

Existentialism and Conjugal Relationship: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's Uma and the Fairy Queen

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Abstract

A conjugal relationship is generally defined as a relationship between married partners who are interdependent socially, financially, physically, and emotionally. There is another less popular description of the term. The term is also applied to define the relationship in which two partners live like a married couple but are not married. This paper studies Mahesh Dattani's radio plays *Uma* and *the Fairy Queen* in the light of both senses of the term. Dattani has presented two married couples in the play who are married but their marriages are catastrophic alliances. The study of the play aims at locating the cause that has transformed their marriages into toxic relationships. The paper also tends to discover the impact of existentialism on a conjugal relationship which is usually considered a universal social institution.

Keywords: Existence precedes essence, individuality, infidelity, and semantic code.

Uma and the Fairy Queen is the last play of the trilogy in which *Uma* is the central character. The play presents an intricate situation involving persons belonging to three different countries – India, Pakistan and England" (Das 34). In this play, *Uma* unfolds the mystery of Michael Forsyth's murder, a British actor in a Shakespeare company. The company has come to India to stage *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream* on the evening of Independence Day at Liam Tate's invitation, a British ambassador to India who has made all arrangements for the performance. Initially, the play seems to be dealing with an international political issue. An English actor, Michael, is got kidnapped by some Muslims, but he suddenly surfaces. Later he is found murdered in the green room of the theatre. It seems that this incident can create tension among the three countries India, Pakistan, and England. However, as the play progresses, it emerges that the motive behind the murder is personal rather than political. *Uma's* investigation culminates in the fact that *Nila* is the cause of Michael's murder. *Nila* has an illegitimate child, *Feroz*, who lives with her ex-husband, *Malik*. *Nila's* longing to get her son back results in the

murder of her husband Michael and *Feroz's* arrest on the charges of Michael's murder and attempt to murder *Nila*.

The difference between this play and the other two lines is in the representation of *Uma* and her relationship with *Suresh*, her husband. In this play, *Uma* has been portrayed as a renowned detective rather than a research scholar as shown in the other two plays. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, she is represented as a research scholar who takes interest in the murder mystery of a hijra because the case seems relevant to her research work. In *The Swami and Winston*, she is again shown as a researcher who is working on "violence in India" (CP2 301). *Uma* tries to unravel the mystery of *Lady Montefiore's* murder, an English lady. *Uma* emerges as a sleuth in the first two plays of the trilogy. She establishes her identity as a detective in the last play of the trilogy.

Mahesh Dattani is a pioneer in the world of modern Indian English Theater. He is "highly regarded as a social critic of contemporary urban life and manners" (Howlader 3988). As Dattani has exposed some social issues besides the murder mysteries in the earlier two plays of the trilogy, he does the same thing in this play also. Dattani craftily fabricates the two diverse themes by employing dramatic techniques effectively. The semantic codes are presented so potentially that they corner the latent theme in deep. Decoding of the semantic codes unveils that the play mirrors conjugal disharmony. The play presents the story of two married couples – *Uma Rao* and *Suresh Rao*, and *Nila Ahmed* and *Aman Malik*. *Uma* and *Nila* are contemporary women who follow the first principle of existentialism: "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre 22). Both are ambitious women who prefer their individuality to their families.

Uma and *Suresh's* marriage is going through the tension that is the outcome of the absence of a child in their marriage. Dattani has shown this emerging tension between *Uma* and *Suresh* in all the plays of the trilogy. This has been first mentioned in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* where *Uma* tells *Anarkali* that "I [*Uma*] don't have any children" (CP1: 14). Dattani has depicted this more powerfully in *Uma and the Fairy Queen*. It is mentioned in the play that *Suresh* wants to have a child, but *Uma* is not interested in that. *Suresh* expresses his desire by narrating

the pathetic story of one of his friends to Uma. He narrates:

Well, a friend of mine – they couldn't have children of their own – you know what they did? . . . they stayed in his village for a few months . . . a poor distant cousin of his was expecting a seventh child and they couldn't afford to keep her . . . so my friend and his wife, they brought the child with them . . .

UMA. Why all the secrecy? Can't they just adopt legally?

SURESH. You know how people are.

UMA. I am sorry Suresh. I am not ready for it.

SURESH. You don't want a child.

UMA. No. I don't think I do (CP2 447-48)

It is evident from the extract that there is a dispute between Uma and Suresh about having a child. Uma enjoys her social and professional life which she has designed for herself. She doesn't want to end her identity as a contemporary woman only to have a child or to be a complete woman as defined in the principle of hegemonic femininity:

Hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Schippers 94).

Nila is another character in the play who sacrifices her family to establish her individuality and break the boundary of femininity.. Nila Ahmed is Michael's wife and lives with him in England, though she is of Pakistani descent. She was a renowned Pakistani TV actress but migrated to England after a tragic incident. She plays the role of Titania, opposite Michael. It is mentioned in the play that Nila and Michael's marriage is not working and Nila wants to divorce Michael, but Michael denies it.

Probably, the absence of a child in their lives leads their marriage to this position. It seems that Nila disparately wants a child. Since she doesn't get a child from Michael, she decides to get Feroz back on any account. Feroz is Nila's illegitimate child who lives with Malik, Nila's ex-husband who is also of Pakistani descent. The cause of this problem lies in Nila's past. Nila is not her real name. Her real name is Ruksana. She changes her name from Ruksana to Nila when she migrates from Pakistan to England to rescue herself from the fatwa "That I [Nila/Ruksana] should be stoned to death in public" (CP2 462) for her infidelity.

Ruksana was a TV celebrity in Pakistan. She was known as an ideal housewife in every household in Pakistan: "Everyone knew her face. She thought she could do whatever she wanted to. But she was wrong. She was an immoral woman" (Sinha 1190). She married Aman

Malik as his second wife and a child was born to her. But "Overnight I [Ruksana] became the adulteress from an ideal housewife" (CP2 462). Malik's first wife claimed that Malik could not become a father and proved that by producing his medical report. Sohaila, Malik's first wife, came out with that shocking news to prove her normality. Uma who leaves no stone unturned to collect all the information about Nila's past and present while investigating the case describes the incident in the following lines:

. . . Society would point a finger at her [Sohaila]. If the other wife could produce a child, then the problem lay with her. In her anxiety to prove her innocence, she showed her husband's medical report to a few friends. So the scandal broke out . . . except in Nila's culture, this is a serious crime. . . . (CP2 462).

As a result, Nila has to leave Pakistan, leaving her child with Malik and Sohaila. She thought that she would ask them to send the child to her later.

Michael is not unaware of Nila's past. He knows everything. Surprisingly, he wants to help her in resolving the problem. "Michael was understanding and found a solution. He offered to sponsor the child's education and living expenses, knowing full well that Aman Malik wasn't earning anything at all after he lost his job." (CP2 463). The reasons for Michael's decision to be Feroz's patron are obvious. Michael loves Nila unconditionally. It can be understood from the fact that despite knowing about Nila's past, he doesn't divorce her even though she demands that. Moreover, he dies saving Nila's life. There is another reason for his offering to be Feroz's patron. Perhaps, like Malik, Michael is not able to father a child and, therefore, he thinks that he can save his marriage by sponsoring Feroz's education and other expenses.

Dattani wants to expose thematically how the absence of a child in the life of a married couple creates tension between the couple. The play also suggests that social prejudices often create some serious problems, as seen in the case of Nila. It is a social mindset that forces Nila to leave her child and country. Society declares her an adulterous and issues a fatwa on her that she should be stoned to death. The story of Suresh's friend shows another consequence of social prejudice. Suresh's friend does not dare to legally adopt a child because of the social notion that fosters procreation and condemns adoption. Society makes an illegitimate or adopted child's life difficult to live. They are condemned, discarded, and ridiculed wherever they go. Feroz echoes what such children feel:

. . . She was an immoral woman and that is something we do not forgive! She slept with her actor friends! For the money, for pleasure, or just to please the Devil. And I was born out of her cesspool of lust. (To Nila.) You! You don't know what I had to suffer. In school, I was known as a

bastard! At home, I was the unwanted child. We had to move to India and live in hiding to run away from the disgrace, but you won't let us live in peace. Unless you die. . . (CP2 465).

Feroz's statement exposes the suffering of an illegitimate child. He is only fifteen, but he has gone through the humiliation that results in self-hatred. He tries to escape from the bitter reality of his life, i.e. being an illegitimate child, but society doesn't let him. This reality keeps haunting and tormenting him. All his anger turns towards Nila whom he holds responsible for all the troubles and sufferings of his life. This is why he wants to kill her. In his attempt to kill Nila, he kills Michael (Michael suddenly comes between the bullet, which Feroz has fired, and Nila) and later injures Nila seriously. Explaining Nietzsche's philosophy of individualism Thomas Flynn writes "As is often the case with existentialists, his personal life gave tragic witness to the price often demanded such nonconformity...." (25). Nila pays the price of being a nonconformist. She doesn't follow the line drawn for women. Nila's existentialism destroys her conjugal relationship completely.

Dattani has successfully attempted to highlight the impact of existentialism on conjugal relationships. The conjugal relationships of the two couples, the Raos and the Ahmads, become toxic because the female partners pay no heed to their families. Instead, they try to materialize their existence to define their identities. This is one of Dattani's plays that offer no solution to the problem it deals with. Dattani shows thematically some ways that such couples choose to resolve their problems, but none of the ways is justifiable. He exposes his listener to the problem and leaves them with the problem to resolve.

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