

## Construction and Reconstruction in Mahesh Dattani's *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child*

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### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a writer whose writing provides an identity for sixty million English-speaking Indians. He won the honor of being the first Indian playwright in English to receive the Sahitya Akademi award. His plays deal with issues of contemporary Indian society. The realistic narrative style Dattani fetches name and fame. His plays are the eye-opener in the Indian scenario. The play *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* is a radio play broadcast on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2000 on BBC Radio. Jeremy Mortimer is the director of the play. The play is a monologue that mourns the construction of marginalized society and the reconstruction of the social setup. The paper deals with the problems faced by the marginalized people, identity crises, and the reconstruction of their identity. The narrative style of Mahesh Dattani outpours the psyche of the downtrodden meticulously. The paper also highlights the inhuman attitudes force upon the people, who are considered as low in caste and class. Dattani attempts to give a gist of cognizance to society through his play. His perturb towards the marginalized group of people is pictured in the play *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child*. Dattani has made a trial to reconstruct the social construction of the Indian society. The play also reveals the postmodern perspective of hyperreality.

**Keywords:** Marginalisation, Identity, Discrimination, Reconstruction, and Construction.

Drama is a art like a tree. The tree gets its fulfilment on giving fruits. The drama is a fruit giving tree. The message send through a drama evokes pleasure and kindle the mind of the readers to think. The playwright conveys his message through the theme of the plays. The plays of Dattani speak through emotion and deep meaning. Dattani's play talks about reality. He brings the social issues through his dramas. He tries to convey the problems faced by the marginalised group of people.

The monologue is based on the true issue that affects Gujarat during the year 2000. According to the report by UNICEF India on July 19<sup>th</sup> 2000, says that the water scarcity affects the people. The report reveals that the mostly affected areas are Rajasthan, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. More than 15 percentage of the population gets through this drought.

Dattani presents this issue in a realistic manner. The playwright follows the dramatic style of Ibsen. The realistic stage of Ibsen is presented through the plays of Dattani.

*The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* is a radio play written to celebrate the six hundredth anniversary of Geoffrey Chaucer. This is the small play in the form of a monologue. Twenty-one writers were selected to write tales and they completed 2000 tales, *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* is one among the tales. The task of story writing reminds Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Jeremy Mortimer comments on the task of a story "Twenty-one writers were commissioned, and their starting point was to write a story which might be re-told to a group of travelers who are forced to spend the night together at a service station on a motorway in England" (CP II 561). Dattani creates the character Anna Gosweb a traveler from a foreign country. She is the narrator of the story. The play highlights the construction of Indian society which impregnates in the mind of Indian people. Through the character Jaman and his family the playwright presents the victimisation of social discrimination.

Dattani is a writer of social concern. He gives attention to the unnoticed issues in the Indian Society. Caste discrimination is a long-run process in Indian society. The structure of caste discrimination and its impact are seen in the play of Dattani. In Indian society, people classify themselves according to the caste to which they belong. They weight the status through economic stability. The high caste does not allow the low caste to attain economic stability. The caste identity also showers the feeling of self-esteem and positive ideas about the caste they belong to. The caste is identified as a stable construct by the upper caste people. They do not love to change the construction of caste in society.

*The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* is the story of Anna Gosweb, a foreigner on her journey to India. Her journey is an unplanned assignment. She receives a letter from a village in India, that makes her travel back to India after several years. She shares her experience of her travel to India and also the difficulties encounter by her to find out her friend Jaman. After several years a letter from her friend moves her thought back to her teenage travel. As soon as she receives a letter from Jaman, pleading for help to save his family by sending thousand rupees, Anna feels restless. As she unfolds the letter, her memories too unfolded. She remembers Jaman, with whom she had an affair long back. The letter states that "Dear Miss Anna Gosweb, I hope your God has been kind to you and favored you with a good husband and many children. Our Gods have failed us, or should I say that

they did not succeed in reaching us" (*CP II* 565-66). The words of Jaman ironically furnish his mental agony of poverty and helplessness. Jaman's village at Kapaswadi is struck with drought and famine. Jaman's opinion about God is different because of his poor wealth and health. Society is more partial in the eyes of a self-respectful man like Jaman. The poverty that struck his village left him helpless to quench the thirst and hunger of his wife and daughter. The words of Jaman express the discrimination of caste in the village, where he lives. He says that the rescue team is "too busy favoring our brethren in the cities and of course, the higher caste people of the village" (*CP II* 566). The letter was drafted "in perfect English" (*CP II* 565) with the help of the village postman. Jaman is not educated to write in perfect English. But he is a man of self-dignity, so he exclaims that he had not begged anyone during his lifetime. He too assures Anna that he will repay the debt after having a good harvest. The letter ends with a note that "Your friend in need. Jaman Gopalia" (*CP II* 566). Through the letter Jaman tries to identify himself as a man with self dignity in the midst of marginalization.

Dattani depicts the class struggle and presents a voice in favour of unvoiced people. Bhadury in his research paper *The Marginalised Group in Indian Social Construct: A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani* adds "the drama while reflecting marginality also reflects the modern Indian social psyche which is predominantly urban with a distinct flavor of the west as such. Time has come as Dattani showcases through his stage settings and dialogue, let alone the succinctly constructed plot and characters, how Indian drama is evolving and searching for a distinctive identity" (110). Jaman is a decent man and he respects all people, but he does not like slavery and caste discrimination. He visits Anna for the first time in Goa. She is a foreign tourist. When he meets Anna as a traveler from a foreign country, he behaves with respect, and he safeguards her, during her stay in India. Anna says "He protected me from drug peddlers and con men" (*CP II* 565). He gets her address on the last day of their meeting. Now, the letter from Jaman brings her again to India.

Dattani speaks to the audience through the glance of Anna Gosweb. Her travel gives a brief description about the places around Gujarat. From Delhi, she travels by train to reach Gujarat. She sleeps for a short while, then she wakes and glances through the window. She sees the land around the place as "tawny, deathly and broken down to flakes and dunglike . . . just bits of dried earth" (*CP II* 566). On the other hand, "there were patches of green land" (*CP II* 566), and she "came to know that belonged to high caste farmers" (*CP II* 566). The

discrimination is shown in cultivating the food-providing source. The poor low cast people die of thirst, while the higher-caste people enjoy all their possessions. Water is a gift from heaven, it is denied to the people of low caste. When the train was near Saurashtra, many carcasses were scattered around the drylands. The inhuman act of class discrimination is meticulously presented by Dattani. The playwright uses his talents for the service to the marginalized people by picturizing the difficulties faced by them because of caste discrimination. He aims to bring home the living condition of the poor and marginalized people in the discriminated social setup. The inhumane nature behind the suffering of the lower caste people was pinned by Dattani. According to Dattani, there are no class and caste barriers, only mankind exists. The people with plenty can support the people who lack. There are only two kinds rich and poor. They are created to love and care for each other.

Dattani gives an identity to Jaman a representative of working-class illiterate low-class laborers. The life of these people ends in paying interest on their debt. Farming is the source of income for their survival. When there is drought, they are not able to do farming. They lent money from higher class people to meet their homely needs. Then they work hard to pay their debt, but the upper-class people are not satisfied with the interest paid to them. This makes the low caste people the endless slaves. Jaman tries to break the chain of slavery. So, he went to Goa to earn money. It is said that "a farmer from Gujarat who visited Goa to earn enough money to pay off the debts his father owned" (*CP II* 566). The people work like slaves without freedom from debt. Jaman's dream to free his family from debt is like the dream of Ambedkar to create a casteless society. Munkar in his work *The Essential Ambedkar* rings the views of Ambedkar and his dream to have a casteless society. His "prime aim and mission of his life was the abolition of caste discrimination from the fabric of India. He wanted to bring the downtrodden and oppressed people freedom from caste-based oppression and untouchability. To this end, he challenged the system and fought for structural reforms in the way Indian polity and society was organised" (26).

With love, Anna reached the village of Jaman. She is eager to identify herself as Jaman's lover. She feels happy to see his family. She loves to share with him about their daughter. But all her dreams fail when she hears that Jaman is dead. On the other hand, her presence in the play helps to expose the cruelty of caste and class discrimination. Anna finds that the whole village is struck with drought. The caste made them suffer without drinking water. But the low caste people do not complain about any discrimination. They accept that it

is the way of their life. Anna finds that life is a total denial of existential freedom to them. They have no pure water to drink. Anna examines the street and says:

I went out and into the streets. I imagine every time in that settlement belonged to low caste people. they were not allowed to draw water from the well close by. Now that the well had dried up it didn't matter anyway. They had to walk three miles every day to fetch a pot of water from the relief tankers. There were too many villages affected by the drought and not enough tankers to go around. They only made it to the upper caste neighborhood. They had to wait for their turn. Which came after the others had their fill. . . (CP II 570)

The cruelty in sharing drinking water in the name of caste is inhuman. Anna attached herself very closely to Jaman's family. She introduces her as Jaman's girlfriend. She cries a lot because her desire for meeting Jaman fails. Still she is happy to visit his family. But Jaman's wife is not ready to accept the girlfriend of his husband. She wants Anna, to leave the place immediately. But Jaman's daughter Shanti smiles at Anna and she loves her. Anna shows the photo of her daughter Jennifer. While talking, Shanti falls and she struggles to breathe. Anna expresses her feelings for Shanti as "Death stared back at me. Shanti raised one frail arm towards me. I knew she was dying" (CP II 570). Anna carried her to the relief camp in Kapileshwar. In the journey of her rescue operation, she encounters the nasty nature of caste discrimination. Anna approaches a bus to take Shanti to the relief camp. But "Jaman's wife stopped a little away from the bus" (CP II 571). The bus loads with high-class people. Anna aims to help Shanti, she do not care about the upper-class travelers. But Jaman's wife is aware and afraid of high caste people. Anna looks at Jaman's wife and her hesitation to board the bus. She courageously grabs the hands of Jaman's wife and put her inside the bus. "An upper-caste man looked at Jaman's wife sitting next to his woman. He raises his voice and orders her to get out. He turned around to gather support from other people" (CP II 571). Anna says that "I planted my foot on his butt and pushed him hard down the steps and out of the bus" (CP II 571). Ironically Dattani highlights that the caste system must be pushed down with force and society must be cleaned and the flowers of love and care are to be grown. Jaman's wife remains passive and terrified during the whole course of action and clings on to Anna still they reach the relief camp. Anna stays with Jaman's family and helps them a lot. "Soon the monsoons arrived. We danced in the rain. I helped them plow

their land. We ran through the fields and bathed in the pond. Mother Earth's breasts were swelling up once again with nourishment for her children" (*CP II* 572).

Dattani symbolically notify that there is hope for good life and prosperity for the people when economic stability is attained. Anna is the symbol of humankind, without any discrimination. When society receives the pure hearts of people like Anna, then mother earth will get ready to nourish her children. The play has excellently delivered a message to society. Society hardly allows the marginal to become part of the mainstream. The play plays as a voice for the voiceless people. Payal Nagpal appreciates the plays of Dattani as "There is no doubt that Dattani's plays can capture the pulse of the urban audience by reflecting the problems of its day" (95). The issue of caste discrimination provides a good message to society. Angeline Multani's A Conversation with Mahesh Dattani sprinkles the views of Dattani through his words as "Yes all these are my identities. Some of them are more important than others. But I am not constantly thinking of my gender, my India-ness, or my sense of place. But these are all inextricably linked to my writing" (167).

*The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* gives an account of hyper-reality. Jaman's wife is not given a name in this play. Symbolically it expresses that she is not aware of her identity. She did not search for her identity. She does not care about her caste discrimination. Unconsciously, they follow the steps of the constructed norms of society without any question. She did not complain about the partial nature of water provision or anything that harm them. Anna reconstructs the prefixed ideals. Anna plays the role of a mother who loves to provide peace and harmony to her children. Anna struggles to show her identity as a good human. The play is a presentation of the unvoiced reality of human life.

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