

Dystopian Society: Thwarted Life in Mahesh Dattani's *Clearing the Rubble*

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Abstract

The paper entitled, "Dystopian Society: Thwarted Life in Mahesh Dattani's *Clearing the Rubble*." vividly pictures the social discrimination prevailing in India with reference to Mahesh Dattani's radio play, *Clearing the Rubble*. This paper exemplifies the unfair treatment received by the economic and religious minorities, even at the time of natural calamities. This play is set up at the backdrop of the terrible earthquake in Bhuj, Gujarat in January 2001. This paper also aims at exhibiting the various kinds of class, religious and economic discriminations found in the Indian society and also traces the reason why rescue fails. This study further shows that religion and poverty has become a torturous weapon against the people more than the natural trauma.

Keywords: Discrimination, hindu, muslim, powerless, victim, voiceless

“Our modern society is engaged in publishing and decorating the cage in which man is kept imprisoned.”

- Nirmalananda

In the Indian society, unity in diversity has become a very rare sight. Discrimination can be seen everywhere, almost in every place, right from our ancient times. The widely dreamt, Utopian society, a place where everyone enjoys absolute equality, freedom and rights is still a dream. Contrary to that, India, for most of the population is a dystopian country where they hardly enjoy freedom, equality, and rights even though it is constitutionally guaranteed. Dattani, the most realistic literary figure has vividly pictured the social discrimination prevailing in India in his radio play, *Clearing the Rubble*. The play gives us a glimpse of modern Indian society with the backdrop of socio-political discrimination, prejudice and social evils.

Natural calamities like earth quake, tsunami, flood, famine etc. destroy the lives of thousands of people around the globe every day. These unexpected disasters turn the person upside down. Tariq Ali has rightly said, “That natural disasters are required to provide Americans with a glimpse of reality in their own country is an indication of the deep rot infecting the official political culture.” This seems to be apt not only for Americans but for Indians too. At the time of disaster everyone understands the reality about oneself and the society.

In Dattani’s *Clearing the Rubble*, a sudden catastrophe shattered the lives of many families. It is a story written in the backdrop of the terrible earthquake in Bhuj, Gujarat in January 2001. Superficial reading of this play shows the trauma faced by the earthquake victims but the deeper reading hints at the various kinds of class, religious and economic discrimination found in the Indian society.

Through this play, he implicated the unfair treatment received by the economic and religious minorities, even at the time of natural calamities. Relief and rescue operations are carried out to protect the people affected by the earthquake. At the time of disaster the whole world is ready to extend the charitable help for the victims though there is no bond between them. But the Indians with the prejudice and communal bias against the muslims fail to render help and service to the victims. They were deprived of proper care and help from the administration as well as relief workers. This is revealed through the prayers of Fatima, "I have no more strength to call out to those people who help others but not us. I cry out for you now. Only in your world is there justice. I want to be in your world" (65).

Jeffrey, an English journalist, visits India "to write about the condition of humanity in other parts of the world" (66). He tries to depict the reality of relief and rescue operations and the plight of the Muslims, during the earthquake. The ravages of the massive earthquake after two days in Malliya, a small muslim village that he witnesses is,

I see what I have seen for miles and miles. No sign of any buildings. All of them reduced to heaps of rubble. People lining up outside relief camps. Waiting for some paperwork to be done before they can have access to meagre shelters and food packets.... I understand that there is no kerosene available. The man tells me that they are completely cut off from the world. Not a single telephone in the village is working. I see silhouettes of piles of rubble everywhere. (66-67)

No rescuers reach Malliya and so many people are buried alive under the rubbles waiting for release but in vain. He could hear mothers, sons and so many others shouting in pain and agony and are waiting for rescue. They are badly in need of a bulldozer. But no one brings the

machines and saves their lives under rubble. As they are minority groups, they have to face cultural trauma which is more intense than the natural disaster.

Later when Jeffrey visits Bhuj, he sees an extremely different scene, the rescue workers were all around the place. He is terribly shocked at the biased treatment of the Indian society. “It is Quite a different picture... There are vans full of relief material everywhere. There is enough activity going on to show that all efforts are being made to rescue people or rehabilitate displaced families” (71).

Jeffrey, though a non-Indian, could not withstand the sight of the suffering. He takes his optimal efforts to save them. But to his great shock, most of the Indians are cold blooded at the time of his fellow human beings' sufferings only because they belong to the other religion. This clearly epitomizes the religious discrimination that subsists in our society. Though a democratic country, to a great extent India is conditioned as a nation meant particularly for Hindus and all other religions are kept in the periphery.

Jeffrey, who could not abide this partial behaviour, takes an initiative to rise voice against the authorities, “Are you preventing equipments and supplies from reaching Muslim and Dalit populations” (72)? With the help of Malliya people, he hijacked the rescue truck, brought it to Malliya and safeguard the life of the lingering beings under the rubble. If a foreigner can be so humane to the fellow humans' suffering why can't an Indian be? Dattani, through dramatizing the character like Jeffrey, wants to show that, humanity though declining in a large scale, still lingers in someone like Jeffrey which should be multiplied to make India, a peaceful nation.

Most of the people die in this colossal earthquake and the rescue fails mainly due to the lack of rescue measures available in India. Natural disaster is hardly predicted and its effect is rarely met with. Indian government which spends enormous fund in less important projects, fails

to spend money in disaster management. The sad reality is that with limited resources, only the privileged people in society is saved, leaving the unprivileged to die.

In the fictional utopian society, everyone is treated alike. There is no differentiation like rich, poor, male, female, Hindu, Muslim etc. But in countries like India, there is wide gap between rich and poor. They are two extremes. Rich people have more than sufficient. On the other side, poor people don't even have a single bread for a day. Running their life partially fulfilling their basic needs like food, clothing etc. itself is a Himalayan task for most of the Indian population.

Dattani shows the pathetic condition of the poor people through Fatima's family. Fatima, being a wife of a poor cobbler, in order to run her family goes to work as a labourer in the hospital construction site. Yet she couldn't meet her family's basic needs with the meagre wages so she made her eldest daughter, Mumtaz to work in the hospital to assist her financially. In the hospital Mumtaz undergoes such an inhumane treatment that would not have happened to her, if she was born in a rich and privileged family. As she was born in a poor muslim family, they humiliate her by undressing her to check the missing money. For them, money is more valuable than human feelings. Poor people are puppets in the hands of rich people. Stripping off a women's dress is a severe crime but no one is there to voice for this voiceless victim. As a powerless mother she could only cry and curse the oppressor.

When somebody at the market place told me what happened. I wanted to kill those people. Mumtaz they did not strip you naked because you are a thief. They did that because they are the children of pigs. You are not a thief I know. I know that you will never be one. They must have lost the money somewhere else. I wish I had taken stones

and bashed their heads in Allah has done that for me. I hope they are all dead in this building. (75)

Indian society has a wrong notion that the son would be the future breadwinner and an asset to one's family whereas a female child is a burden and so there is a vast discrimination between a girl child and a boy child. Great priority is laid upon the male child. Due to the impact of this society, Fatima wants to educate her son by all means. She doesn't want her children to face the same difficulty that she had faced being the wife of a cobbler. She doesn't want her son to be the future cobbler, mending the shoes. Unlike her, she wants her children to be respected in this society. This impulse of the mother highlights the underlying fact that the poor and the religious minorities are never respected nor their feelings are valued. They are treated as aliens who are unfit to live in this world.

Salim, the only hope of Fatima also undergoes discrimination like his other family members. Fatima with much difficulty sends her son to school. As far as Fatima is considered, her son is the only one privileged in her home because he is the one who goes to school whereas his sisters are not. No body at home is aware of the fact that he is being ill-treated in school for being a son of a cobbler and a Muslim. Salim reminiscence,

I began to feel inferior to them. There were other Muslim boys too. But somehow they treated me indifferently. One day, there was a dead rat in the classroom. The smell was so strong that no one could enter the room. One of the children told the teacher that I should be sent in to pick up the rat and clean the room. I did not want to do it. The bigger boys called me the cobbler's son and said that it was my job to do these things. If I could touch the hide of a cow, I could pick up the dead rat. The teacher did not say a word. Every day

after that, the boys would mock me, look at me with a smile, telling me that I didn't know my place. (79)

As a small school boy, Salim readily tells the other boys that he belongs to the farmer family just to escape from the insults.

The aforesaid incident clearly demonstrates that the caste and religious disparities are predominant even among school children. Small children imitates the elders blindly. This happened in India for centuries together. This societal discernment sprouted due to some evil forces at some indefinite ancient time and had been carried blindly without questioning its evil effects. Knowingly or unknowingly children adapt the behaviours of their family members. But this ought to be changed.

The pathetic condition of the economic, religious and communal minorities would change only when every individual whole heartedly accepts and loves them as their brothers and sisters. On the whole Dattani, shows that religion and poverty became a torturous weapon against the people more than the natural trauma. The dramatist exhorts the people for a change of societal mindset in order to make India a place known for its harmony and better living.

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