



Centering the marginalized: A Comparative study of Mahesh Dattani and Tennessee Williams

KEYWORDS

Marginality, Homosexuality, hijra (Transgendering) identity.

Parashurama Murthy G

Research Scholar, Bharatiar University, Assistant Professor, Maharani's Science College, Mysore, Karnataka

Dr.Udayaravi .S.V.

Research Supervisor, Bharatiar University, Associate Professor, Pallagatti Adavappa First Grade College, Tiptur, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

The present article falls under the thrust area of 'Marginal discourses'. The article intends to compare and contrast the characters sketched by Mahesh Dattani and Tennessee Williams. Despite several common denominators these two dramatists have they are distinct in their themes and treatments of the issues theme of Homosexuality, Cannibalism, impotency, drug addiction and sexual frenzy. Tennessee Williams dramatics have been read in relation to the concept of marginality. Williams uses of theatricality and stage craft, and also visual and aural images stage directions and the character's body language as well as their spoken words has been deliberated and explored under the concept of marginalization in his earlier plays. Considering Mahesh Dattani's plays would raise many questions regarding hijra (Trans gendering) identity, their constitution, connotations, their social acceptability and tolerability in a jeopardized conditions as they are the victims of nature as well as of the society. They are deprived class with no voice, no sympathies, no love, no consolations, no justice and probably no hope of acceptability in the society.

Introduction

There is no more influential twentieth-century American playwright than Tennessee Williams. His repertoire twenty five full length plays as well as many shorter ones, two novels, three books of verse, sixty short stories and an original screen play. He won the Pulitzer Prize for A Street car Named desire in 1947 and Cat on A Hot Tin Roof in 1955 and was named as the first playwright who received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Honorary Doctorate award on him from Harvard University in 1982. President Carter at Kennedy Centre honored him in 1979.

Being the multifaceted literary and dramatic figure, Mahesh Dattani has given a new height and dimension to Indian English Drama. He is the first English Indian playwright to have been received the Sahitya Academy Award. He dares to expose the naked and agonizing reality of the marginalized groups/class, like gender inequalities, religious intolerance and hypocrisy about HIV victims. They are invisible minority-neglected minority-considered as 'chosen of god'.

Meaning of subaltern studies:

'Subaltern', meaning 'of inferior rank', is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist and Communist Party Leader, refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. A *subaltern* is someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. From the Latin roots *sub*- "below", and *alternus* "all others", *subaltern* is used to describe someone of a low rank (as in the military) or class (as in a caste system). Subalterns occupy entry-level jobs or occupy a lower rung of the "corporate ladder." But the term is also used to describe someone who has no political or economic power, such as a poor person living under a dictatorship. Different kinds of synonyms are used for the word 'Subaltern', like: common people, lower-class, underprivileged, exploited, inferiors, minors, weak etc. British Historian, E.P. Thomson wrote an article in 'The Times Magazine'. While giving his opinion he used the words '*History from Down Below*' Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci has used the word 'subaltern' for minor, poor, downtrodden people. Subaltern means overlooked, neglected, disregarded, and treated with unconcern and indifference.

Besides all these, it might also be employed in discussions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion and so on. Gayotri Spivak's essay '**can the subaltern speak**' (1983) has had particular influence on this broader development, especially in its deconstruction of gender" (qtd. in Mc Ewan 16). Spivak objects to careless life of

the term and its appropriation by marginalized groups who are not specifically subaltern" (16). She asserts that "subaltern is not just another word for the approved or marginalized rather; it signifies very specifically a group of people whose voices cannot be heard or that are willfully ignored in dominant modes of narrative production." (16).

Marginalization and subaltern with reference to the works of Tennessee Williams and Dattani:

The term "Subaltern" came in to existence during 1970s by which time Tennessee Williams had already written his most representative works. Though we find several characters and features of subaltern element in his works, the term has hardly been used anachronistically with reference to the works of Tennessee Williams. So, the study makes it a point that in what sense the term 'subaltern' is used with reference to his works. The marginalized characters, issues, and themes which come under subaltern studies are prevalent in the works of Tennessee Williams.

When the topic of marginalization is discussed in the Williams's works, one question is raised whether he intentionally writes about marginality or essentially, he sees all his characters as marginalized. Williams' says "I have never been able to say what was the theme of my play and I don't think I have never been conscious of writing with a theme in mind. I am always surprised when after a play is opened, I read in the papers what the play about...It is a play of life what could be simpler, and yet more you can easily extend that a little and say it is a tragedy of incomprehension. That also means life...that is life in America. Or you can say it is a play that considers the "problem of evil" (qtd. in Day 25-27). His words indicate that being a marginal is a "tragedy of incomprehension" that impedes an individual within a social structure. The question of marginality is therefore, about 'life' which also gives his character a universal aspect.

Even so, Mahesh Dattani, being the best known dramatist, also reputed and accomplished actor, director, and scriptwriter and dance teacher, with his interest in the so called abnormal, maladjusted and marginalized section of society dealt such social issues in each and every plays of him that he produced in the arena of English drama ever. In almost all the plays Dattani has succeeded in exposing social maladies and weaknesses of the mainstream of society.

The subaltern common denominators in the plays of Dattani and Tennessee Williams

The article focuses on common denominators grappled by the two

genius writers in their own way. The plot and the story and the characters are different in these two cases, the treatments are different, but the issues are the same. Whether these writers leave the burning social issues as open-ended plays or struggle to find solutions are studied in the process. Sometimes it appears the two playwrights under discussions have many things in common. The social issues, otherwise ignored or marginalized by the 'others' are the topics of constant and common interest of these two writers.

Brick in a **cat on a Hot Tin Roof** and Blanche's husband in a **street car named desire** bring to mind the homosexuals and the lesbians in Dattani's **On a Muggy night in Mumbai** and **Do the needful**. Both of these playwrights display a special interest and knack in laying bare tensions, anxiety, frustrations and fear of those who are discarded and scorned by the majority of heterosexuals. Tennessee Williams insights into this conflict between the natural propensities of an individual and the rigid social norms and values it seems, have added significantly to Dattani's perspectives on such issues.

Influenced by Tennessee Dattani has explored and dramatized the hitherto forbidden territories of social and personal life with courage with the novelty of approach, clarity of perception and strength of conviction.

Blanche in the "A Street Car named desire" and Mala in the play "30 days in September" both had traumatic experiences in life. Both of them were scarred from previous events in life. Blanche married to a man who happened to be a gay. When Blanche found her husband which another man he eventually committed suicide. This left Blanche depressed and was not able to accept that her husband was a gay. She felt that she failed as a woman or she did not have the charm of a woman for she attracted a gay instead of a real man. Therefore she began to feel insecure about herself. She eventually got involved with a lot of men which would lead to her downfall.

Mala is a young lady who had a rather disturbing past. She was sexually abused by her uncle. Her mother who kept mum about what had befallen Mala made matter even worst. Mala too was insecure in life and always wanted attention from men, older men. She had a bad temper and always blamed her mother for not helping her and letting her uncle abused by her. She was obviously a very depressed lady. What is similar of these two characters is that their past shaped them into who they are now. Sadly both of them became rather disturbed and began to use their sexual appeal to channel their frustration towards what had happened to them. Both of them were depressed and confused. Another similarity between them is that they both found someone who really cared for them. Blanche found Mitch and Mala had Deepak. These two men cared for them and are the ones that could help them change for the better.

Differences between Blanche and Mala will be that in the end Blanche did not overcome her traumatic experiences and fell deeper into it. Mala had the chance to overcome her past and live a better life. Eventually it was really up to these two characters to change. Mala grabbed the chance to change however Blanche got hurt more and more. They rather represent people suffering from depression in our society. Dattani, with his interest is in the so called abnormal, maladjusted and marginalized section of society, which had deep influence on him. Brick in *Cat on a Tin Roof* and Blanche husband in a *Street Car Named Desire* bring to mind the homosexuals and the lesbians in Dattani's *on a muggy night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful*.

Most of Tennessee Williams' plays –especially *Cat on a Tin Roof* and *A Street Car Named Desire* –focus on struggles with homosexuality in a very straight society. Williams constantly speaks of gender and almost as constantly of sexuality and sexual orientation and gender, sexuality and sexual orientation in his plays, such as *madness* –or not madness, *old/south v/s New South*, and so on. Some Critics are tempted to see Williams' plays as 'homosexual art'; which can quickly

become reductive supposing there was such a thing as "homosexual art".

The play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* simply would not exist if skipper had not committed suicide before the curtain rises. Admittedly, there is Big Daddy's cancer, the question of inheritance, Maggie's splendid character Big Mama's pathetic ramblings and Mae's detestable child rearing. Then, of course, there is the southern heritage. But without skipper's suicide, there is no Brick drinking himself into oblivion and no play. Yes, Brick is "responsible for skipper's death, but Brick was merely an instrument of the heteronormative dominant culture. Homosexual panic killed the skipper. The title of the play 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' itself suggests proverbially as in 'used to describe someone who is in a status of extreme nervous worry. Similarly at the beginning of the play Brick appears to be in a status of extreme nervous worry and disarray.

The study tries to bring both these dramatists under one scanner. Sometimes it appears they have more things in difference than things in common. They belong to two diametrically opposite cultural situations. However, they have many things in common. The social issues, otherwise ignored or marginalized by the 'others' are the topics of constant and common interest of these two writers. It concludes that though irrespective of socio-cultural differences in the societies to which the two writers belong to, all human beings have similar problems but the way in which it is grappled varies. Does a good playwright come out with a solution and give due poetic justice for the marginalized characters or whether he places it open-ended is a question to ponder.

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