

Minimised Identity and Marginal Self in *The Big Fat City*

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Abstract

If each existent has voice, though many a time voiceless, then the marginals are undoubtedly vocal; vocal in their demands, needs as well as plight. The echo of ‘need’ and ‘feed’ has its own meaningful pattern of sense and sensibility – the exploration of which is challenging and at times defeating in terms of ‘feel for humanity’. The present paper is one such difficult and self – defeating attempt to reveal the voice and voiceless cry of the Marginals in terms of caste and class discrimination. The recent play *The Big Fat City* is therefore in resonance with the marginals striving for articulation in order to achieve self – respect and self – efficacy. With Juxtaposition of urban – rural and have-have not, the cunning inhuman traits and tools at work are projected with precision to slot the marginals in full deep probe.

Though the present age has awarded multiple choices, yet the life of marginals cut off from the power – society continue to rely on their personal fate with little or no voice. With increased financial and social instability, anxiety and social approval is as much a far – off gain as was earlier. The public and private spheres juxtaposed adds a much-telling effect to the ‘voiceless say’ of the marginals projected/delineated.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, *The Big Fat City*, Minimised Identity, Marginal Self, Marginals, Voiceless, Power, Inequality, Articulation

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani the playwright, screenwriter, film-maker, script writer, producer and stage director has produced plays of enduring merit. Realising that the world is filled with new ideas, Dattani, like Karnard and Tendulkar, introduced new art form, emerging from the use of technology to add loud meaningful decibels to otherwise not much robust genre. He made theatre move out of the proscenium to speak more intimately and largely on contemporary issues. His enthusiasm resounds in one such play of meaningful enterprise ‘Where did I Leave my Purdah,’ Where Nazia of old theatre makes a comeback with affirmation- “My life is big. I am BIG and GENEROUS. Only the theatre deserves me” (44). The play under study *The Big Fat City* appeared for the public on 22 June 2013 at the Tara Theatre, NCPA, Nariman Point, Mumbai to “... reflect on the highs and lows of surviving in a system largely indifferent to Profession Theatre” (cover page)

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Discussion

The Big Fat City is another challenging play with much assertive and aggressive note against khap community. Dattani has established his acumen for taking up contemporary issues - a quick diagnosis comes up as a play if an ill affects the society pathetically. Achintkaur, T.V film and stage actor, therefore, labelled it as “a black comedy” in her contribution entitled “A Note on the play” affixed as a preface. The play illustrates honour killing, also called ‘customary killing’. It can also be defined as a death that is awarded to a spouse or both for marrying within the same gotra or outside one’s caste or one’s sibling or proximal cousin. A caste definition describes this as “Honour crimes and killings as violence stemming from a perceived desire to safeguard family” human which in turn is embodied in female behaviour that challenges man’s control over woman including control exerted through sexual relations, rape, dating someone unacceptable to the family and the violations of restrictions imposed on woman and girl’s dress , employment or educational opportunities, social lifestyle. Victimisation to implicit discrimination brings in violence and loss of new bloomed lives. Parallel to this is explicit discrimination wherein a self- imposed seclusion is expected no sooner economic weeds spurt up.

In the modern times, marginalisation is the cause of concept change. Today an individual is no longer a product of merely traditions, rituals, localities or family. In the existing times, under the flux of transitional changes, self- identity is created through ‘choices’ made by a person. Because the rate of change is annoyingly hurried, it is difficult to survive “on automatic pilot” mode to protect a single lifestyle from the generalised environment of ‘Decent Living’. In an effort to reach a level of public charisma, charm and appreciation, the self is subjected to unimagined conflicts that leads to ‘fragmentation of Identity’ and additional rigorous efforts are put in to reconstruct the narrative of ‘recognition’. Because modern life is more private and at the same time more public the inhabitants are open to high-consequence risk in terms of emotional and psychological health. Marginalisation of any nature – be its class, caste or race occurs when the self-preserving aspects of identity are mutilated or hampered. The need to promote self-worth for sense of belonging and connectedness with others is therefore requisite for innate drive to feel efficacious, safe, and secured living. When this master sentiment is diseased due to motive challenged by the world around, a marginalised ‘self’ is the ugly outcome. The Big Fat City’ is a potent example of this process.

Plot

Murli and Niharika are socially secluded due to fiscal downfall, herein Sailesh falls in as a butt for Niharika wants to transfer their loan to Sailesh’s bank not knowing that Murli has lost his job too. On the other hand, Sailesh is intent upon using Murli against misuse of his customer’s money. Equally deplorable is the state of TV actor Lalita who needs money to fend

her boozier husband-Kailash and a young son - Rahul. In her struggle to make both ends meet, she gets involved with a drug racket of underworld with wild notoriety. Kailash is killed by Puneet who is Anu's husband and are paying guest in Niharika's flat. Because Kailash is lying naked dead in Anu's bed, Puneet suspects his wife sexual connection indicating fragile trust in marriage. To do away with the corpse, the entire stock of characters join to manage Anu to trick her brother Harjeet for Rs. One crore. Harjeet suspects foul play and appears as a killer to do away with his sister for living with Puneet causing stigma on their Khap community. Full of gory drama elements like envy, adultery, violence, murder, greed, mafia and corruption, the play adds gloom to the class and caste marginals. The play is therefore an endeavour to integrate same caste and gotra marriage into the common acceptable fold of social recognition. With multiple cruel instances happening now and then, the play demands 'Khap Penal Pattern' to be quashed both legally and individually.

Interpretation

Spread to the length of two acts and six scenes in all, the play makes neat slots for story to develop. Act I, Scene I opens in an economical locale comprising of one bedroom-hall, kitchenette with a small balcony attached to it for meagre air to blow in. Poor finances of the inhabits is symbolically conveyed through makeshift furniture in the bedroom further a few essential items are also on the missing list like a television set and an air conditioner. With poorly done backdrop one can estimate at once that the cause of tension in none other but "no money" or less Money". Murli and Niharika are therefore struggling for a support- system that can steer them out of deep waters. Resorting to false way and tricky intention that are at work to bait a man of richness who can crutch their staggering finance.

Niharika: ... you have to look successful... and are chance ! we have this one chance and you want to ruin it. (158)

It is this prospective help which ironically comes to bait the couple as financial crutches for Sailesh pretends to be financially sound through his plight is much a corollary to that of Niharika and Murli. Sailesh is quick to estimate in the possibility and is disappointed. Interestingly this is quickly reported through SMS – the screen shows what aside or soliloquy were instrumental in doing in earlier times. The screen reflects his thoughts as- loud meditation, a window to processing of circumstances as derivatives. When Sailesh's wife calls him exquisitely of the possibility of help needed, he types out a message as he is in audible proximity of Niharika and Murli-Screen (from Sailesh): Just Got HERE. His wife is A PRETENTIOUS, SNOOTY BITCH. CHANCES ARE SLIM: (158)

This trap is concocted again through a technical gadget with its social website- Facebook-

“I am so glad to see two college mates united, thanks to Facebook (161). Sailesh and Murli are in tight corners but strategically one wants to use the other for rescue operation. The spouses on either side are also involved to bail out the opportunities. Lolly is another such instrumental presence put to work to tide out the economic odds in Murli’s financial health. Technology is again given space and the popularity of the soap-opera. Saas Beni Saperan is mentioned to illustrate the expanse of media-reach.

Technology is also utilized for plotting and its secrecy as audio-conferencing tool is put to revelation:

Screen (From Niharika): I invited Her so he will be IMPRESSED. IT’S WORKING SO PLEASE DON’T SCREW THINGS UP. DON’T SAY A WORD. (165)

Such innovative techniques do save time of staging and also propels speed of the plot. This also keep the three strands of the story well connected and interdependent:

- a corporate couple in
- a financial quandary
- a popular soap star with a troubled marriage and an aspiring starlet with uncanny awry.

Conclusion

The Big Fat City is not a well-received play though the head female actress Achint Kaur makes tall claims of the subtleties which challenged her performance. The reasons given are varied for example it talks about three strands of stories badly linked to make a shoddy plot and the message going awry as the play progresses. This concoction of three message conveying into one may please a crazy Dattani-lover but others may find the play mind-boggling. Center stage is occupied by female characters who are socially and economically under-privileged and in this sense are subalterns. Pathologically the play suggests an attitudinal change as a truly revolutionary empowerment. The play details how poor finances is a social disadvantage whereby an individual is relegated to the fringe of the groups/ society where he desires to be. The love partners Anu and Puneet are condemned to live a life of homeless to seek ‘gainful’ togetherness which the refractory community does not permit.

Escaping from social deprivation is their only refuge. To their fate lies the other group (Murli, Sailesh and Lalita) fearing economic exclusion as they lack capital asset to repay debts and survive on daily basis. Here all characters are ‘poor’ in an uncustomary sense, that is “they have little; are of little or no worth and have little skill/luck”. The entire cohort of personae strive illegally and unethically for non- food related needs. This uncomfortable fringe speaks loud of increasing internal and external dependence for lazy and luxurious survival. For example, Murli who is living away from his mother in a modern flat decides to shift back to his parental house

due to loss of job in the sweep of inflation hence stands deprived of his rightful bailout package. Murli who has bought a modern living on manifold debts sounds pathetic when he pleads:

Murli: I can't take it; I can't live in the fear that these thugs from the bank are going to come and knock on our door. They will beat us up, Break some bones to get us going , don't like violence. I don't even play Angry Birds! (180)

The plight of all characters is limited to the slot named 'Material Self'. The 'Bodily Self' is in conflict with the world and wherein each character stands marginalised. Here the focus is purely and largely on what William James called "The empirical Self". The 'mere ownership effect' places one on the hierarchy of 'high' or 'low', wherein his progeny, his friends, his reputation and his riches fall into account. The characters suffer anguish because they have lost what they earlier possessed and are now in depression for they desire now much more without putting in the needed labour. This results in shrinkage of their personalities leading, to noticeable 'harsh-feel' of 'no-identity' and 'no recognition'. The marginal characters therefore strive for 'accomodation,' adaption of new mode and adjustments in the existing frame to build their identity frame.

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