

The Forbidden Space in Mahesh Dattani's Plays *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Final Solutions*: A Study

- Abhinandan Malas

Abstract: In the plays of Mahesh Dattani we see the representation of the marginalized classes of society and the space they occupy in society. This space is forbidden by society and is often ignored by the latter. My paper “**The Forbidden Space in Mahesh Dattani's Plays *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Final Solutions*: A Study**” focuses on this forbidden space and intends to show how this forbidden imaginary space stands out to be more real than the socially recognized space of the mainstream society.

Keywords: subjugation, humiliation, patriarchy, homosexuality, cultural psyche.

Mahesh Dattani has emerged as a major voice in modern Indian English drama. In his plays Dattani explores those spaces of Indian society that are generally ignored or overlooked by the latter. The issues relating to the problems of women, children, religious minorities, homosexuals, eunuchs and other oppressed classes form the major themes of his plays. While presenting these classes Dattani draws a demarcation line between the real space and the imaginary or the psychological space. The real space includes the real world. In this real space the oppressed classes hardly find any scope to accommodate themselves within the mainstream of society. On the other hand we see that the imaginary space denotes the domain where the oppressed classes do actually belong. This imaginary space reflects the actual world of these discriminated classes and shows what their existence is or should have been like. In his plays Dattani presents the real world and the imaginary world simultaneously to bring out the contrast between the two and certain issues and problems which evolve from this contrast and are related to modern Indian society. In doing so Dattani uses his theatrical space with subtlety to provide these spaces with symbolic significance. But the imaginary space, that truly represents the discourse of the oppressed classes of society, is forbidden by society itself. In this paper I focus on this forbidden space. I also intend to show how this forbidden imaginary space stands out to be more real than the socially recognized space of the mainstream society which has been portrayed by Dattani through proper division of the theatrical space. But, it is not that the forbidden space is always presented through imagination. It is also presented by the space occupied by individuals of these classes who demarcate their own boundaries through their words, impressions, concepts and attitude

towards the so called normal world. In Dattani's plays the oppressed classes include women, children, religious minorities, homosexuals, eunuchs and others whom society is reluctant to recognize. It is true that these sections of society do not interact freely with the mainstream society because their space remains unnoticed by the latter. A critical study and analysis of these plays will help us in bringing out the true nature of this forbidden space that lies very much as a part of society which is reluctant to notice it. The issues of women and children form important aspects of Dattani's dramatic theme and motif. In plays like *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Thirty Days in September* and *A Special Season (Ek Alag Mausam)* the oppressions, discriminations and injustice done against women and children in the patriarchal Indian society spontaneously create a space for them to exist and express themselves. This space is described by Tara in the play *Tara* through the following words,

TARA... The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out..." (Dattani, vol I: 325).

The play *Tara* is about the gender discrimination practiced against a girl child named Tara by her family including her mother. The story is about two Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, who were born conjoined and with three legs. The third leg had a greater chance of survival with the female child because it had the blood circulation from her body. But their mother and maternal grandfather, the representatives of the patriarchal society, did the discrimination against Tara and forced the doctor to give the third leg to the male child (Chandan). The leg survived for two days with Chandan and the result was that both of them were left with a single leg each and Tara got an improper health. This improper health ultimately led Tara towards her premature death. While talking to her brother Chandan, Tara points out that the space in which they existed before birth, their mother's womb, was the safe and secure space for them to exist. That space signifies the peaceful coexistence of man and woman without any discrimination. That can be called as the natural space. But, the eternal bonding of man and woman is broken when that space is lost and the individuals come in contact with society. By referring to the mother's womb Dattani refers to the prenatal space that exists, for an individual, before birth. Through this Dattani also refers to the shared space that exists between man and woman and every individual when they are not interfered by social constructs like gender. This shared space represents the two selves (man and woman) which are separated from each other after coming in contact with society. While speaking about the representation of childhood in *Tara* Dattani says:

I see *Tara* as a play about the male self and female self. The male self being preferred... The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst. (Subramanyam, 129)

This forbidden space of man-woman equality and unity is presented by Dattani at the end of the play where the imaginary space becomes the only space for existence for these two individuals without experiencing any kind of interference from society. At the end of the play Chandan gets

united with his sister Tara (who is dead at present) in an imaginary level, both having two legs each, and thus the fulfillment is achieved. The space that is not recognized by society is also presented as a cradle for attaining fulfillment. The patriarchal society ignores this space, the mother's womb, which is the symbolic original home of every human being. This space is forbidden and is lost under the gender constructs and stereotypical ideas formed by society against women. These social constructs are responsible for the loss of the space for Tara and also for her death as well. While talking on this matter Subhash Chandra says,

...it is not one individual who has killed Tara. It is the socio-cultural system which is responsible for her death. The beliefs, the attitudes, and the prejudices that are deep-rooted in the collective Indian cultural psyche become instrumental in taking Tara's life. It is a complex play. (Dhawan, 62)

Indirectly, but very truly, society is responsible for the death of Tara and also for the unending breach that has occurred in the harmonious relationship between man and woman. While discussing the role of society in the life of Tara and Chandan eminent critic Fatima Rizvi says,

The Patels have ignored the idea that perhaps Nature intends that the children remain because there is no essential difference between the sexes and wants them to remain always as they were born, closely hugging each other. Medical science, advanced technology, and humanity itself are against such oneness which they term freakish. (Rizvi, 15)

In *Thirty Days in September* we see the issue of sexual violence against a girl child. Here Dattani deals with the social evil of incest which tells the true nature of the real world. The desired space that we see in the eyes of Mala is reflected through the space that is created by Mala's self revelations when she is with her counselor. It is important to note that the imaginary space intersects the real space and as a result of that the boundary between the two often gets blurred. We have seen that in *Tara* and now it is more prominent in *Thirty Days in September*. The character Mala always oscillates between the space of cruel subjugation and humiliation that is thrust upon her by society and the desired space of safe, secure and normal life that she is denied of. The space of a little girl is violated by the cruelty of society. Throughout the play we see Mala suffering from the sense of guilt. Her childhood was lost when she lost her virginity. This turned her into a frustrated individual who lost control over her life. While explaining her predicament regarding her code of conduct (especially sexual behaviour) in society Mala says:

MALA. I don't know why. I just don't understand...Please don't ask me why I do it. It's just a game...not a game. No...it's...I know it's wrong. What I am doing is terribly wrong! But it means a lot to me. I like it. That is why I am a bad person. I have no character... (Dattani, vol II: 18)

In the play Dattani divides the theatrical space into several areas. The most important area is the first area of the counselor's room consisting of a 'comfortable' chair, a 'simple' table and a double sitter. This space is

very important because in this space Mala reveals herself, her dreadful past, her distorted present, her love affairs and her relationships with her mother Shanta and her boyfriend Deepak. This is the space which shows the intense struggle and suffering that Mala is going through at present while trying to wipe out the memories of her dreadful past. Mala's final victory in this psychological war establishes her as an individual with her own identity. She finds her own space which is free from the shadows of her dreadful past. In the counselor's room Mala finally declares her independence,

MALA (saying it with a growing sense of joy). But what is the point? He is dead. Today. February 29th 2004. he is dead. Today. I have made February 29th my Freedom Day. I will celebrate it with my husband. We are going to have a champagne dinner. He is waiting for me this very moment at the restaurant. (Dattani, vol II: 56)

We see Mala finally getting back her control over life. At the end of the play she is confident and has occupied a space in society and the play ends with a positive note. This space was lost in her childhood after getting sexually ill treated by her maternal uncle Vinay. Laws are there to punish criminals like Vinay, but the struggle and sufferings of a girl like Mala from her childhood into her adulthood often goes unrecognized by society. Society becomes cruel and oppressive for such sexually violated women who are treated as outcasts by it. Society refuses to recognize the space occupied by such women and causes further sufferings and humiliations to them. Mala's sense of guilt grows due to this attitude of society which evaluates a woman by her virginity and sexual conducts which are nothing but taboos and stereotypical constructs of the patriarchal Indian society. But, unlike *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September* ends with an optimistic tone. In the latter the forbidden space of Mala's existence as an individual is ultimately recognized by society. Mala herself succeeds in overcoming and defying the constructs of patriarchal society and finally establishes her own identity by affiliating herself to mainstream society.

In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani deals with the problems faced by the homosexuals in India. Like women and children the homosexuals are also treated as the marginalized others in India. Though laws are made to secure the space of the homosexual people in India, but, the real situation is different and has remained unchanged to a large extent till date. In this play Dattani presents a horrifying image of the predicament and the helpless situation of homosexuals in modern Indian society. The space occupied by the homosexuals, the lesbians and the gay people is forbidden by the 'normal' society. In the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani divides his theatrical arena into different levels. To understand the real nature of the socially forbidden space occupied by the homosexuals it is important to understand the different levels into which Dattani has divided his theatrical arena which basically consists of three areas. The most important area is the space denoted by Kamlesh's flat. The outer space denotes the real world. There is also the imaginary space which is also a part of the forbidden space. In this imaginary space

the homosexuals interact with each other and the real nature of their existence is revealed. The actual space of the homosexuals in society is represented by Kamlesh's flat. All the homosexuals Kamlesh, Prakash(Ed), Ranjit, Bunny Singh, Deepali and Sharad are confined within this space. But the imaginary level becomes a representation of greater reality where the true nature of this forbidden space is revealed. The homosexual space (both Kamlesh's flat and the imaginary level) is frequently intersected by the real space. The marriage ceremony, the music, the people of the other flats all are acting as subjugating agencies of society and are always posing threats to the homosexual space.

To secure their space the homosexuals are incorporating different codes of conducts, related to the heterosexual world, which are nothing but camouflages to hide from the eyes of society. Bunny Singh is the famous anchor of a television programme. He is having a family which includes his wife and two children. He has created a space in society to exist as a heterosexual which is nothing but a camouflage. He acquires a false identity to resist the hegemony of some false constructs and stereotypical ideas regarding alternate sexuality that are devised by society. The relationship between Prakash and Kiran(Kamlesh's sister) is also a camouflage which is having a great significance in the development of the dramatic plot. Prakash(Ed) is actually in love with Kamlesh. But, Kiran, Kamlesh's sister and the only heterosexual character in the play, is deeply in love with Prakash. Prakash wants to enter into a family relationship with Kiran so that he can continue with his homosexual relationship with Kamlesh. Thus, it is quite evident that the real space (homosexuals) is hidden under the social constructs thus giving it a false identity. The homosexual space is revealed in the imaginary level. In this level the feeling of insecurity and lack of communication among the homosexuals is prominent. While we come to know about the past meeting between Prakash and Kamlesh we see that these things are prominent from Prakash's words while talking with the latter,

PRAKASH...Why should I commit suicide? Nobody would know. Unless they were intelligent like you. But you don't know me. You wouldn't even have known I existed. (Pause) As you can see, I didn't do that. I thought to myself, let me just check out the park tonight. If I don't meet anyone who will listen to my story, then I will go ahead and do it. (Dattani, vol II: 81)

The above words of Prakash clearly show the predicament of homosexuals in society. The horror of the situation is presented in the last part of the play where we see that while Ed(Prakash) is attempting to commit suicide by jumping through the window the others are trying to stop him. One thing is important to note over here is that, the play ends with frustrations, unfulfilled desires and the threat to the forbidden space of homosexuals looming large. But, these homosexuals continue with their relationships without moving towards heterosexual bonding (except Bunny Singh). Ultimately the secret of the triangular love relationship between Kamlesh, Prakash(Ed) and Kiran is revealed. The final chaos and anxiety reflect the struggle among homosexuals to maintain their space of existence instead of getting lost among the

heterosexual world by becoming a part of them. This is an attempt to counter the threats from society and maintain their own identity.

Finally, when we come to Dattani's award winning play *Final Solutions* we find that while dealing with the sensitive issue of communal discriminations Dattani indirectly, but with force, points out the space occupied by the Muslims, a minority class, in Indian society. People like Javed and Babban find impending threats to their space of existence. Right from the childhood they have lived under tremendous social discriminations and ill treatments. Javed's stone pelting in the Rath yatra denotes not only his anger but also his desire to protest and get freedom and justice from social subjugations and stereotypes. While talking about his throwing stones in the rath yatra Javed says:

JAVED. I had permission to do exactly what I had been asked not to do all my life! Raise my voice in protest. To shout a scream like a child on the giant wheel in a carnival. The first screams are of pleasure. Of sensing an unusual freedom. And then...it becomes nightmarish as your world is way below you and you are moving away from it...and suddenly you come crashing down, down and you want to get off. (Dattani, vol I: 204)

That voice of protest originates from the conflict between the real space and the forbidden space, containing the Muslims and others. The burning of the shop of Javed's family by the forefathers of Ramnik Gandhi symbolically denotes destruction or ultimate loss of the natural space occupied by the Muslims in Indian society. Hardika's distaste for Zarine, that grew due to some misunderstanding, gave rise to hatred for the whole Muslim community in her heart. Hardika and Ramnik act as representative agencies of Indian society. In Ramnik we find the all considering self that is ready to listen to the problems of these minority classes. Society must recognize the forbidden space of Muslims and other minority classes and must listen to their problems so that a new space can be created for the peaceful coexistence of both the parties. Ramnik suggests this while talking to his mother Hardika about Javed and Babban where se says,

HARDIKA. Do you think...do you think those boys will ever come back? RAMNIK. If you call them they will come. But then again—if it's too late—they may not. (Dattani, vol I: 226).

Someone must take the responsibility to listen to these marginalized classes of society and also recognize the space occupied by them which is forbidden by the mainstream of society. In *Final Solutions* it is Ramnik Gandhi, in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* it is Kiran and in *Thirty Days in September* it is the counselor who plays the roles of listeners to the problems of existence faced by the people residing in the forbidden space. Tara (*Tara*) unfortunately fails to get any listener to her problems. She could have found someone in her mother but the latter was also an accomplice in the dark designs of patriarchal society against her. Chandan is also a listener but equally helpless like Tara. Bharati's (Tara's mother) repentance brings no solution to Tara. Listening to them and

considering their problems can secure the space of the marginalized classes of society.

Thus, it is quite evident that Dattani, besides presenting the forbidden spaces of society also shows that these spaces deserve to be a part of the social space. They basically reflect the real conditions of different marginalized sections like, women, children, homosexuals and religious minorities in the four plays discussed above. On the other hand society, which forbids these spaces, is itself based on some ideologies and stereotypical constructs regarding gender, religion, social behaviour and others which are nothing but false identities and concepts devised to serve the purpose of the privileged classes of society. Thus, the forbidden space turns out to be more real which needs to be recognized by society to end the conflict between the two.

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