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THEATRICAL STRATEGEM: A RESEARCH LOCATED ON MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE AND THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER

A.MAHARA DEVI

Assistant Professor,

Department of English, E.M.G. Yadava Women's College, Madurai



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Abstract

The Paper centralizes the stage settings and theatrical techniques in Mahesh Dattani's Select plays. As a dramatist, he wishes to associate the art of drama with real human experiences. Each play has different content and appeal. He has the ability to manage the stage performances and has given the full description of those particular norms and persons and their actions. Dattani wants to convey his message to the audience as well as the readers, to make them realize and accept that certain unusual things are also happening in the society. Dattani has adopted different techniques for his plays, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *Thirty days in September*. Stillness, silence, sound and movement are the important matters in theatre directions which will give unique identity to the play and the settings depends on the arrangement of these four elements. Dattani has used dynamic and innovative theatrical art to capture the reality of unpleasant life. In modern dramas, eccentric expressions have the prominent capability to represent the guilt of the characters. He has embellished the Indian English drama with his experiments and Innovative devices.

Keywords: Theatre, Techniques, Scenes, Situation, Innovation.

Dattani is a preeminent and professional Indian playwright. His main motive is to present real-life experiences in his plays. He has methodically used the dramatic techniques and devices to bring the exact feelings of the human sufferings in front of the audience. As a dramatist, he wishes to associate the art of drama with real human experiences. Each play has different content and appeal. He has the ability to manage the stage performances and has given the full description of those particular norms and persons and their actions. In short, his settings are in pieces like the families who occupy them. Another necessary thing is, whether the characters

in his plays are good or bad, right or wrong, they are treated with understanding and sympathy.

Dattani wants to convey his message to the audience as well as the readers, to make them realize and accept that certain unusual things are also happening in the society. Each play of Dattani reveals that he explores both the masculine and the feminine self with him. He has chosen the genre of drama so that he can share his views directly with the audience. He has tried to present his opinions through the form of drama with his creative innovations. His plays are experimented on the stage and most of his plays were staged first and then

printed afterwards. Dattani has adopted different techniques for his plays, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *Thirty days in September*. According to Asha Chaudhuri,

... The setting for all Dattani's plays then, is necessarily embedded within the mechanisms of the middle-class Indian family, and this is the context from which he operates. Working within his own time and place, and not an alien and distant westernized world, removed from the everyday ground realities with which the Urban Indian audience could easily identify, Dattani was already set on a path very different from earlier attempts at staging Indian drama in English [24].

Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* was first broadcasted under the title *Seven Circles around the Fire* by BBC Radio on 9th January, 1999. And it was performed on the stage at the Stein Auditorium, India Habitat centre in New Delhi, under the title *Seven Steps around the Fire*. It is a play in three acts. From the beginning till end, the play has twenty movements. Stillness, silence, sound and movement are the important matters in theatre directions which will give unique identity to the play and the settings depends on the arrangement of these four elements.

The first main technique in this play is voice-over technique. It is also known as off-camera or off-stage commentary. In this technique the dialogues may be spoken by someone who appears elsewhere in the production or it may be done by any voice-actor. It is prerecorded and placed over the top of a film or video and it is commonly used in documentaries or in newspaper reports to explain information. It is used to reveal the unspoken thoughts of the visible characters. The voice-over technique is used in this play and it is considered as a helpful tool for the audience to understand the situations on the stage. Here, this technique is used to reveal the inner thoughts of Uma. Throughout the play, Uma questions herself about the identity and the origin of hijras:

...Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this

country with Islam, or are they a part of our glorious Hindu tradition? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of child birth? How do they come to know of these weddings? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionists? And why do they not take singing lesson?[CP II 246]

Paralinguistic and nonlinguistic devices are used in this play. It is a visible feature in the form of spoken communication, but it does not involve words. Facial expressions, tone and pitch of voice, body language are the paralinguistic elements. In a stage drama, light must be an important one. The light is used to focus on the shifting from one scene to another scene. Complete fade out is also done in dramas, but most of the times, the technique of cross-fade is used. The first scene begins in the office of superintendent of police, where the constable Munswamy and Uma are discussing about Anarkali's case. To make a change from the office to the prison, the fade out technique is used. This provides little time to change the setting or it helps the characters to move from one place to another.

To make a quick change in the scenes, cross-fade is employed. When Munswamy refuses to take Uma to Champa's house, Uma suddenly goes off stage and he starts the car. Again, the cross-fade is used to shift the scene from the road to bazaar, where Champa leads her life. In that particular scene, cross-fade is used for several times. When Uma reaches Champa's place, then the scene switches from the outdoor to Champa's living room. Another significant purpose of light is to display the mood of the characters on the stage.

Interior: Living room of Champa Champa, an elderly hijra is fanning herself with a delicate punkah and reading Femina. Uma coughs a bit at the door [CP II 253]

'Pause' serves an opportunity for the characters to respond to the text, they speak. It is considered as a self-conscious device as it enables the characters to recall the text and at the same time it also gives room for the audience to analyze the consciousness of the character. During the conversation between Anarkali and Uma, 'pause' is

used several times. Pause usually highlights the character's hesitation to speak.

Anarkali: Look at me

Pause.

Oh! My sister ! You are my sister, no?

Uma looks at Anarkali for a while, then puts her hand on her arm

Uma: Yes

Anarkali: Get me out of here

Pause. Uma with draws [CP II 242]

'Pause' dispenses time for Anarkali to proceed a bail for Uma and it also helps Uma to understand and react to Anarkali's speech. Silence plays a vital role in drama. Because, it provides time to the audience as well as to the actors who are acting on the stage to comprehend the entire framework. Here, silence is used as a technique while Uma visits Anarkali in the prison and Munswamy introduces Uma to the prisoners. This facilitates the audience to get a glimpse at the settings on the stage.

To guide the play in a natural way, the sound effects play an important role. It makes the play livelier on the stage, like the clapping of hijras, Sanskrit shlokas, gargling, traffic noise, sound of footsteps, coughing, drumbeat, dancing bells. During the wedding of Subbu, even the sound of crackle from the fire is also an effective sound. When the hijras get into the marriage hall, to bless the couple, the stage echoes with the sound of drumbeats.

The hijras begin to dance again we lose the singing as the drum beat and the Dancing bells are unrealistically overpowering. It builds to a crescendo... Subbu looks away to see a vision of Kamla dancing on another level. The music Builds to crescendo...[CP II 278]

Dattani has made use of a correct degree of music and drumbeats. Facial expression is one of the primary features, while acting in a drama. From the expressions of the characters only, the audience can understand the situations and the emotions of the characters. For example, Anarkali's sexual

expression when she asks Munswamy for a cigarette, and the frightening appearance of Salim when Uma reaches at the house of Minister and enquires about him. The author should be very careful, while using a single element, whether it may be a pause, facial expression, comma or a full stop. He has an intention behind each and every technique.

The central characteristic element of this play is stage direction. Despite the use of dialogues, the stage directions, movements and other settings are also integral parts of the play. Though there is no conversation between characters, the actions on the stage expose the situations. When Uma asks about Kamala to Champa, she finds a photograph of Kamala and unfolds it. But Champa quickly snatches it away from Uma. This silent action also paves way for the readers to observe the attitude of the characters. The first scene of the play is significant one.

Sanskrit mantras fade in the ones chanted during a hindu wedding. The crackle of Fire we see beautiful woman in a bridal outfit enters. The crackle from the fire Grows louder. She screams and tries to run but is now on fire. She rolls on the Ground. Her screams turn silent as sounds of the mantras and flames take over. Black out [CP II 233]

In the last act, Subbu shoots himself to join kamala. After taking Subbu away from the stage, Uma and Suresh remain on the stage. Anarkali moves away from that place, but she is showed as that she stays on the stage. Dattani has highlighted a dreamlike spot on the stage. Everyone could see the image of Subbu uniting with kamala by embracing her. The play ends with hijras dancing in a slow motion and also clapping to the rhythm of the slow motion. In the center stage, Uma remains fixed under the spot light.

To reduce the using of many black outs, Dattani has designed a multi-level stage to show different places on the stage. "Seven Steps around the Fire" starts with this setting:

A composite set comprising levels and gauze curtains which could be back lit to Reveal

interiors or drawn aside when needed. Props should be minimal and Scenes need to move without too many blackouts [CP II 233]

From this description the audience can understand how Dattani has used the stage economically by designing the area of hijras, office of Suresh, Uma's father's home and other places. Through these techniques, Dattani has clearly dramatized the real condition of hijras before the audience and has succeeded in gaining people's respect for them.

The play, *Thirty days in September* is a stage play in three acts. It was first performed at the Prithvi theatre, Mumbai on May 31 May 2001. It presents the issue of child's sexual abuse. Dattani has used dynamic and innovative theatrical art to capture the reality of unpleasant life. The stage setting of this play is unique. The action of the play is moved, but there is no change in the settings and the scenes. Dattani divided the stage into four acting areas. The first acting area has comfortable chairs and a simple table with magazines and a double seated. The chair is reserved for counsellor who remains on invisible presence in the play. The second area is the central portion of the stage. It represents the living room of Shanta and Mala, the mother and the daughter. The dominant feature is the large picture of Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna in the background imparts mystic touch to two distinctive worlds represented by Mala and Shanta. The third area is pooja room which is perhaps behind a screen so that it is visible to the audience when it is required. In the last scene of the play the scrim is highlighted.

The fourth acting area is the most flexible, representing many locations. The fourth area represents party house, two restaurants, and Deepak's house during different occasions. It is more representational and it would be adequate to have four cubes that could be configured by the actors before the required scene, and in full view of audience. These four different areas within one setting are considered as a conductive device to project the twilight of internal spaces of characters. Apart from the settings, the language is an important tool. Dattani has used broken sentences,

incomplete sentences and meaningless words to debunk the emotional crisis of characters. It is used to flaunt the poignant turbulence going on within the consciousness of Mala and Shanta. Though the dialogues are incomplete it gives a complete picture of the private spaces.

In modern dramas, eccentric expressions have the prominent capability to represent the guilt of the characters. The display of the atrocious part in the presence of invisible counsellor is a valid mechanism to reveal those neglected issues in theater. The dialogues of Mala are immature, because she is the bad sufferer in comparison with others. In spite of stress, violence and the feeling of bitterness, the characters maintain silence throughout the play. Mala and Shanta are portrayed as victims of sexual exploitation by their blood relationship. The play begins with Mala's taped conversation and its setting.

During Mala's taped conversation, we see the back of a life-sized doll of a seven years old girl propped on a chair. During the first conversation we only see the back of the head. With every subsequent taped conversation, we see more of the profile... [CP II 7]

Actually, Mala talks to the imagined counsellor and not to the audience. Only one tape recorder is placed on the table. But Mala is not self-conscious about the recordings. And she narrates about her part life. Again, the recorded voice of Mala is played on the stage:

I have been so bad; I can't tell you where to begin! It's not just the men in the Office, I told you about, but before much before! I-Oh God! I-I seduced my uncle when I was thirteen! I- slept with my cousin and anyone who was available... [CP II 33]

At first, the play starts with Mala's self-comprehension and self-allegation and the sense of deception towards her mother. Actions in this play are invigorated with this beginning. But at the end, when Shanta breaches her deep silence and narrates her miserable life and her failure to save her daughter from her monster brother with this

epiphany, the play takes a new path. Though they are encased in agony and anguish, the play ends with an ecstatic union between the mother and the daughter.

Dattani is renowned for applying flashback technique. He portrays the past and present with the shift of memory. He brings to light to the issue like child sexual abuse and present them through the theatrical art. He places the facts on the page first, in the form of script and then he presents these things employing innovative stage craft techniques. He promotes a straight forward transmission of ideas between the victims in his plays and the audience. It is considered as an exercise to the audience, so that they can become too aware of those issues. His dramatic art has a compassionate touch. He is a portrayer of the real world of urban life. In most of his plays, many characters face misfortunes and they suffer from their past with guilt and sin. According to Beena Agarwal:

Dattani's dramatic art is inspired by the mission to communicate profound meaning through his plays and therefore, he exhibits keen awareness for the direction and stage performance of his own plays. He sensitive dramatic self is a fine synthesis of a dancer, director, actor, playwright, audience and commentator moving collectively towards a single direction [24]

In the middle of the play, two scenes are played simultaneously without dimming or rising the lights. The first scene takes place in Mala's home and the second scene in Deepak's flat. Vinay and shanta are talking in their home. On the other side, Mala and Deepak are talking in his flat. But the dialogues of them are mixed with one another. Throughout the play, Mala could imagine the figure of Vinay wherever she goes, on seeing that image, she feels disturbed. When Mala goes to meet Deepak the image of Vinay tortures her. Mala could hear the words of Vinay, but in reality, there is no one in front of her. Deepak brings her to the real world. Mala envisages that a man enters into their place. Vinay's different eye movement and a sense of confederacy in his tone of voice is very crucial when the lights fade on them, it is understood that the man standing

there is just a fantasy, but in reality, the man only exists in Mala's home. Mala's mind is haunted by the psychological trauma.

In this play, many actions are performed in the living room of Shanta and Mala. The large picture of Shri Krishna and a life-sized doll of a seven years old girl are the dominant figures. Mala's self is shattered and disjointed. So, Dattani makes use of recorded voice, monologues and symbols. Here the effective symbol is doll. It associates with silence which Shanta maintains against the victimization of her daughter for sexual gratification. It also illustrates that Mala is not allowed to explicit the reality by society. Dattani remarks in a conversation with Anitha Santhanam,

It's the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like in this case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It's the silence that makes the abused feel betrayed. (Santhanam 51)

Another technique in this play is, cross-fade When Mala and Deepak takes Shanta to the hospital, Vinay is frozen on the stage. With the help of cross-fade, again the first scene in the counsellor's office comes. Mala walks against the stage as the lights cross-fade. Now the spotlight is fixed on Vinay. And the doll is facing Mala and she stares at the doll. She imagines that her uncle Vinay comes near her, picks the doll and is holding the doll by its skirt, so that it covers the doll's face. The man asks her to touch him. Mala speaks in bold voice, that "you are dead! You deserve to be dead! Die! [CP II 57]. From this dialogue, the audience comes to know that her Vinay had died already. Then, the scene shifts from the counsellor's office to Mala's house.

In the last scene only, Mala recognizes the very big truth behind the reasons of her mother's silence and she feels ashamed of her own disregard towards her mother. Finally, she asks her mother to forgive her and she waits for her mother's words.

The scrim wall around the prayer room rises. Mala is overjoyed. Shanta Continues with her prayer Mala walks up to her and kneels. [CP II 58]
The last line of the play is ambiguous. Mala begs her

mother to grant pardon for always blaming her mother.

Shanta turns back to her god and continues with her prayer. Mala slowly rests Her head in Shanta's lap.

Mala : I know you will, mother, I know you have.

Shanta picks up the bell, and begins to sing it even as the lights fade out. [CP II 50].

This line may have more than one meaning in this play. One is that Shanta has forgiven and accepted Mala. Another meaning is that she may have turned to God ignoring the human bond between the mother and the daughter. Dattani has worn lot of symbols, images and different devices to make the audience and the readers to comprehend the scenes on the stage. Stage settings are the striking features in his plays. He has used maximum space and environment and have introduced many theatrical devices like, slow motion and simultaneous actions, music and dance. He has embellished the Indian English drama with his experiments and innovative techniques.

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