

Typical Indian Parents' Mentality Portrayed in the Drama "Do the Needful" by Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a well-known playwright and a film director of India, whose themes mainly revolve around modern-day Indian issues. Although the main theme of the drama "Do the Needful" is not about the mindsets of the Indian parents, the researcher has found it interesting that the dialogues between parents of the Lata and Alpesh sound very much like the typical parents of many households. The qualities that the parents look for in a Son-in-law of a Daughter-in-law, the discussion between the mother and father weighing the pros and cons of the match, forcing the wedding on their children, talking high of the properties of the in-laws, all these factors are the stories of many households in India. This research paper is an attempt to bring out some of the typical characteristics of the mindset of the Indian parents with reference to the play. In the first part of the paper, the researcher introduces Mahesh Dattani as a playwright and introduces the general traits of the Indian parents. The researcher justifies that it is not to generalize but to reflect the attitude of the majority of Indian parents. In the second part of the play and the theme are explained. In the next part of the paper, various lines from the play that represent the theme are taken and explained amalgamated with the quotes of other researchers to justify the theme of the research paper. The last part of the research paper concludes with the critical appreciation of the play.

Keywords: Dattani, Play, Romantic Comedy, Patriarchy, India, Arranged Marriages.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani's plays reflect many ills of Indian society. Usually, the plays that highlight the ills of society tend to be serious in their tone but Dattani's narrative style is quite different in that they do not always seriously portray the ills of society. He uses comedy as a genre if required. The play "Do the Needful" is one of those romantic comedies that immerses the audience in humour yet brings out a very important shortfalls of Indian society. The very title of the play "Do the Needful" is an Indian English expression. The whole theme is very much Indian. It is interesting to note that the play is written for BBC Radio. According to Sally Avens, the play is well-received by the British audience. Sally Avens, in her note to the play, writes about the universal appeal in the drama:

"Like all the best love stories, the hero and heroine end up getting married, but the road to marital bliss is full of the most unexpected twists and turns. For me, this was the enjoy of working on Mahesh's script: his writing, whilst taking on a conventional form and being readily accessible to an audience, never fails to challenge and surprise and whilst the play may be set in India within the conventions of 'arranged marriages', its wider themes are universal" (Dattani 2016:138)

Typical Traits of Indian Parents:

It is not intended to stereotype the attitude of all Indian Parents to a particular category. As every individual is different, parents too are different from one another. However, the majority of Indian parents have some traits in common. There are positive outcomes as well as negative outcomes of upbringing by the Indian parents. Indians flourish in academics and hold very good positions in various multinational companies because of the upbringing of the parents and at the same time, they come hard on their children and devoid them of their freedom to choose either in terms of career or marriage. In an article published

in Times of India (2020) under the title “Five toxic parenting traits we are guilty of”, the five toxic qualities of Indian parents are mentioned:

“1. Unnecessary comparison 2. Creating gender-specific roles at home, 3. Not placing enough importance to their mental health 4. I did this for you- attitude 5. You don’t respect their privacy”.

References from the Play “Do the Needful”:

Lata and Alphesh both are unwilling to get married because of their own reasons, Lata is in love with a Muslim man named Salim and Alphesh is a gay, who adores Trilok, a massage therapist in Mumbai. Alphesh is already a divorced man.

Patel’s family comes to Bangalore for a matrimonial interview. The situation makes us identify the typical Indian tradition, where marriages take place according to the wishes and whims of the parents without giving much importance to the wishes of the children. You do not have to marry someone whom you love, you get married to the one we select, and then you can love your future husband or the future wife is an unwritten rule in India. However what is notable is that the Patels and the Gowdas agree to inter-caste marriage, which is the modern trend in its way. In this conversation between Prema Gowda and Devraj Gowda, we understand that desperation, being rich despite being divorced, showing off the wealth, and addressing her own daughter as notorious, these regressive ideas are exposed yet they consider themselves as broad-minded because they are in favour of inter-caste marriage:

“PREMA GOWDA. Do you think it will work with these Patel people?

DEVRAJ GOWDA. Who knows?

PREMA GOWDA. They seem desperate.

DEVRAJ GOWDA. We are desperate.

PREMA GOWDA. He is thirty-plus and divorced.

DEVRAJ GOWDA. She is twenty-four and notorious.

Pause.

PREMA GOWDA. Hmm,

DEVRAJ GOWDA. After all, if they can consider an inter-caste marriage, they must be broad-minded, like us.

PREMA GOWDA. Or desperate. (Sighs.) 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.

PREMA GOWDA. When do they want to come?

DEVRAJ GOWDA. 21st and 22nd September. We can take them to the farm. That will impress them." (Dattani 2016:144)

It is not uncommon in India that if there an unmarried daughter at home, the people around them such as neighbours, colleagues and relatives bring in so much of pressure to marry off the girl. The more they delay them more pressure the parents are under. Such kind of societal pressure gets on the Gowdas, who are desperate to marry off their daughter, as early as possible. It is more of an issue of honour rather than respecting the feelings of the girl. "It is ironic that the Gowdas and Patels, who try to show that they are very civilized, in terms of inter-community arranged marriage, have no care for inner happiness of their children" (Kumar 2017)

Kumar Rai (2014) gives his reasoning for the attitude of the Indian parents to resort to such actions as "There are the two levels of the mental spectrum of parents and mental spectrum of the children, but the interior space dealing with individual's free will and choice is hidden. It is yearning to express under the weight of exterior space dealing with the society/parental mindset. What parents think good/proper is revealed through exterior mode. And what Alpesh/ Lata think is revealed through the interior channel. An exterior device can

be deemed as the curtain to veil the internal reality of the human mind and psyche. The play alerts us about the excessive parental pressure for conforming to the tradition and conventions of society”. Thus in the following conversation between Lata and her mother, it is evident that they are forcing the marriage upon her because of the external pressure, that is from the society of getting to know that her daughter has had an affair with a Muslim man and it is widely known in their community:

“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. You have ruined our lives!

DEVRAJ GOWDA. Prema . . .

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 (tearfully). All those boys knew about you!

LATA. That’s not true.

PREMA GOWDA. They told their mothers and their grandmothers and the whole wide world!

LATA. No, they did not. Because it is not true!

PREMA GOWDA. Oh, so the whole Gowda community is lying about you?

LATA. People believe what they want to believe.

PREMA GOWDA. Why would they want to say all this then?” (Dattani 2016:145)

Typical Indian parents rate the standard of the school not by the standards of the school but by who goes to the school, In the following lines, we see how hilariously Dattani portrayed the conversation between Alphesh and Lata's parents:

“PREMA GOWDA. And which school did you go to?

ALPESH. Jamnabai Narsibai. (Thought.) Bingo!

CHANDRAKANT PATEL. It's a good school.

PREMA GOWDA. Yes, I am sure . . .

DEVRAJ GOWDA (overlap). I have heard of it . . .

KUSUMBEN PATEL (cutting both of them). All the film stars children go to that school.

Pause.

PREMA GOWDA. I am sure it is a good school. In spite of the film stars' children” (Dattani 2016:154)

Another trait of Indian parents is to worry about the career of their children, Instead of letting their children grow on their own, they arrange everything to them. Alphesh's parents persuade him to tell Gowda's family about how hard he worked to establish the printing press. However, Alphesh knows how it is established and he doesn't find conviction in telling them, and in his thoughts, he expresses his feelings as:

“ALPESH (thought). What could I say to them? Daddy had his colleague approve the loan. We paid enough bribes to get the damn thing off. We hired the underworld to have Grandpa's tenants evicted . . . I hate lying and liars. I have to do it so often. I feel every time I speak, I am lying. (Pause.) In case you think I am rich . . . I am just the caretaker. It's all his. I can't walk out on him without leaving it all. I wish it didn't matter. I wish” (Dattani 2016:162)

Either good or bad habits, Children in India are afraid to let their parents know about their habits. The fear that they have towards their parents doesn't stop them from resorting to the bad habits but they keep the parents in the dark, Parents by restricting them, lose the opportunity to talk and counsel of where to draw the line. In the following lines we see that both Lata and Alpesh smoke but they don't want their parents to know it:

“LATA. I didn't know you smoked.

ALPESH. Oh!

LATA. I didn't mean to startle you. It's okay, go ahead.

ALPESH. Thanks.

More puffing.

LATA. I can see the back yard from my window. I looked out and I saw you.

ALPESH. Please don't tell my dad . . . about my smoking.

LATA. It's okay, I understand.

ALPESH. Why did you come out? Is there anything you want to talk to me about?

LATA. No.

ALPESH. Oh.

LATA. I just came down here to join you for a smoke.

ALPESH. Oh.

LATA. May I have one?”

Conclusion

In spite of highlighting very serious issues in the play, Dattani doesn't lose his sense of humour; he brings out the issues in a subtle sense of comedy through the dialogues. The play closes in a happy ending as everyone gets everything they want. The typical mindsets of

the Indian parents, rights of gay community, hypocrisy of elders, society that pokes its nose into affairs of others and so many other themes are highlighted in a short play. On further research, the topic can be extended to the psychological and sociological reason for the mindset of the Indian parents.

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