

Unifying Splintered Souls through Music in Mahesh Dattani's Play *Morning Raga*

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Mahesh Dattani along with Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Nissim Ezekiel occupies the most significant position in twentieth century Indian Drama in English. In 1998, Dattani became the first playwright in English to be honoured with India's most prestigious award for literature, the Sahitya Akademi Award. Bestowed on him for a collection of his plays *Final Solutions and other Plays*, the citation described his work as 'a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English'.

Prior to his stint with the world of theatre, he used to work as a copywriter in an advertising firm. He has also worked with his father in the family business. In 1984, he founded his theatre group 'Playpen' and in 1986 he wrote his first play *Where There's a Will*. Since then he has written many plays such as *Tara*, *Night Queen* and *Dance Like a Man*. All the plays of Mahesh Dattani are based on social issues. Apart from the theatre, he is also active in the field of film making. His films have been appreciated all over the world. Besides being a playwright and a director, Dattani adorns the mantle of a teacher with equal ease. He teaches Theatre courses at the summer session programmes at Portland University, Oregon, U.S.A. He also imparts training in the field of acting, directing and playwriting at his own theatre studio in Bangalore.

Dattani relished experimenting with several dramatic devices. His knowledge of Bharatanatyam, a classical South Indian dance, which he learned during his childhood, has helped him in managing space on stage. A blend of modern English colloquialism and Indianisms, sharp and precise dialogues, highlighting the otherwise invisible reality, and the split-stage technique render his plays not only stage-worthy but also thought provoking. The constant intercutting between two actions not only makes his plays tighter narratives but also gives richer dramatic effects.

This paper attempts to analyse the various layers and levels of cross cultural images that are brought together in Dattani's play *Morning Raga*, fusing raga with modern elements. It focuses on the age old conflict between tradition and change and how an old singer joins the younger generation to recreate and reconstruct a new world. As he himself says:

While working on the post production of my first directorial venture *Mango Souffle*, Amit Heni (music director) was in the recording studio with me and he had called a traditional Carnatic singer for a background jazz-based piece. The interaction between the two- one young jazz musician with a goatee and hippie *kurta* and the other a purist in a *Kanjivaram* sari and temple jewellery- was cross generation, cross culture and cross gender. That was the beginning of *Morning Raga*.¹

The play is about a mourning Carnatic singer who has been pulled out of a past tragedy by two vivacious modern youngsters. It shows a keen reverence for classical culture and heritage. The collision of the modern and traditional, the strained merging of Indian and western ways, 'singing your way to bliss,' are the major themes of *Morning Raga*. Dattani admits the strong influence of Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams in helping him approach a subject from multiple perspectives. As Kumar Das opines:

"What makes *Morning Raga* enjoyable is its big city/ small village, old ways/ new ways, boy meets girl-as fate would have it story line- exactly the sort of simplistic form that popular cinema audience demand."²

The play revolves around three main characters whose lives have been ruined by tragic events of the past, and shows how they are united by circumstances as they slowly work together and blend their passions to bring back the happiness they once had. All three are connected by their love of music, and the play explores elements of classical Indian music and combines it with contemporary rhythms to create mesmerizing music. It is music that crosses generation, culture and gender gaps to bring

about human bonding. All three main characters find their release through music. To quote Mahesh Dattani:

“Technology and modernity are fine but we must not forget that we have a rich heritage- something that countries like America do not have. We cannot erase our cultural memory. Even if we choose to bury it deep within us, it will spring unexpectedly”.³

Excellent opening credits intercut beautiful scenes of the country side with two women boarding a bus to a concert in the city. ‘Swarnalatha and Vaishnavi settle down and hold their children and their musical instruments closely’(337). This clearly reveals their passion for music. The bus and a car coming opposite each other collide on the narrow bridge, killing Vaishnavi while Swarnalatha survives. However, Swarnalatha’s son Madhavan is killed while Vaishnavi’s son is fortunate to be alive.

Swarnalatha’s ambition of performing in the city gets thwarted due to this ghastly accident on her village bridge, in which she loses her only child as well as her dear friend who plays the violin. She holds herself responsible for the tragedy as she had been pushing reluctant Vaishnavi into making that trip to the city on that fateful journey. She spends her time in self-imposed exile, never daring to cross the bridge. Swarnalatha is haunted by her loss and keeps herself shut up in her house for twenty years, too depressed to meet people or even sing.

Eventually, her dead friend’s son Abhinay returns to the village and opens up her barely healed wounds. Not satisfied with his job in the city as a jingle composer, Abhinay sets out to start a music band. When he tells his father about his intention, he yells at him and says:”You have also gone mad! Like your mother! She is controlling you from the other world”. (344).

The play brings out the relationship between the father and the son very clearly. It is explicitly seen that Abhinay’s father is a male chauvinist who does not care about his wife. Even after her death he keeps

complaining about her and feels that she has been responsible for Abhinay's interest in music. He is also a womanizer who has illicit relationships with women, and feels no remorse even when Abhinay comes to know about it. On one occasion when Abhinay comes to his house in the village, he finds a woman walking out of his father's room. What surprises the reader is that the father behaves as though everything he does is correct and normal. During their conversation, when his father accuses him of not showing his face for three years and sarcastically asks whether he has been busy, Abhinav replies in the same ironic tone, 'Not half as busy-as you', indirectly hinting at his father's illicit relationship. It is clear to Abhinay that his mother's twentieth death anniversary means nothing to his father. He demands the violin from his father who has no clue where it is. Just then, Abhinay hears Swarnalatha's voice near the river, and goes to greet her. As he is crossing the road, she screams out a warning looking at a car moving fast towards him. Pinkie, the city-bred girl, halts the car and an old woman shouts at her saying:

“Don't let him go! He is a murderer! You city people do you want to kill! Was my husband not enough? Swarnalatha looks at Abhinay in a new light... Don't leave him! Abhinay! He killed your mother!”⁴

Pinkie is just out of college, and helps her mother with her boutique. While driving back to the city with Abhinay, they meet a guitarist and a drummer who want them to join the group. Abhinay and Pinkie start a music group, and Pinkie's mother, Mrs. Kapoor, allows the music group to practice in the store room of the boutique. However, the band's first gig is not a success, and the club manager accuses them of 'trying to be whites who are pretending to be blacks'.

Pinkie's mother likes to encourage young talent and wants to be surrounded by art, beauty and culture. She becomes very protective about her daughter after her husband's death but Pinkie, as a teenager, does not understand her mother's good nature and often argues with her. After a lot of hesitation, Mrs. Kapoor finally tells Pinkie the truth about her father, about how he was a drunkard and used to beat her up. She informs Pinkie that she did not want her to know about this side of her father

because she wanted her to have good memories of him as he loved his daughter a great deal. It is at this juncture that Mrs.Kapoor talks about the accident and explains how her father was responsible for the death of the villagers in the bus accident.

Meanwhile, the music group realizes that something is missing. While struggling to find a new direction, Abhinay bumps into Swarnalatha. Pinkie finds herself drawn to the same village since she is also affected by the tragedy. After hearing Swarnalatha singing in the mesmerizing Carnatic tradition of Southern India, Abhinay is convinced that her voice is just what the band needs. But the problem is getting her to leave the village, which she has steadfastly refused to do ever since Abhinay's mother's fatal bus crash.

A kind of emotional bonding develops among all the three- Swarnalatha, Abhinay and Pinkie. As Shabana Azmi, a renowned actor and political activist rightly opines in her note on the play:

“Mahesh's screen play makes emotional transitions between the lines rather than through dialogue. For instance, in the scene where Abhinay's father confronts Swarnalatha in the fields and asks her to back off from his son because her music will take him nowhere, Swarnalatha is enraged at this insult to music. But she does not say a word to his father. She turns to Abhinay and says 'I will sing for you'. That one line says it all- it contains the entire history of the inter-personal relationships between the characters”.⁵

Swarnalatha turns down the offer initially but relents subsequently. Abhinay wants her to sing with his band in a fusion concert and after much persuasion from him and her husband Mr.Shastri, she agrees. Mr. Shastri wants to take her to the city for the concert but unfortunately as the car is out of order, he requests her to travel by bus promising to come after repairing the car. But the memories of the past haunt her mind with 'the ghastly figures of Vaishnavi and her son', and Swarnalatha gets off the bus and runs back towards the village.

Unlike Pinkie's father, we find Mr. Shastri trying to help his wife come out of her mental trauma. He wants her to take part in the concert, knowing well that it would give her fulfillment in life. Though he strongly feels that his wife should not have taken their son with her on the fateful day of the bus accident, he does not react negatively to her. In fact, he is the one who helps her to achieve what she wants. He keeps encouraging his wife to help Abhinay and Pinkie in their endeavours. He has always been by her side though he does not articulate much.

Though the absence of Swarnalatha upsets Abhinay who refuses to perform on the stage, there ensues an emotional bonding between him and Pinkie. She reminisces the way her father used to caress her in her childhood and finds a similar kind of affection and kindness in Abhinay. As Pinkie says:

“When I was small, I took my time to learn to walk....I remember my father. Early morning he would put me down on the floor and stand in front of me with his arms wide open. When I walked to him he would hug me. If I crawled to him he would move away....When he died... I couldn't walk. I refused to walk because he wasn't there...any more. Abhinay looks at her with new eyes”.⁶

In a very subtle manner, Mahesh Dattani reunites three minds belonging to different generations, gender and culture with the help of their passion for music. During his next meeting with Swarnalatha in the village Abhinay says:

“You don't have to say anything now, I will wait. Think about it. But remember, I am waiting for you to sing for me. I know you will. You want to sing. And I can help you fulfill your ambition. I am not leaving the village till you agree”.⁷

Gradually she understands Abhinay's interest in music and teaches Carnatic music to Pinkie. She teaches her Sindhu Bhairavi, the morning raga which was Vaishnavi's favourite raga, and the one that she was planning to sing in the city twenty years ago. Even Abhinay expresses his understanding and passion for the morning raga, when he comes

running, on hearing Swarnalatha singing it. Pinkie, in an emotional state of mind, confesses her father's role in the village accident. Swarnalatha overcomes the fear of crossing the bridge with the help of Pinkie who forcefully drives her in her car without her own knowledge. Abhinay and Pinkie arrange a concert in the city and after a lot of persuasion, Swarnalatha sings on the stage. She is truly overwhelmed to be there. It is a dream come true and Swarnalatha confesses on the stage:

“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. Abhinay! I sing this raga for you – my son”.⁸

In a flashback, all three of them – Swarnalatha, Abhinay and Pinkie – feel as though they are singing for their loved ones, Madhavan, Vaishnavi and Pinkie's father respectively, though they are on the stage singing for the audience. Everyone is enthralled to see the fusion of not only music but also of generation, culture and gender. Shabana Azmi does not cease to surprise us when she takes on the guilt-stricken, troubled but stately Carnatic singer's role with a passionate, territorial possessiveness. Shabana performing the intricate classical tunes or running panic-stricken across the bridge that once snatched away her happiness is a sight that goes beyond the poetry of the soul. Amit Hering and Mani Sharma's fusion of music is so fluent that we want to let the music play on. In an illuminating introduction, Jeremy Mortimer, Executive Producer, BBC Radio Drama observes:

“Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions. And by revealing the complexity, he makes the world a richer place for all of us.”⁹

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