

Confluence of Past and Present in Mahesh Dattani's 'Morning Raga':

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani in most of his plays befittingly mingles the past with the present. Dattani, smoothly and inadvertently infuses the elements of past into the modern themes to give appealing sense to the plays '*Final Solutions*', '*Do the Needful*' and the movie '*Morning Raga*'. The movie '*Morning Raga*' is a perfect example of the confluence of past and the present. The present paper analyses various incidents, situations, characters, settings and even technical aspects used by the dramatist to connect the past and the present, traditional and the modern, rural and urban setting. The elements of past and present are inseparable in the works of Dattani. The paper envisages that inspite of being contradictory, past and present cannot be isolated from each other. On the other hand, their perfect and balanced combination is an essential aspect for a bright future. The paper appreciates Dattani for moralizing the readers to accept, adopt and adjust themselves with the modernity, youths and contemporary situations without clinging to past too tightly.

Keywords: Morning raga, Carnatic music, self-guilt, flashback

The great Roman writer Horace has stated, "The purpose of drama is to delight and instruct".¹ Mahesh Dattani's works definitely serve both these purposes of drama. His plays primarily delight the audience and at the same time instruct them for the fatal repercussions of the false and pseudo notions of society. About the true function of drama, Dattani states, "The function of drama in my opinion is not merely to reflect malfunctions of society, but to act like 'freak mirrors' in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all passes for normal in our world. It is ugly but funny."²

Dattani deals with the contemporary modern themes but in it he infuses well the elements of past thereby making it naturalistic, familiar and acceptable to Indian psyche. The traits like old blind faiths, customs, art forms, setting and even old people are all suitably infused and perfectly blended into the modern themes. Dattani doesn't consider past and present as fragmented notions but considers their fusion as inseparable part of a man's life. He never draws a bold line between the past and the present but emphasizes on the need of its fine combination. He develops the hypothesis that past and present cannot remain isolated because they are not separate entities; the present reflects the past and the past corrects the present.

The action in '*Morning Raga*' moves between the past and the present in the form of flashback and flash-forward. Throughout the movie one observes the invasion of past and present into each other's territory. The movie breaks the duality of past and the present and the distinction of personal and impersonal. Dattani explains about this duality in the movie, "It's about a meeting of two worlds. A story that brings together the modern and the traditional, unites the past with the present, Carnatic music with Western music, fate and coincidence with individual choices".³

The movie mainly deals with the emotional and identity crisis of an artist Swarnalatha. She generates an uncompromising guilt of killing her son Madhav and her friend Vaishnavi in an accident. She also suffers due to surmounted pressure of social conventions upon her. Swarnalatha, Mr. Shastri, Abhinay's father and Mrs. Kapoor belong to same generation but they all possess different attitudes. Swarnalatha possesses broader outlook. She learns and perfects the art of singing which was not considered a respected profession at her times. She even dares to give her performance in concerts outside her village. However, she is not bold enough to give a fight with the social conventions imposed upon her by the orthodox people of the village.

After the tragic accident, Swarnalatha is swayed by constant boasting and banging of societal norms which a married woman is supposed to follow. Her tragic past, compounded with irrational social myths, gradually dominates her mind and her art. The result is she gives up singing and loses charm of life. Her pessimism indicates her weak will power and makes her stand in the line of orthodox women. Thus Swarnalatha's behaviour appears to be contradictory. She wants to enjoy the freedom which modern life provides but cannot come out of the threshold of rudimentary and social domain. She cannot keep herself free from the terror of orthodox traditions. But in the end her ongoing tussle gets the outlet when Abhinay

enters her life. He fulfills Swarnalatha's suppressed wishes and helps her in unfolding her talent.

Abhinay brings Swarnalatha out from the clutches of social obligations. He helps her to overcome her guilt. It is due to the efforts of Abhinay that in the end Swarnalatha supports music and proves her fondness for music. Her suppressed energy is well tapped by Abhinay and the real Swarnalatha peeps out of the layers of social inhibitions and the feelings of self guilt. Ultimately it is her music that helps her to retain her self-esteem and self confidence. She even accepts Abhinay as a replacement of her dead son Madhav. Hence before her concert with Abhinay, she addresses the audience,

“Thank you. It has been a difficult raga for me to learn. Twenty years is a long time. Music is a never ending journey. It has been my dream to sing for an audience such as you. But ... (Finding it difficult to get the words) tonight, I will sing this song for my son who, like my music, has returned after a very long journey. (Looking at Abhinay.) Abhinay, I sing this raga for you—my son”. (CP 416)

In the movie, Swarnalatha represents the past, the traditional, the Carnatic music and one end of the bridge of the fusion. On the other side, Abhinay represents the opposite – the present, the modern, the western music and the receiving end of the bridge. Though Abhinay represents the opposite side of the past, he is not against the past. He comes to the accompaniment of past so that the two could come out with a perfect union. It is he who encourages Swarnalatha to give her classical voice to his western music so as to suit the modern generation. It is the tireless efforts of Abhinay that he builds a strong platform to connect the present with the past. If one holds or advocates for either the past or the present then he/she is either wasted or remains outdated. Hence one should always strive for the perfect unison of past and the present. Abhinay runs from pillar to post to bring Swarnalatha out of her past. He leaves no stone unturned to unite his western music with Swarnalatha's traditional yet rich and serene music.

Mr. Shastri and Abhinay's father are of the same generation and almost of the same age but represents opposite poles. Throughout the movie Mr. Shastri is shown to be a calm, composed, submissive and a supportive husband. He understands Swarnalatha's restlessness and supports her at every step. He never imposes his dreams and desires upon her. He doesn't hold his wife responsible for the death of their son. In spite of belonging to past generation and living in a village where women of respectable families are not supposed to sing in public, Mr. Shastri never stops Swarnalatha from singing. On the other hand, he motivates

her to nurture her art. He helps her in every possible way and always stands by her side. He follows what Abhinay plans for Swarnalatha. When Swarnalatha refuses Abhinay to give her voice to his music, it is Mr. Shastri who tries to convince her to accept Abhinay's proposal. Thus Mr. Shastri helps Swarnalatha to overcome her trauma which she has been nursing for twenty years.

Swarnalatha: I just couldn't go.

Mr. Shastri sits next to Swarnalatha.

Mr. Shastri: He needs you.

Swarnalatha: Why?

Mr. Shastri: He is a musician. And so are you.

Swarnalatha: You never ...

(Swarnalatha cries softly. Mr. Shastri holds her in his arms as she sobs.) (CP 390)

Unlike Mr. Shastri, Abhinay's father is an orthodox Indian and a male chauvinist. He holds Vaishnavi's and Swarnalatha's music responsible for the tragic accident. He doesn't approve Abhinay's idea of making music as his profession. He has no fondness for music. Hence he becomes furious when Abhinay tells him about his music group.

Abhinay: I am not coming back.

Father: Oh. Then what are you going to do?

Abhinay: I want to start a music group.

Father (Yelling): Whose baby is that? (To Abhinay.) Will you be able to support yourself?

Abhinay: I will be sending what I have saved.

Father: You have also gone mad! Like your mother! She is controlling you from the other world! (CP 344)

The fourth character of old generation in the movie is Mrs. Kapoor. Dattani portrays her character contrary to Swarnalatha. Mrs. Kapoor is a modern woman who helps her daughter Pinkie in every aspect to fulfill her dream of becoming a singer. She tries her best to keep Pinkie happy so that she should never realize the void of her father. She does not allow the shadow of her being a widow to cast upon her daughter's life. She is a happy go lucky woman who boldly faces her loneliness by keeping herself busy in her boutique and helping Pinkie in every possible manner. She permits the boys of Pinkie's group to practice in her home.

“Oh yes! Your wonderful talented friends. So pleased to meet you! Go right in. Pinkie dear, go ahead. I’ll call if I need you.” (CP 357)

She is a tough woman. It is she who befriends with the village women and sells them the tickets of Abhinay’s show. She doesn’t disclose her husband’s truth to Pinkie till she becomes young. However, she reveals everything to Pinkie when she charges her for not allowing her to be close to her father.

Mrs. Kapoor: He used to beat me up. He would start in the morning and ... I tried to protect you ... and I did. Pinkie, that’s all that mattered to me. That you didn’t see any of it. I don’t want you to hate your father. He was sick, but—he loved you a great deal. He did.

(Pinkie slowly holds her mom and hugs her. Mrs. Kapoor smiles at her reassuringly.)

Mrs. Kapoor: It’s okay. I am all right. I am a tough woman. (CP 366)

Thus all these four characters of past generation differ in their way of dealing with the situations of their life. They either mutely accept and follow the social conventions like Mr. Shastri or try to shake the pillars of social taboos like Mrs. Kapoor and later Swarnalatha also. Abhinay’s father representing the opposite pole advocates the old customs. In any way the lives of these characters move around the social taboos either in advocating them, accepting them or opposing them.

Contrary to the past generation is the present generation of the movie represented by Abhinay and Pinkie. They are least concerned about the social beliefs and the people of society. They are determined youths and don’t need the consent or the support of their parents to attain their goals. They continue marching towards their path without any hesitation or counter action in response. Thus in the movie, we see different perception and diverse outlook of two opposite generations in dealing their lives.

Dattani depicts that the old generation cannot come out of social conventions so easily whereas the young generation has nothing to do with these conventions. The success of the people of past generation depends largely on the support they get from the family and the society. On the contrary, the young generation doesn’t wait for family’s or society’s approval and do whatever is aimed in their lives. The youths with their revolutionary thoughts and clear vision break the physical, social and emotional barriers which may hinder their path of success. The younger artists know it well that the unreasonable societal norms could not bind their talent. That is why Abhinay, in spite of strong opposition from his father, makes music

as his profession. He doesn't concern or seek advice from his father for his career but simply declares what he wants to do in life.

Abhinay's father: Is it enough to make you famous?

Abhinay: If she had lived she may have been a famous musician.

Father: Is Swarnalatha a famous musician?

Abhinay: She doesn't want to be famous.

Father: You are very innocent. You are going to lose all your money, and she is not going to help you when you go knocking on her door. (CP 404)

Abhinay is so confident that he doesn't ask for any financial assistance to his millionaire father. He is least concerned about his father's financial or personal affairs. He doesn't ask anything nor reacts when he senses the clandestine relations building between his father and the maid servant of the house.

Like Abhinay, Pinkie is also a determined and a dynamic young girl. She is also passionate for music and wants to make music her career. She is a sole decision maker of her career. She is moved when Mrs. Kapoor tells her the truth of her father. Pinkie, who has been nursing misunderstanding about her mother's relation with her father, now understands her mother well. Thus we see that the youths of present generation are more confident, more determined and more matured than the older generation.

Apart from the fusion of past and present generation, the movie also fuses western and Carnatic music. Swarnalatha and Vaishnavi representing old generation are the masters of Carnatic music whereas Abhinay and Pinkie representing young generation are the artists of western music. Abhinay and Pinkie have high regard for the classical Carnatic music. About this fusion of western and classical music, Aruna S., a critic says, "During the recording, it was interesting to watch the interaction between these two artists belonging to two different worlds-Carnatic and western. They are working together and creating something new. It was a meeting of two worlds."⁴

Abhinay is so passionate for his mother's violin that after twenty years of his mother's death, he goes to village just to have it. When he holds the violin of her mother sent by Swarnalatha, he becomes excited and feels his mother's presence. The touch of violin reminds him of his mother. Hence he decides to infuse Carnatic music in his western music. He meets Swarnalatha in the village and develops so much fondness for her voice that he invokes her to sing for him.

Abhinay: Will you sing for me in a concert?

Swarnalatha: No.

Abhinay: You must. I cannot do the concert without you.

Swarnalatha is perturbed.

Swarnalatha: Why?

Abhinay: I don't know. It somehow makes sense. (CP 380)

Abhinay feels that only Swarnalatha's voice befits his music. Hence when Swarnalatha rejects his proposal, he invokes her in the name of his mother Vaishnavi. He emotionally blackmails her by asking her for the returns of his mother's accompaniment to her.

Swarnalatha: I don't go to the city.

Abhinay: You must.

Swarnalatha: Why?

Abhinay: Because it's me who is asking. Vaishnavi's son. My mother played for you. You can sing for me. Or don't you want to return the favour because she is dead and it doesn't matter any more? (CP 380)

Like Abhinay, Pinkie too has respect and fondness for Carnatic music. Though she doesn't have the base of classical music, she becomes desperate to learn lessons of Carnatic music from Swarnalatha. After her initial hesitation, she learns classical music perfectly and comes true to the expectations of Abhinay and Swarnalatha. Seeing Pinkie's passion and determination to learn Carnatic music, Swarnalatha transforms her art to Pinkie and makes her an able artist. Later both the females develop a strong tie between them.

Thus Abhinay and Pinkie represent young generation in true sense who incorporate whatever good and rich of past into present for a better outcome. They don't cling tightly to modern and western thoughts nor blindly follow the past. They extract the better of the two opposites- of the past and the present, of the old and the young, of the tradition and the modern. They become successful in convincing and proving their mettle. It is the result of their efforts that Swarnalatha resumes her singing and Abhinay's father too acknowledges his son's skill in the end by burying his deep-rooted prejudices against music.

It is interesting to study the two opposite females of past generation- Swarnalatha and Mrs. Kapoor. Swarnalatha represents a typical village woman whose tragic past relentlessly dominates her present life making her silent and serious. She stops singing and holds herself solely responsible for the death of her son and friend. She even doesn't talk properly to an outsider and becomes petulant if somebody talks to her. Hence when Abhinay comes to meet her for the first time, she tries to avoid her and becomes restless.

Nagamma: That boy is coming here, Amma! Vaishnavi's boy!

(Swarnalatha drops the pot and it falls into the well. Swarnalatha is flustered.)

Swarnalatha: Oh! Call someone, quickly before it goes right down! Oh! (Nagamma leaves. Swarnalatha frets over the pot. Calling.) Somu!

(Abhinay comes to the backyard. Swarnalatha begins to sweep the area around the tulasi plant.)

What do you want from me? (CP 371)

Opposite to Swarnalatha is Mrs. Kapoor. Her past is equally tragic but she closes all the doors of her past. The way she leads her life and cares for Pinkie proves her courage and determination to fight against the odds of life. In spite of being a single mother, she fulfills every genuine and small wish of her daughter. She is financially independent and enjoys the life to the fullest. She remains cheerful and accepts everything happily whatever comes in her life. She is so bold and lively that she doesn't hesitate whistling loudly at Pinkie's performance in a banquet hall. She even enjoys riding on the buffalo in the village when she breaks her leg and couldn't walk. Not only this, she also sells the tickets of Abhinay's show to the villagers. It is because of the efforts taken by Mrs. Kapoor that the hall gets completely packed for Abhinay's and Pinkie's performance.

Abhinay: I can't believe it. The entire village is here!

Mrs. Kapoor: Well, I did sell a few tickets while I was there. (CP 413)

Thus we observe that the two women of same generation having similar tragic past look at life with opposite angles. One faces the life too boldly without bringing the shadow of her past on her present and the other goes on clinging with her past and is completely enveloped by its shadow.

The contradictory behaviour of the two women is the effect of the surrounding and the society in which the two women Swarnalatha and Mrs. Kapoor live in the movie. Swarnalatha resides in a village comprises of orthodox and conservative people. She can't build her confidence to face the adverse situation of life. She loses all hopes and lives a charmless life. On the contrary, Mrs. Kapoor is a resident of a metro city where the people know the art of facing the situation irrespective of its gravity. In the village, things are different. The villagers, including Abhinay's father hold Swarnalatha responsible for the tragic accident and go on reminding her about it every now and then. When Swarnalatha starts imparting the lessons of music to Abhinay and Pinkie, Appa Rau, an orthodox villager, remarks,

Appa Rau (to Annapoorna): Here is some news that will get rid of your stomach ache ... Our Swarnalatha is going to the city to sing! Yes, I heard it only this morning. That boy Abhinay has asked her to sing with some modern band ... What she will do singing there God alone knows ...! After all that happened, she still wants to sing in the city. (CP 382-383)

In city like Mumbai, people don't have time and interest in poking their noses in the lives of others. Nobody in the city looks Mrs. Kapoor down for being a single mother. Thus the surrounding and the mentality of the society we live in certainly affect our lives. It is the society which helps us to overcome our trauma of life and to motivate us for a happy life in future. And it is the society again which revives our old wounds and forces us to live a hopeless life.

Towards the end of the movie however, Swarnalatha understands the game of life and accepts the situation. She throws her guilt consciousness, resumes her singing and thus makes her life melodious again. In order to bring this transformation in Swarnalatha, every character plays a vital role. With the support of her caring husband, Mr. Shastri, Abhinay's reminding her of Vaishnavi, Pinkie's motivation and even the opposition of Abhinay's father boost her to go ahead in life and help her to get back her lost son in the form of Abhinay.

Thus Dattani successfully portrays the opposite reaction of two females of same generation. Throughout the movie we see the complex and opposite currents of past and present, Carnatic and western music, rudimentary and modern thoughts, opponents and proponents of music, city and village life, old and new generation. Dattani thus precisely conglomerates so many opposites and ultimately gives the best product. Asha Kuthari remarks about this fine antithesis of the movie, "*Morning Raga* speaks about the confluence of the past and the present, of old and new worlds, the archetypal and the contemporary, and importantly, Carnatic and Western music as the pre-release comments and interviews by the director stated."⁵

To present the fusion of past and present in more effective way, Dattani paints the exterior of the movie with his dexterous art of using the techniques of flashback. In '*Morning Raga*' Swarnalatha is shown to remember the tragic accident again and again in which she loses her best friend and her own son. After accepting the invitation of Abhinay and Pinkie hesitatingly, when Swarnalatha dares to cross the city, she is again reminded of her past and she stops there and there only. Within a few minutes after she occupies seat in the bus, she

once again remembers the tragic accident. The continuous use of flashback and flash-forward techniques creates beautiful crescendo in the movie. She remembers,

Swarnalatha's child is drawing a pattern on the window pane. Present time. Evening. Bus. Moving. Swarnalatha looks around. The bus approaches the bridge. Swarnalatha can see the bridge now. She panics. Swarnalatha gets up and tries to go to the front. But there is a lot of stuff in the aisle. Swarnalatha looks at the bridge approaching ...

Flashback. Interior. Bus. Falling over the bridge.

Swarnalatha's tanpura cracks as the passengers are jolted out of their seats as the bus begins to keel over. Swarnalatha's child is torn away from her with the impact. Vaishnavi reaches out to Swarnalatha's child. Vaishnavi's child is pulled away.

Present. Bus. Moving.

Swarnalatha leans forward. She sees the river.

Swarnalatha (screaming): Stop it! Stop the bus!

The bus stops on the bridge. Everyone looks at her as she tries to get off with her bag. The bag comes apart as she gets off the bus. Swarnalatha gets off the bus and runs back towards her village. Swarnalatha turns around to see the ghostly figures of Vaishnavi and her son.

In the movie, Dattani beautifully mingles the village and the city life. Abhinay and Pinkie live in metro city and visit the village for learning classical music from Swarnalatha. This village is the hometown of Abhinay where his father stays taking care of the ancestral property. Pinkie's connection is also there with this village as his father meets with the tragic accident in the same village. The subservient character of the village Appa Rau adds flavour to the movie by presenting the typical mindset of the village people. Appa Rau's conversation with his buffalo Annapoorna brings before us the image of the village life. The name Annapoorna of the buffalo further justifies the village life.

Appa Rau: Oh, oh. Annapoorna, see. See who has come. Our Abhinay!

Abhinay: Namaskara Appa Rau. All these years and you are still milking Annapoorna!

Appa Rau: Give my regards to your father. (To his buffalo.) A nice boy from our village should not be roaming around unmarried. (CP 342)

Mrs. Kapoor's arrival in the village displays all the shades of village life before us. When she walks through the village with her high heel shoes, she twists her ankle. She takes the support

of Appa Rau to reach to village women weavers. Appa Rau's hesitation to walk with Mrs. Kapoor reflects the shame the village people feel to be with a stranger lady. We could relish another village scene when Mrs. Kapoor due to her twisted ankle can't walk and hence rides on Annapoorna led by Appa Rau.

Mrs Kapoor: I can't walk any more. What do I do? Help me!

Mrs. Kapoor puts an arm around Appa Rau. He is clearly embarrassed.

Appa Rau: Annapoorna! Look that side! (They walk for a while.) (Pleading.) Madam!

The house is here. Please Madam, walk properly. I am a respectable man with grandchildren. I will take your leave now. (CP 400)

Conclusion:

In the movie, Abhinay's father, a rudiment villager disapproves and discourages Abhinay's idea of choosing music as his profession. He considers that music would destroy Abhinay's career. Similarly Swarnalatha chains herself with the strong strings of societal pattern and narrow beliefs as against the younger generation Abhinay and Pinkie who are least concerned about the biased notions of society.

We observe that Dattani presents the young generation as bold, carefree and revolutionists and at the same time very matured and balanced too. Abhinay and Pinkie become successful in their lives in spite of their tragic past and struggle-full life. Both the youths face lot many hardships and even emotional pits in their ways to success but they face it calmly trying their best not to hurt anybody.

Through his unique techniques, Dattani beautifully mingles the past with the present. At no stage and in no scene, one sees the incongruence of the two. The characters, the elements, the psyche, the traditional old and the modern new beliefs and the situations of past and present are so incredibly incorporated in this movie that nowhere we feel the deliberate or odd entry of the past into the present and vice versa. Dattani leaves no room for any kind of alteration in the movie. From technical view point also we witness the best combination of the past and the present. No doubt we experience the conflicts and differences in the attitudes of the characters of different generations, but those differences appear so smoothly and unknowingly that one feels it to be an integrated part of the theme. Dattani doesn't permit the dominance or the encroachment of the past and the present in each other's territory. As a careful and an intelligent playwright, he justifiably treats past and present without ever being biased towards any side.

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