

## **The Promise and Problems of Conjuality: A Critical study of Mahesh Dattani's 'Do the Needful'**

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### **I Introduction**

Family is not only an important constituent of Indian culture but the nerve centre of Indian life. Indian English post-colonial writers take 'family' as a metaphor in their works. They also examine the relationships among the members of the family with accuracy and authenticity. Marriage and breaking of marriage, parent-child relationships, extra-marital relationships, difference in outlook among members of the family on various issues attract Dattani's attention and shape his attitude towards different aspects of life. The plays of Mahesh Dattani emerge as 'fresh-arrivals' in the domain of Indian English drama to crystallize and represent the 'essence' of what contemporary urban life in India is about for so many middle and upper-middle class Indians in the last decade of twentieth century.

Creative writers like Dattani in their works have shown how man is forced to renounce spiritual vows and practices and accept mundane reality with all its attractions and compulsions. Love, sex and religion have been the recurring motifs in all forms of art because they wield excessive charm, influence and power in life of man and are an indispensable part of his earthly existence which distinguishes him from all lower forms of life. Whereas love and sex help him to express his emotions and passions especially in relation to the opposite sex, religion becomes an expression of man's higher aspirations and helps him to overcome human frailties and weaknesses.

Thus, the themes of alienation and rootlessness, uncertainty and restlessness, of religious crisis, are the very fundamental attitudes relating to the existence of man, rebellion of the individual against all kinds of established concepts and notions and his desperate attempt to carve out an identity for himself or a fierce striving to save himself from turning into an automation, find expression in the works of contemporary writers.

Mahesh Dattani, Indian playwright in English, seems trapped between conflicting perceptions of being “unaware of reality” and “being too real.” (Multani,36) These conflicts are related to issues of identity in a multicultural society. He addresses an audience that is English speaking, urban and middle class. This audience has, in the last few decades, been caught up in debates about its identity. He scratches beneath the surface to dig up concerns that the middle class lives with but has not come to terms with. “The contemporary urban Indian has to struggle with conflicting loyalties.... He has to confront every day, the tensions created by his/her several fragmented identities of class, caste, gender and religion.”(Multani, 42) These themes appear from time to time in Indian playwriting in English. In particular, the family as the source of oppression and the breeding ground for social prejudices has been the subject of several Indian plays in English, including the plays of Cyrus Mistry, Poile Sengupta, Dina Mehta, Gieve Patel and Mahesh Dattani.

The present paper comprehensively studies the theme of conjugal relationship, love, partnership, trust, betrayal and homosexuality. The focus of the research paper is on the social structure of the society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity. Besides studying the theme of gay relationships, it also studies how young women are eager to prove their independence and break free from their parents.

## ***II Do the Needful***

In the play *Do the Needful*, Dattani has once more adopted the all too familiar locale of the upper middle class family. This was his first radio play, commissioned by the BBC and the genre he has chosen for that was of a romantic comedy. Dattani has chosen the

mechanism of two ethnically diverse upper middle class Indian families, and then go on to subvert the entire edifice that has been constructed.

This play is set in India with the overt handling of the theme of arranged marriages. A gay man forced into a heterosexual marriage with a tenacious, independent girl in love with another man is character that easily goes down with any audience, worldwide. The subtle nuances are provided by the nature of the arranged match: the north-south inter-community arrangement in itself shows up the entire episode for what it is – a cover up, the all important facade that must be put in place if the social, familial machinery is to work.

Having an arranged marriage may be very convenient and beneficial in many respects, but it can also have its problems. Arranged marriages, which are prevalent in Indian society, may be regarded as coercion if young people are forced in marriage they do not want. If either bride or groom is being made to marry without consent, this has to be regarded as a violation of the fundamental human right of self-determination and personal freedom. In such circumstances, we often changes ways, make compromises, negotiate with the proceedings or sometimes, just stand stubbornly and let things fall apart.

*Do the Needful* displays the conjugal problems of Alpesh and Lata primarily, who are forced into marital relation with persons as they belong to from different cultural milieus. They too do the needful, make compromises and negotiate with the proceeding and allowing each other to enjoy their freedom, as one is homosexual and other notorious, by remaining silent to each other's secrets while also keeping their parents happy.

This is the play where Dattani simultaneously explores the twin issues of gender and alternate sexuality. It begins with montages of sounds that juxtaposes all the major characters and locate them in heterogeneous settings at Mumbai and Bangalore, as also in terms of their orientation. Two sets of families, one Gujrati (the Patels), the other Kannadigas (the Gowdas) are negotiating a match between their offspring. Alpesh Patel

is “thirty-plus and divorced” and Lata Gowda is twenty four and “notorious”. (Dattani,21)

The situation thus becomes at once curious and grabs the interest of audience, as anyone familiar with the Indian cultural and social milieu rarely does one come across inter-community arranged marriages. The curiosity turns into astonishment when it is revealed that both parties are themselves wary of the situation, and highly skeptical of each other. Gowda couple assumes Patel’s to be broad-minded as they are considering an inter-caste marriage just like them but doubts about their financial status:

Devraj Gowda: After all, if they can consider an inter-caste Marriage, they must be broad-minded, like us.

Prema Gowda: Or really, really desperate. I can’t do this to Lata! He is divorced, and there’s no mention of his education. Lata is so well read!

Devraj Gowda: He is richer than we are .... (Dattani, 121)

Patel couple is also in the identical situation of doubts, distrust, confusion and assumptions about the Gowda’s as Kusumben Patel expresses, “If they have something to hide, then... If not, we will find some poor Patel girl-who will be grateful to enter our household...” (Dattani,126). So, both the families, though highly skeptical of each other, are condemned to the arrangement because of social pressures.

At the very outset of the play, Dattani lets the audience to the ‘thoughts’ of both Lata and Alpesh that resonate with yearnings for Salim and Trilok respectively, and realize that while the prospective ‘bride’ is involved with another man, apparently a ‘terrorist’, the ‘groom-to-be’ is a gay. Both the families find their children going out of the way and become desperate to set them ‘straight’ and settled by throwing them in the institution of marriage.

*Do the Needful* works on ‘fringe’ issues that remain latent and suppressed, or are pushed to the periphery. Dattani through his plays push forward these issues to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence.

...You can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian [that] doesn't happen here. You can't talk about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having sex with a cook or actually having a sex life – that isn't Indian either - that's confrontational even if it is Indian. (Chaudhary, 47)

Dattani believes that the ‘mainstream’ society lives in a state of ‘forced harmony’, out of the sense of helplessness or out of a lack of alternatives. Simply for lack of choice, they conform to ‘homosexuals’ as stigma on society or persons besmirching the name of the family. Though, the winds of change are blowing across the country. And it is the modern generation which is increasingly outspoken of sex, leading the way. But still homosexuality is considered as a taboo in our society and Alpesh represents the case of those gays who, because of social pressures do not accept publicly that they are ‘queer’, could also do a bit of soul-searching.

Life goes beyond legal issues and Alpesh never musters up courage to become outspoken about his sex preferences. Though he drops hints about his happy being alone exemplify the results of his last marriage but parents who are unable to understand the undercurrents of his thoughts make him to agree by all means to get into socially accepted heterosexual marriage. Social pressures that work through its unit family could be seen where Alpesh tries in vain to veto their opinion on his own marriage. The family acts as the hegemony of common oppressor which puts the shackles and handcuffs of marriage to their respective offspring Alpesh and Lata, against their wishes just for the sake of good name and reputation in society.

Lata is a different individual who hates when anyone says the words ‘Do the Needful’ with regard to her marriage. She is involved with a Kashmir based Muslim boy Salim, a terrorist, with whom she is ready even to elope if she is forced to marry

elsewhere. Gowda couple, like most of the Indian parents is against this relationship which will bring nothing but stigma and disgrace on their name as the following conversation reflects their view:

Lata: Please, Amma! Please don't insist I agree to this!

You are ruining my life.

Prema Gowda: You should have thought of our lives  
before sleeping with that terrorist.

Devraj Gowda: Lata, go to your room...

Prema Gowda: She has to do it in his hostel! Couldn't  
they go to a hill station or somewhere ?

Lata: You wouldn't have allowed me.

Prema Gowda: All those boys knew about you! (Dattani,122)

If Alpesh's mother threatens him to commit suicide, if he denies or in case his marriage crumbles, Lata's mother uses the tool of her tears to get the girl agreed for marriage

In arranged marriages, parents display their children as being 'gifted children', with unique attributes and qualities to enhance their value in 'marriage market'. Lata in the beginning has to show that she can cook, "While cooking is not one of her talents" (Dattani,145) and Lata hates the way she is being exhibited for marriage and is filled with contempt, remembering her last experience:

...This was the bit I hated. The last buffalo complained about my narrow hips. Honestly, I would have screamed if this one had done that. You don't need wide hips to bear children, for God's sake! (Dattani,132)

Alpesh too has to present himself as the sole supporter of the family and economically sound. He has to speak highly about his printing press diploma and the way he got the

loan of seventy-five lakhs to meet the requirements of the company Hewlett Packard. Thus, under the pressures of family Alpesh and Lata have to put false facades and behave hypocritically though alien to their nature.

Both the families brag not only about their respective children as ‘the most suitable match’ but also about their ancestral backgrounds. While Gowdas exhibit about their being, “landowners since the Vijaynagar Empire” (Dattani, 137) that existed in the eleventh century, Patels too propose their being traditionally rich farmers. Both the families are poles apart not only in terms of demographic region but also in their traditions and culture. The Gowda’s traditionally were landowners while Patel’s farmers, their cooking and taste preferences are also different as Gowda’s, “puts lot of tamarinds in their cooking”, while the dishes of Patel’s are “mostly sweet”,(Dattani,138) and, “not too spicy”, and are purely vegetarians while Gowda’s, “eat everything” except “beef” of course.(Dattani,139) This north and south fusion of the families also differ in their views about giving rich gifts in marriage as dowries. The Gowda’s give and take rich dowries to their daughters in marriage while patel’s oppose any such exchange. The difference that is head and shoulders above these differences is the difference of educational status of the prospective bride and groom. While Alpesh is college dropout and had studies in “Jamna-bai Narsibai Bingo” (Dattani,130), Lata had her schooling from “Bangalore Catholic School”, the best in Bangalore” (Dattani,134). And while Lata is just twenty three, Alpesh is thirty plus and divorced. In spite of lying bare of the separateness of their existence, the families move inexorably towards the pre-ordained destiny: the marriage of their subversive children, though also curious to know the other party’s difficulty to find suitable match in their own community:

Another issue which gets concern in the play, though secondary, is the crumbling joint family system. Gowda couple blames themselves for Lata’s going astray and ‘notorious’ as they remained busy in their clinic, and Lata grew up as a neglected child. But even at the crucial moment of hot discussion over the issue, Prema Gowda puts forward herself as the modern woman who stood up for her rights. However, mental

stress, emotional insecurity, confusion and sense of alienation of Gowda's on various fronts are easily put behind the facade of false love and unity.

Indian society and culture is known for its strong secular orientation, because it readily accepts diversity of faiths and plurality of customs and traditions. But our society does not readily accept inter-caste, inter-community and inter-cultural marriage especially, the educationally backward classes who are against such changes in society. They regard them as ills present in the Western world which are ruining even our society. Dattani enmeshes such outlook in the present play through the characters of the liftman and Malliappa, the coconut vendor. They represent the nagging society which always peeps through the windows of others house. The liftman keeps an eye over the every movement of Patel family and gossips, "I hope Alpesh bhaiya's luck is good this time. They are in Bangalore? South Indians?" (Dattani,123). Malliappa also rejects Alpesh for not knowing Kannad, calls them, "modern big people, giving so much freedom to your children" (Dattani, 140).

Ironically enough, when both the families are approving for Alpesh and Lata's match, they themselves disapprove each other though it is Lata only who discloses her involvement with Salim, while 'things' remains in the closet of Alpesh's mind about Trilok. Lata knows that her parents just want her to get married to anyone and she has no say in the matter. But, when Alpesh also expresses his helplessness to say no to this arrangement either, she is resolved on running away. It is Gauri, Gowda's cow, however, who changes Lata's course of action and her fate. Before leaving her house finally, Lata visits her cowshed and discovers Alpesh with Mali in an offensive state. She expresses her disgust for the whole thing while Mali keeps pleading and Alpesh readily accepts his being 'homosexual':

Alpesh:       What are you doing here?

Lata:           You! ... You are a homo!

Alpesh:       Will you turn off that flashlight? No, just point it someplace else...

Mali:           Akka! It was not my fault, Akka!



Alpesh: Wait a minute! He was enjoying every minute of it! ... Look, honestly, it was my doing. (Dattani, 153-154)

But, her initial and expected disgust gives way to a gleeful sense of freedom. She would not have to sleep with this man if she marries him. Both will be able to give each other ample space and do their own thing, also keeping the families and society happy – ‘doing the needful’. The mutual agreement comes in the form of a Hindi phrase that Alpesh offers. “Teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup”. (Dattani, 142)

The compromise that Lata and Alpesh make in marrying is a clever and conscious choice to maintain peace and status quo, almost tailored to suit both the characters as well as the larger milieu; indeed, a ‘forced harmony’ as Dattani would put it. “The crux of the solution”, as Asha Kuthari puts forward, “also suggests that the space between two marginalized groups is now truly shared. The forced harmony has actually brought in a sense of liberation, not guilt” (Chaudhary, 161).

### III Conclusion:

Thus, the ‘romantic comedy’ *Do the Needful* achieves its purpose that typifies the genre with no overtones of morality or shame. The protagonists in this play are in search of their identities within the oppressive structures of custom, tradition, gender and sexuality within the modern urban Indian family and conjugal relations. Alpesh and Lata find an ingenious solution by ‘doing the needful’ and thus giving sufficient space and do their own things, also keeping the family and society happy. Unfortunately the idea is horrifying which is unacceptable at the cost of the sanctity of marriage.

### IV References:

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