space and can come in contact with the society only on the occasions of marriage and childbirth. Ironically the eunuchs are unable to take part in these activities. Secondly, the murder also brings forth the serious issue of power and politics that actually render the privileged class with enough power to dominate upon the weaker sections of society. There is a tremendous misuse of power. The powerful people use their position in society to serve their personal gains. Thirdly, human relationship is one of the determining factors, which is behind the murder. It is his concern for his son's future which compels Mr. Sharma to go to the extent of killing a person. We also witness the existence of love and human feelings among the eunuchs. The head eunuch, Champa, claims herself to be the mother of the other eunuchs, including Kamla and Anarkali. We also witness the development of a beautiful relationship and understanding between Uma Rao (belonging to the normal section of the society) and the eunuch community. The eunuchs cannot bear children. Uma is also childless. She can understand the sufferings of the eunuchs and expresses her sympathy for them and is also ready to provide them with some justice. The eunuchs cannot produce children and neither can they take part in the marriage. But still they can form a family. Champa, along with her other followers, has formed that family. The family of the eunuchs is a space where society hardly bothers to intrude. It provides a security for them. Fourthly, here, in this play, we get an important issue which depicts that love and marriage can develop between the community of the eunuchs and the normal society. Subbu, the minister's son, and Uma, both belong to the normal society. While Subbu is in love with Kamla, a eunuch, Uma declares her sisterly love for Anarkali (another eunuch) and the other eunuchs. Uma and Subbu develop a space where an interaction between the eunuch community and mainstream society can take place. Society must play the role of a listener, like Uma, and should have the courage, like Subbu, to recognize and accept the eunuchs as a part of it. The murder of Kamla symbolically signifies the murder of that relationship which must exist between these two communities. The murder breaks the harmony between the two communities. Society must stop interfering in that space where there is a need for such a relationship to exist and develop. Through Kamla's murder and the sufferings of the other eunuchs Dattani tries to highlight the symbolic death of the whole community of eunuchs who have lost their space of existence. Subbu's

suicide declares the death of the relationship and understanding that developed between these communities. Finally, we see that Dattani also shows the immense poverty and sufferings that exist in society of modern India. The presentation of eunuchs and the beggars show that poverty is also an important issue in modern India which is responsible for this discrimination. It is always true that society will listen to and accept any individual who is financially sound and having a position and status in society. Uma's love and affection for the eunuchs show that she is trying to find out a friend in them. Like the eunuchs she is also unable to produce children. Uma identifies herself with them and becomes sympathetic to them. This is the reason that compels Uma to find justice for Kamla. She is trying to find out a space for them and for herself also which can accommodate the marginalized sections of society. The search for this space is initiated by the murder and ends with some relief. The murder points out the cruelty with which society treats the eunuchs. Dattani shows that there is a need to find out the origin of these eunuchs and to make them a part of our culture. Dattani puts some questions about these eunuchs before the readers through Uma,

UMA: Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this country with Islam, or are they a part of our glorious Hindu tradition?... How do they come to know of these weddings? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionists? And why do they not take singing lessons? (Dattani, vol.II: 246)

The Swami and Winston, the second of the Uma series, is also a thriller involving murder and sufferings. Dattani very skillfully develops the plot, and, the revelation at the end is striking. Unlike *Seven Steps around the Fire* we are unable to identify the murderer till the end of the play. But, like *Seven Steps around the Fire*, here also Dattani brings into discussion some important issues that are highly sensitive, dangerous, as well as important in the modern Indian context. *The Swami and Winston* brings back the memory of the Ayodhya issue and the Hindu-Muslim riots that took place after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Religion and the communal issues are important factors which are required to be dealt with carefully for the sake of peace and harmony in the modern Indian society. Dattani again places some questions before the religious fanatics through Uma. While discussing the issue of religious fanaticism with the Hindu fanatic Sitaram Trivedi, Uma asks him,

UMA. What if it leads to a civil war? The horrors of partition all over again. Is Hindu pride worth all that? Isn't there any other way of establishing Hindu pride? (Dattani, vol.II: 303)

Religious fanaticism and personal gains are the two important things that Dattani has shown in this play. Sitaram Trivedi, the north Indian Hindu fanatic, murders Lady Montefiore, a member of the British aristocracy and is about to kill her brother Charles Montefiore. Charles is associated with the Scotland Yard and is visiting India for some personal reasons. He also becomes a member of the ashram near the Bull Temple and is highly influenced by the Swami and the Hindu religion. He also marries Radha, later revealed as the daughter of Sitaram Trivedi.

Mr. Trivedi devices the plan to murder Lady Montefiore and then Charles so that Radha can become the successor of the total property of Lady Montefiore and Charles, and finally he will become the master of a large amount of money which he plans to invest in establishing his own ashram and a Hindu institution abroad. Dattani shows that religious fanatics like Sitaram Trivedi use religion for their own purpose. We also see that Dattani tactfully places the issue of Babri Masjid and communal riots in the present Indian context. Through Uma, Dattani shows that common people are devoid of any such fanaticism. It is the fanatics who are responsible for spreading this communal tension among the people for their own gains. Dattani also hints at the issue of North Indian-South Indian division when Munswamy, a South Indian and the constable of Bangalore Police, refers to the fact that Mr. Trivedi is a North Indian. In the end when Uma discovers Sitaram Trivedi as the real murderer we find that the issue of communalism and religious fanaticism are of no importance to the common people. Dattani is not criticizing any particular religion. But, he also shows that tolerance and harmony are required among different religious sects to keep intact the unity of the country. In the end of the play Mr. Trivedi pays the price by losing his own daughter who commits suicide for being an accomplice in her father's crime. The murder of Lady Montefiore has virtually killed Radha and is responsible for symbolic assassination of the true spirit of the tolerant Hindu religion. Sitaram Trivedi has, thus, committed a number of murders, directly or indirectly.

Dattani's next thriller *Uma and the Fairy Queen* deals with the murder of an English- man, Michael. This play is important because it gives rise to a number of issues that are highly relevant in the modern context. They also refer to the diplomatic relationship between India and other foreign countries. The issue of murder becomes a matter of secondary importance. The murder turns out to be an outcome of the personal revenge, whereas Dattani raises the issues of cross border terrorism, India-Pakistan relationship, communal tension and human relationships in this play. The play also deals with the mother-son relationship in particular. The murder of Michael is committed in the first part of the play. The Bangalore police suspect it as a terrorist attack which is meant to taint the India-Pakistan-Britain relationship and also to give rise to communal tension in India. The problems of terrorism and communalism are serious issues in modern times and Uma Rao is not ready to put the blame upon any group which may give rise to more tensions and conflicts. Michael is killed by Feroz. Feroz is the illegal son of Nila Ahmed, a famous Pakistani TV star. Feroz lives with Malik in India. Malik is the actual husband of Nila but not the father of Feroz. Nila is in love with Michael. Feroz wants to kill Nila for being an adulterer. But unfortunately Michael is killed while saving Nila from Feroz. The murder is simply an outcome of the desire to take revenge. This also gives rise to the issue of different family problems and extramarital affairs. Feroz has suffered in society and at home for being an illegal child. But we also see the true motherly love in Nila for her son Feroz who tries to kill her. But the issues raised by the murder, in the

beginning of the play, are more important in the international context. This is so because terrorism is not only an international issue, but is also related to the matters of India and Pakistan. This is indirectly related to the Hindu-Muslim issue which is very important for India's internal as well as external security. By revealing the real motive behind the murder Dattani shows that, to come to any conclusion regarding such an issue, without investigating it properly, may go against the interest of the state. While talking about the murder of Michael with her husband Suresh, Uma says,

UMA. Suresh. It is you who don't understand. It is not in our interest that this murder gets to be more political than it really is. The relations between Pakistan, India, UK are at stake. That is the real issue. (Dattani, vol. II: 444)

Society needs to consider seriously any matter that is related to such a number of complexities. We may come to the conclusion that unlike many other thriller writers, Mahesh Dattani maintains his trend of presenting and focusing on the social problems through his whodunits. Murder becomes an issue which raises other important questions. The family problems, minority issue, the question of the eunuchs, national and international politics, communal tensions and many such complex problems are raised by Dattani which come into the discourse after the murder is committed. I have made a brief study of the world literature which shows that a detective plot generally revolves round the motive and the mechanism of the murder. Whereas, in Dattani's plays we find that the other related issues become the centre of discussion and murder appears to be only a driving action that leads to the revelation of these issues. Dattani emphasizes on the related issues other than the murder. The plot becomes a ground for interaction between these issues. Dattani tries to make us aware of the need to interact and analyze these problems for the betterment of our social existence.

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