



Impact of Globalization in Modern City: Mahesh Dattani's play the Big Fat City

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is well-known Indian English Playwright. He is a social realist. He deals with the critical social evils deeply rooted in the contemporary modern Indian milieu. The play *The Big Fat City* is considered as first black comedy of Indian theatre. Black comedy is also known as black humour, dark comedy, dark humour or gallows humour. The dramatist has portrayed the life style of Mumbai city dwellers and their involvement in socialization. The play is a sarcastic tale of a murder. It carries all the elements of black comedy such as greed, love, hypocrisy, jealousy, murder, drugs, violence, discrimination, human sexuality, family honour and corruption. The play is a combination of both humour and pathos. In a sense, this is the impact of globalization in modern urban society.

Keywords - Mahesh Dattani, Black Comedy, Modern City, Globalization, Hypocrisy, Murder, Family Honour etc.

Mahesh Dattani (b. 1958) is a celebrated Indian English playwright, actor, dancer, director. He is the founder of the theatre company „Playpen" and a studio „Mahesh Studio". He is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award. Dattani's plays elucidate bold themes which are prevalent in the modern urban middle class family. He is a social realist. He deals with the critical social evils deeply rooted in the contemporary modern Indian milieu. The research paper tries to analyze critically Dattani's stage play *The Big Fat City* as a black comedy. The play is considered as the first black comedy of Indian theatre. The important feature of black comedy is combination of the hilarious and the wretched. It is a mixture of the feelings of mirth and solemnity.

The term „black humour" was first coined by the surrealist theorist, Andre Breton, in his book, *Anthology of Black Humour* in 1935 while interpreting the writings of Jonathan Swift. Black comedy is also known as black humour, dark comedy, dark humour or gallows humour. It presents serious subject matter in a light manner or in a comic way. In the play *The Big Fat City*, Dattani enumerates serious issues such as breakdown of relationships, emotional and

spiritual hollowness of man, adverse impact of technology on human lifestyle and commodification of moral and ethical values. In short, the play portrays confusion, anxiety, frustration and desperation of the modern world. Dattani himself accepts:

“The *Big Fat City* is a play that may have all the elements of a knockabout farce but is in fact a black comedy on the sad, lonely but stimulating lives that we lead in this city of dreams.” (Dattani 2014: 42)

The issues in the play *The Big Fat City* are serious and grave in nature. The treatment is light with a touch of „dark subtle humour". The play *The Big Fat City* was first performed for the Public on 22nd June 2013 at the Tata Theatre, NCPA, Nariman Point, Mumbai. It was directed by Mahesh Dattani himself and produced by Ashvin Gidwani. The play first published in Dattani's book *Me and My Plays* in 2014. The play *The Big Fat City* is considered to be the first black comedy in Indian Theatre. The play set in Mumbai city. The dramatist has portrayed the life style of Mumbai city dwellers and their involvement in socialization. The play is a sarcastic tale of a murder. It carries all the elements of black comedy such as greed, love, hypocrisy, jealousy, murder, drugs,

violence, discrimination, human sexuality, family honour and corruption. Black comedy deals with the subjects that are usually serious in nature and treated with gravity like insanity, death, murder, war and violence. Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst, in his essay Humour (1927) deals with the theory of black comedy as:

“The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.”

(https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1_0017.Sigmund_Freud?page=3)

The play set in the flat of Murli and his wife, Niharika who live in Mumbai. The play *The Big Fat City* revolves around three characters – Niharika, Lalitha and Anu. The play narrates three different stories. The first is about a couple Murli and his wife, Niharika. They live in a one BHK flat in an apartment named as „The Big Fat City“. Murli worked as an Associate Managing Director in Lotus Inc. India. He is struggling to survive in Mumbai City. He has been fired from his job. He has to pay monthly EMI on the loan for the home which they purchased. The couple is unable to pay their EMI on time. Therefore, they invite Sailesh Ganatra, Murli's friend for dinner. Sailesh is his college mate. He is the managing partner of Jalaram Bank. Niharika feels that Sailesh would help them to bring them out from this financial condition. Niharika invites Lalitha Jagtiani (Lolly), a television actress, to impress Sailesh. Actually, the irony is that Sailesh is also suffering from financial breakdown. He has to arrange a sum of forty thousand for the settlement of a client's bank account. So, he comes there to visit them. Secondly, Lolly, a television actress, is also in her declining career on Indian small screen industry. She is struggling for getting a running role in Ekta Kapoor's daily soap. Already she played the role of „Yamini“ in Ekta Kapoor's daily soap *Saans Bani Saperan*. The last is Anu, a young aspiring actress. She moved from

Haryana to Mumbai by changing her name from Bhateri to Anu with her boyfriend Puneet. Anu and Puneet want to marry by displeasing their parents and Khap Panchayat. Anu wanted to hide her real story and presents herself as a struggling actor. Thus, the play *The Big Fat City* is about „hidden stories“. All the characters have their hidden stories. They are trying to hide their stories from one another and want to represent as successful personnel in the city like Mumbai. Mumbai city carries all the dark realities. Mahesh Dattani tries to open up these dark realities. The actual drama begins when Puneet murders Kailash, Lalitha's drunkard husband. Actually, Puneet misunderstands that Kailash is a producer and Anu had slept with him in her bedroom which she has taken on rent in Niharika's flat. After murder, Anu makes a plan that she wants to present this murder as a suicide. She promises monetary share to the members who are present on the spot of murder i.e. Lolly, Sailesh and Murli. She calls her elder brother, Harjeet and demands extra money to finance her film in which she got a good role. Harjeet has doubts so he pays a surprise visit to them and finds reality that Anu and Puneet want to marry so they eloped from Haryana. All things get clear to him so he shoots both Anu and Puneet for his family's honour. At the end of the play, Murli and Niharika move to Thirunalvelli (house of Murli's mother). They could not save their house in Mumbai. Lolly involves Sailesh and both develop a link with Usmanbhai, underworld mafia. Lolly's son, Rahul leaves her as she couldn't become a caring mother.

The play *The Big Fat City* is not „fat city“ in reality but it is fat according to number of issues. The reader finds lots of problems when he / she enter Mumbai city. About the theme of the play Achint Kaur rightly says:

“It depicts ordinary people caught in extraordinary tragic situations, each struggling to deal with their own situations in a bizarre way. It is a black comedy in the true sense of the word.” (Dattani 2014: 149)

The characters in this play are using themselves one another for their personal gains. They are lacking sensitivity. Niharika is playing vital role to survive her home. She is pretending and boastful lady while Murli is restless and grief stricken about his miserable condition. Niharika wants to show Sailesh that they are successful and confident. She says:

“NIHARIKA (going to him). Please, Murli, don’t look so helpless... You have to look more confident! Please!” (Dattani 2014: 157)

Another character, Lolly is a distressed and pretends to be successful actress but in reality she is struggling for running role in Ekta Kapoor’s daily soap. It is observed as:

“SCREEN (from Lolly): SORRY EKTA. BUT PLEASE, PLEASE GIVE ME A RUNNING CHARACTER IN YOUR NEW SERIAL. I REALLY DON’T WANT TO DO THAT MORBID DATTANI PLAY. I AM DESPERATE. PLEASE!” (Dattani 2014: 168)

She is not surprised on her husband Kailash’s murder. She says:

“LOLLY. Oh Sailesh! When I saw Kailash’s body on the street – I knew he had left to make way for better things! I am so happy I don’t need to feel guilty about anything!” (Dattani 2014: 218)

Anu plays vital role in the development of drama. Anu loves Puneet. Puneet proves himself a true lover and he does every possible thing for his love. He murders Kailash for the sake of his love. It is observed as follows:

“PUNEET. You are mine! No one can take you way from me.

ANU. But, but... I don’t even know him. PUNEET. Sleeping with strange men will not give love! I will give you love!” (Dattani 2014: 183) Anu forges a plan and throws the dead body of Kailash from the balcony of fourteenth floor of the apartment. She is not feeling guilty on this act. Unfortunately, Anu and Puneet shot dead by Harjeet, Anu's elder brother. This act is an act of honour killing. The characters are living false, acquisitive and empty life style. These characters are unreal, absurd and insensitive to the

situations. This is the impact of globalization on modern urban society.

Thus, Mahesh Dattani’s play *The Big Fat City* is a black comedy. He presents the dark side of the world in a humourous way. He handled a variety of themes in this play such as lack of moral and ethical values, adverse impact of technology on our relationships, patriarchal society, changes in human behavior, commercialization of death for personal gain, honour killing, lack of

motherhood, gap in relationship etc. The play is a combination of both humour and pathos.

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