



Maresh Dattani's 'Clearing the Rubble': A Critique of Centre Versus Margins

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Abstract— *The present paper proposes to depict the reality of the society of modern times in a socio-realistic play 'Clearing the Rubble' by Maresh Dattani. The main thrust of the paper is to throw light on the pathos of the marginalized section of society. Maresh Dattani is a well known playwright who is known for his courageous attacks on the cruel and inhuman attitude towards the weak and marginalized categories. The paper examines how a society can be cruel enough to deny equal rights to their fellow beings on the basis of caste discrimination. 'Clearing the Rubble' brings treatment; the marginalized section of untouchables goes through during the natural calamity of earthquake. It presents the discrimination against the minority community of Muslims and who are also untouchables and is thus doubly marginalized. The dramatist has struck the conscience of the society by exposing the hypocrisy of the Indian society. Dattani wants to give a message through this play that the marginalized sections of low-caste should be given human status that, man is a man and he is born equal to all other men. This play gives an exotic image of our country and barely scratches the surface of Indian reality. He has made Herculean effort to retrieve the true and realistic inside view of India and her people.*

Keywords— *discrimination, hypocrisy, inequality, marginalized, untouchables.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India is not unique; caste system exists in most countries as barriers to class mobility. Discrimination against untouchables still exists in rural areas in the private spheres, in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources. It has largely disappeared in urban areas and in public sphere. Some untouchables have successfully integrated into urban Indian society, where caste origins are less obvious and less important in public life. (28th January 2010, The Hindu). In rural India, however, caste origins are more readily apparent and untouchables are excluded from various spheres of social life. (28th January 2010, The Hindu)

The main concern of this paper is to study on how caste and class system hinders the course of sweet-social-life in Indian society, and add to human suffering by creating

artificial walls and rituals at every step. The caste system and the class system are the two major factors that divide Indian society into various groups.

Indian society and culture is characterized by a pervasive belief in the doctrine of Karma. Unquestioning belief in the doctrine of Karma has had deep and widespread implications for Indian society. The belief that one's good and bad deeds are bound to be rewarded or punished tends to strengthen adherence to norms and is thus a strong support to processes of social control. Belief in the doctrine of Karma also performs the latent function of providing support to the caste system.

'Class' is another important factor of social stratification in Indian society. "Social class is a group of people based on any factor other than birth and having a specific social status attached to it." (81,Kumar). Thus class defines the social status of people on various grounds other than the

birth, and which accords people as socially superior and inferior.

Even then, it is not the caste and class alone which is responsible for the human predicament and suffering; the faults also lie with the followers and regulators of these systems. But, some masterminds corrupt and deform these social systems for their selfish purposes and give this pure philosophy a different colour of their prejudices, and it turns against mankind, retarding its mental, economic and cultural development. So both these systems as have been made chaotic and ugly in Indian society are condemned, criticized and wished to be relinquished by the social reformers and religious leaders.

Not surprisingly, many modern Indian writers have been fiercely opposed to social oppression, caste prejudices and injustices. In this regard Dattani's plays have been welcomed in the domain of Indian English Drama as 'Fresh arrivals' in the last decade of the twentieth century, as his plays deal with the contemporary issues. Dattani's plays are about the marginalized sections of our society, women, gays and hijras (eunuchs). It is their conflicts and frictions issuing from patriarchy, religious intolerance, gender and sexuality that he tries to explore. According to Dattani all of us "want to be a part of society of the mainstream but we must acknowledge that it is a forced harmony." (342, Chandra) It is the intense realization of this forced harmony which weaves the fabric of his writings. They expose the communal politics and violence of the people of the urban society, on the one hand, and the hypocrisy and class discrimination of the people on the other hand. He digs up concerns that the middle class lives with but has not come to terms with. He digs up contentious issues as, "In acceptance, he believes, lies the catharsis and the solution". Moreover, he quips, "Isn't it important to pursue truth for ultimately all art is but a quest for truth." (Oct.25, 2009, Singh) Thematic concerns of Dattani do not revolt with modern writing which expresses, "the themes of Individual's predicament in the form of rootlessness and crisis of identity mainly lying behind in desperate affirmation and traditional culture have been explicitly expressed." (128, Asnani)

II. MAHESH DATTANI'S CLEARING THE RUBBLE

Clearing the Rubble is Dattani's radio play which was first broadcasted on January 2002. Mahesh Dattani was commissioned by BBC Radio to write a play to be broadcasted on the first anniversary of the tragedy of earthquake that occurred in Bhuj in January 2001.

Clearing the Rubble followed three people whose lives were affected by the earthquake. An English journalist in

the region at the time of the catastrophe goes back to Bhuj a year later. He is trying to track a boy he had met when he was helping with the relief effort. We also hear the story of the boy's mother, herself trapped in the rubble.

Jeffrey is an English journalist, who is traveling through Kutch Express and remembers while scribbling, the devastating incident of earthquake that had occurred a year before. He personally feels that during the course of the year he has changed a lot, and he is coming back in India not just to meet Salim, but to help him or anyone else. He repents that when he had met Salim earlier, they did not get the chance to tell their stories to each another, if they had, they would never have parted.

Jeffrey narrates his story with his journey to village Malliya about a year ago on 28th January 2001, two days after a massive devastation of the land of Kutch, a region in the Indian state of Gujrat, with earthquake. He had come to write about the condition of humanity in other parts of the world. As Jeffrey narrates, we not only get the worldview of devastated land of earthquake and the people who have lost their loved ones, their homes and everything, but also 'communalism' and 'casteism' that create barrier in social or domestic life

There are whole rows of vans and trucks with equipments and rescue workers, but they do not reach Malliya, the village of Salim because they are marginals, Muslims and of 'low-caste' and 'low-class' society and the centrals are too powerful to lose their hold upon the secure operations to save their people first. Malliya, the village which has been reduced to the heaps of rubble presents only the heart searing scenes of loss and grief everywhere. The village has been completely cut off from the rest of the world, with no mode of communication, not a whole building or hut to be seen anywhere. The available sight is only of the silhouettes of piles of rubble everywhere. As Jeffrey while giving his introduction to one of the relief officers sounds like Tim Sebastian in one of his attack modes, "Are you preventing equipment and supplies from reaching Muslim and Dalit populations?" (72, Dattani. The officer pays lip service to the ideal of 'tolerance' saying "'No. No!' That is not true. We are a very tolerant people" (72, Dattani). Officer shows respect for the ideal of tolerance just because he knows that Jeffrey was catching the moments in his camera. This incident proves that we pay homage to ideals like tolerance, equality, casteless society, secularism, and brotherhood of all Indians, only in the books and through lip service.

As the story proceeds we hear Fatima who lives through the harsh reality of her daughter stripped naked in the street and another daughter who remains sick with cough and diarrhea, and, son Salim for whom they all have to

sacrifice, though it is another matter that Salim too has his own problems. With the death of her children Fatima could at least console herself that her children might be well in paradise, happy and free of all worries, neglect and differences of the world.

Salim's mother, Fatima is a religious lady whose faith remains unshaken even when she is left with nothing. She is a believer of the doctrine of Karma that is one's good and bad deeds are bound to be rewarded or punished according to one's Karma. Fatima believes that because they are of low caste and marginals, there will never be justice done to them in this hard-hearted world. But, God knows no difference and, "There will be justice and peace", in "Allah's Kingdom" (73, Dattani). Fatima also becomes the mouthpiece of the Indian philosophy of life after death as she seeks forgiveness from all her children to make her accounts clear before she meets them in the next world.

First she seeks forgiveness from her youngest child Saira who remained sick with typhoid, diarrhea, cough and fever throughout her brief existence in the world. Saira lost her father even before when she was born. Saira did not face much injustice as she left this unjust world soon. The problem with the Indian society is that people of low castes like that of Salim's family are not considered as persons, or as subjects, they are unfortunately treated as objects. That is why Fatima feels relaxed for Saira because she does not have to worry about typhoid or malaria for her and wait in line for a doctor to finally see them and send them to Rajkot for medicines. Fatima is relaxed with the expected happiness, justice and peace for Saira in Allah's Kingdom now.

Next forgiveness that Fatima seeks is from Mumtaz, the middle child. Mumtaz was the favourite child of Fatima as she was the strongest and most hard-working. Mumtaz is doubly marginalized. On the one hand she becomes the victim of society, being the girl of low caste and on the other hand she becomes the victim of patriarchal system as she has to sacrifice for the well being of her family, especially her brother Salim. The virtues of self-effacement and self-sacrifice, submission and docility are dinned into her in her childhood and it is taught to her to acquire these virtues which will bring her happiness and lead her to salvation.

Fatima remembers the incident when at the marketplace she was told, how Mumtaz was stripped naked because she was suspected to have stolen something from the hospital, where she worked. Fatima repents for sending her back to the hospital where Mumtaz was humiliated. She also pacifies herself thinking that she hid the fact and never told what happened to her. But, the contradictions of the storms

of thought keeps going on in her mind as the very next moment she says:

... No, that is not true. I never gave you a chance to say anything. Even if you had, I would not have listened. There were more important things than you to think of. Fighting to keep us all alive. (74, Dattani)

Thus, Mumtaz has to desensitize herself in order to survive in a society where the untouchables do not get any recognition as human beings.

Fatima finds no reason to beg Salim's forgiveness. She feels that they had given the best of what they all could. She had to work hard to buy his books or take some sweets for the schoolmaster. Mumtaz had to spend the whole day to fetch water for him to drink or wash his feet the next morning. What Salim had to worry was only about his father's decision to teach his trade, and his mother's decision to send him to school. Fatima does not want Salim to go in for the cobbler's profession because as a cobbler he would continue to be a low caste. This extraordinary domestic institution – 'caste system' has thus yielded strong ethnological results. It is worthwhile to quote the words of Rev. Sherring here, who states that the caste in India is:

Indissolubly blended with the social life of the Hindu and is as much a necessity to him as food to eat, cloth to wear, and house to live in. (217, Sherring)

Salim had his own dreams but there was no room for them in it. As he becomes a spirit, he appreciates his mother for having some dream and also for giving him a dream. Salim wants to talk to his mother to share what he was going through, Salim considers himself a burden, that was shared equally by his mother and Mumtaz and thus she sacrificed for the sake of her mother and not for him. He enjoyed the attention, little bothering about the responsibility that awaited him with manhood. As Salim defends himself:

I was a burden. To both of you. Because you wanted me to ease your burden when I grew up and earned enough money to support you... I did not know the responsibility that awaited me with manhood. I simply accepted whatever you gave me. You gave me a lot. I enjoyed the attention. (78, Dattani)

Salim recalls the days of his childhood in school where he enjoyed a lot because he did not have to work in the heat like his father and the school had a fan. He was happy among the boys and girls from different castes. Salim remembers the class-room incident when he was humiliated even by the Muslim boys in front of a teacher and he begins to feel low. As he narrates:

One day, there was a dead rat in the classroom. The smell was so strong that no one could enter the room. One of the

children told the teacher that I should be sent in to pick up the rat and clean the room. I did not want to do it. The bigger boys called me a cobbler's son and said that it was my job to do these things. If I could touch the hide of a cow, I could pick up a dead rat. The teacher did not say a word. (79, Dattani)

After this incident he felt that the boys are always mocking him, and he was not able to tell anybody about his family and caste afterwards, wherever he went for studies.

The stigma of being called untouchables and marginalized does not leave them even after their death. When they are alive, the society does not recognize and treat them as human beings and when they die the government wants a proof of their existence. They remain marginalized no matter, dead or alive. Lee Maracle in her "Notes on a Life" has presented the agonized cry of marginals as:

We have been handed a set of names and they all have race's based, colonial based, conquest based meanings and the assumption is that the others out there get to name things... they hurry to name it so we don't name it ourselves... they name it, define it and apply the rules to, then they own it and we just fit into it. (157, Maracle)

This is the reason that Salim has to stay on like other spirits because their lives and deaths have not been acknowledged. He wants to tell Jeffrey that why do spirits stay on? What do spirits want? And why after the death they do not go straight to the heaven and why this life continues? The government offers compensation to those who have lost their loved ones only if they can show proof that they lived and died. These are the questions where lies the significance of the title 'Clearing the Rubble'. As Salim tells Jeffrey:

For those of us who were buried or cremated before a doctor could reach us, we have no proof that we did exist. It is not enough that my mother tells them 'I had three children, I lost them all.' It is not enough that our neighbours tell them 'Yes I knew her children, they did exist!' The whole village can scream at them saying 'we did exist! We did live!' That is not enough. (82, Dattani)

Salim tells that outside his village he existed only in Jeffrey's mind, just to leave a mark behind. The play ends on a significant thought, which is in the recorded voice of Jeffrey in answering machine:

... If you cannot clear the rubble you have to live with it, around it and over it, because what you lost is buried in there somewhere and until you find it, you have to keep on living with the rubble. (83, Dattani)

Thus, unless and until our society emerges from the shackles of caste-based society, we have to live with the

rubble of an all pervading despotism which fosters jealousies, ferments faction, prevents union and thus repress natural growth and keeps it stunted.

III. CONCLUSION

The present paper poignantly discusses and reveals the issues of class, caste and gender as marginalities in the middle class urban world. Clearing the Rubble, emphatically bring casteism, classism, untouchability, discrimination and inequality in India against a vast section of its populace as are ordained by scriptures, which are held and hailed as sacred as well as divine. Salim and his community represent those marginalized muslims who endure discrimination, segregation and social ostracization. The whole play is a voice to the marginalized people. The playwright has excellently delivered the message. The society hardly allows the marginal to become part of the mainstream. The play has become a voice to all the voice less sufferers.

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