

Myths, Beliefs and Practices in the Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract—*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines myth “as a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. The term myth has a wide range of meanings, which can be divided roughly into ‘rationalist’ and ‘romantic’ versions: In the first, a ‘myth’ is a false or unreliable story or belief (adjective: mythical), while in the second, ‘myth’ is a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding (adjective: mythic). In most literary contexts, the second kind of usage prevails, and, myths are regarded as fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity, and existence. (Baldick 235)*

Myths are the source of one’s culture, tradition, rituals, celebrations, beliefs and practices. All information regarding a particular group of people is revealed through myths. The information said in myths cannot be proved; yet it does not give room for suspicion because of the interest that it kindles on reading. Myths find its place even in contemporary writings as it fascinates the readers of all times and ages. As the mythological characters are not found in real life it fascinates the readers. The message which is conveyed through the myths will be very effective. In short, it will be apt to quote Coleridge; “willing suspension of disbelief”. We will not use our rational thinking to question it. Myths often help the readers to know the origin of some event. It teaches some virtues, it gives confidence and hope to people who are in grief.

The focus of this paper is to bring out the myths used in Dattani’s select plays and also to show the beliefs and practises of the people found in the select plays of Mahesh Dattani.

Keywords— *Myths, beliefs, practices.*

“Dattani belongs to a generation of writers who use the English language without either pride or guilt. Asked by a journalist why he didn’t write in his own language, he replied ‘I do’. (Mehrotra 392)

Thus Dattani has not only made English as one of his own languages but also has made Indian myths, beliefs and practices to Western countries through his plays and his language.

In the play *Seven steps around the Fire* the sociology professor Uma Rao investigates the murder of a transgender named Kamla, and finds out the truth that another transgender named Anarkali was not the real culprit, but has been falsely accused of having murdered Kamla. After meeting Anarkali in the prison she reads the origin and the history of transgender. There is a mythological reference to the transgender in the Indian Epic *Ramayana*.

Another legend traces their ancestry to the *Ramayana*. The legend has it that god Rama was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, ‘men and women turn back’. Some of his male followers did not know what to do. They could not disobey him. So they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion. (CP I 10)

People treat transgender as though they are not at all human beings. The pronoun “it” is sometimes used to refer them though it is scientifically wrong. Dattani has used the same pronoun even in his plays not only to make an easy understanding by the readers but also to teach them a lesson that it is a fault to refer to the transgender as “it”. It gives pleasure to the readers while reading in the terms that they are conveniently used to. It adds flavour to the drama. Though it is not history, it is interesting to read. Phrases like “lowest of the low” (11) denoting transgender; at once gets an honourable place in the reader’s heart.

However Dattani breaks the pleasure by introducing the myth in *Ramayana* to bring a religious effect on the transgender. After reading the myth whenever a transgender encounters in any one’s life, he will be reminded of this myth and would stop harassing transgender. So in this context, the myth is not unnecessarily thrust into the play. It also becomes the integral part of it. Actually the objective of Uma Rao’s

study is to find out the position of the transgender in the society. Through her study Dattani teaches the readers about the degrading position that the transgenders hold in the society.

In the play *Ek Alag Mausam*, Aparna, gets the HIV infection from her husband. But she is not disappointed. She overcomes her destiny by lending her service to the HIV affected children and dying people by joining in JeevanJyoti. While spending her days in the shelter, she takes the children for a picnic along with George who is also a HIV affected person. There she tells the children:

You see the devas were very happy with themselves. So they ate, drank and slept. They didn't do any work. Soon they became very lazy and selfish. All they did was think of themselves and much they could eat at every meal. God was very angry with them. So he put a curse on them. As a result of that curse, the devas could not bend their elbows. (CP II 521)

She instructs the children to have their food without bending their elbow but they could not succeed. She then continues the story:

And so they couldn't eat. All the devas were extremely upset. As upset you would be if you could not eat all this delicious food. They begged God to take back his curse. And God said-if you can eat without bending your elbows, then only shall I lift the curse. So they tried and they tried, until finally they succeeded! (CP II 522)

Aparna narrated this story to the children. If they feed the food to others they need not bend their elbows. This story teaches one of the values that one should always lead a selfless life. If Aparna tells the children that they should have concern for others, they should not lead a selfish life, it will not be effective. When this is said through the myth they would not forget. Dattani relates this myth with the day today activities. The moral said in this play is applicable to all ages and all people. So it is universal.

Dr, Machado's Jeevan Jyoti, the shelter for HIV positive and the activities that happen, show the sacrifice of so many people like George and Aparna. One should not spend his time in doing nothing. One must work hard and earn for one's livelihood. Laziness and reluctance to work are not virtues; children should learn this lesson from their childhood days onwards. Otherwise they would prefer to lead their life by making others to work. Life will be boring. And if there is no challenge in life we cannot immortalise it. If we do some remarkable work then we will become immortal beings.

In the play *Brief Candle*, Vikas, the central character takes palliative medicine in the hospital where

his former lady love Deepika is a doctor. He is conversing with Mahesh who is assisting Deepika. When Vikas expresses his fear Mahesh says:

Mahesh: Pray for freedom from the cycle of life and death. Do you know the Hanuman Chalisa? If you recite that a hundred times every day you will be free forever.

Vikas: But I want to live.

Mahesh: Hmm. . . Then chant the Maha Mrityunjaya.

Vikas: Ah! Like Markandeya. Ohmm Trayambakam Yajamahe . . . what was the story?" (*Brief Candle* 19)

Vikas is counting his days. He might not live for a long time, but Mahesh advises him to chant Mahamrityunjaya if he wants to live for a long period and if he wants to die he has to chant Hanuman Chalisa. He is forsaken by the doctors. But what Vikas says is that by chanting mantras he can come out from the fear of death. His attention will be focussed in chanting the mantra rather than thinking about death. Here one's belief gives life to that person. By uttering such mantras he believes that Vikas's concentration will be diverted from the thought of death. Thus Dattani has introduced Indian beliefs in this play.

Another myth is also referred in this play. Lord Shiva blessed a couple who asked for a child and gave two options. One is they will be blessed by a son with a long life and the second option is they can have a very good son but his life time will be very short; that is he will live for sixteen years .

The sage chose the good and devout son hence Markandeya, the perfect son, was born. But on his sixteenth birthday, Yamaraj, the God of death, came to get Markandeya. (19)

The story goes like this:

The boy clung onto Lord Shiva's statue and prayed, Om Trayambakam Yajamahe . . . Shiva was pleased with his devotion, so he made sure the boy never turned sixteen, so Yama could not take him away. . . (20)

Though Dattani talks about the suffering of cancer patients the message conveyed in the myth gives a lot of self confidence and peace of mind to Vikas. It is a must for people like Vikas who is always thinking about death. This myth is connected with the theme of the play.

There is a belief in Hindu religion that after death the spirit will remain for some period in the house. Dattani uses this belief in the play *Where There is a Will*. The central character Has Mukh's spirit stays in the house and watches each and every action that happens in his family.

I am dead .I can see my own body lying still on the bed. Looking peaceful, but dead. I never imagined it

would happen so soon. Well it has. (to the audience)
Didn't I tell you that if I carried on smoking like that
I'd be dead in no time? I didn't believe it myself. I
thought I was joking. (CP I 476)
The sprit will stay in tamarind tree is the belief of a
group of Hindus. Dattani brings out it in
this play. Hasmukh's sprit stays in the tamarind tree in
front of their house till the family
reunites.

Hasmukh (to the audience) Have you ever swung on
a tamarind tree? Upside down? You should try it
some time. You can see the world the way it really
is. It is important to get a good grip on the branch
with your legs. Then you can relax your hands and
head. (496)

In the play *Tara* the practice of soaking girl
babies in milk is mentioned In Patels community. They
do this to kill the girl babies because they have to spend a
lot of money for marriage and they have to give dowry to
the bride groom.

Roopa:...The Patels in the old days were unhappy
with getting girl babies-

you know dowry and things like that-so
they used to drown them in milk. (349)

In Dattani's select plays, myths are used in the
required places to bring a stronger effect to the chosen
theme. It helps to stress the point which Dattani wanted to
convey. The belief of the sprit that will stay after death
used in the play adds humour to the play and also it serves
the motive of the theatre that is to entertain.

Thus Dattani has succeeded in having used the
Indian myths, practices and beliefs to propagate his plots
and making the societal issues an easy understanding.

"Dattani felt that being an actor, then a playwright,
then a director are complementary to each other in
the intricate process of producing a play. The secret
of his success lies in the fact that the audience is
always kept in mind and that he was aware of the
significance of entertainment rather than the play
being didactic because then it ceases to be 'theatre'.
The most credible aspect of Dattani's plays rests on
his uncanny ability to communicate with the
audience straight from the heart. (Myles 114-115)

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