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Mapping the Urban Space: Representation of Mumbai in Dattani's *The Big Fat City*

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Abstract

Sahitya Akademi award winning only Indian English dramatist Mahesh Dattani's latest drama *The Big Fat City* (2014) is considered to be the first black comedy in Indian theatre as in this text the dramatist has sarcastically portrayed the stylized lives of the city dwellers and their involvement in socialization. Thus the textual fabric of *The Big Fat City* captures the ever-moving ever-whirling spirit of Mumbai, the city of action where life never stops. People who come into this city with aspirations and who go back from here with shattered longings all want not only to have a big bite of it but also to connect with its 'nerves'. The 'big fat city' is not void or lifeless but the gap of reciprocity renders it with barrenness. Taking cue from social critics I, in this article, am going to depict how Mumbai is presented in three dimensions - a mirror, a mirage and a magnet which reflects the people's lives, eludes the dreams of its people and attracts people respectively. Thus the city becomes a character and influences the lives of its inhabitants incessantly.

Keywords

Dattani, Mumbai, city, urban

Mahesh Dattani (b. 1958) and his plays need no introduction in the literary world. In Indian English Drama the name 'Dattani' essentially dazzles with so many praises that a mere critical analysis would generally fade away under that aura. In Dattani's dazzling dramatic world he has been continually unlocking many doors which nobody had dared before and has been continually inviting his successive followers to tread on that so long untrodden path. The play *The Big Fat City* (2014) revolves around the lives of three characters- Niharika, Lalita and Anu. Niharika and her husband Murli are struggling with their dire economic condition to survive in Mumbai city. Lalita, Niharika's neighbour and a TV serial actor, has been wrestling with the problems in both her personal and professional lives. Anu, the paying guest in Niharika's apartment, comes from Haryana by changing her name (from Bhatari to Anu) to live with her boyfriend Puneet and hides her real stories by appearing as a struggling actor. This is a play of 'hidden stories' and the real stories come into the light when the characters confront the murder of Kailash, Lalita's drunkard husband, by Puneet.

The Big Fat City is not essentially 'fat' in its volume but it is really 'fat' regarding the content of its numerous issues. The reader would get baffled after entering into this city world with its innumerable problems and covered-up issues. Firstly, the title words indicate that the play is about a place (precisely urban space) and the mindscapes of the characters virtually reveal the landscape of the city space. Secondly, this city as reflected in Dattani's play explores and celebrates the surface structure of the economic capital of India - Mumbai. Values, relationship, love, friendship - everything jostle on the surface. Thirdly, here in this 'big fat city' one can find 'the loss of the real' (Jean Baudrillard's famous phrase) in the character Lalita whose identity as a TV serial actor substitutes her real identity. Fourthly, the most important issue of masking and unmasking connects the character and plot to the city space literally and figuratively. Fifthly, the text crops up the most thought-provoking issue whether the city where people come to earn their livelihood can really be turned into a 'home'.

From the very beginning of the text Niharika is trying to glam up the 'surface' level to hide their (she and her husband Murli) reality. She not only puts up a mask of a successful modern woman but also compels her husband to put up another mask only to execute her plot in a successful way. The text begins with Niharika and her husband and simultaneously she gets prepared to stylize her husband (forcing him to wear a silk kurti) and her script by arranging a small get together. Murli tries to be fit in silk kurti but it is torn off arousing his wife's disgust. She employs the silk kurti as a mark of upper class to grab the attention of Murli's invited friend Sailesh, the managing partner of Jalaram Bank. Each and every

character is continually trying not to reveal their true self and to jostle on the surface level of life by wearing masks. Critics always focus on the presence of mask to be the prime theme of urban life as does Lewis Mumford in *The City in History* (1961):

The city ... ceased to be a stage for a significant drama in which everyone had a role, with lines to speak: it became, rather, a pompous show place for power; and its streets properly presented only two-dimensional facades that served as a mask for a pervasive system of regimentation and exploitation. (196)

Similarly, in Dattani's text the dress becomes synonymous with mask. But the sudden tearing off of the silk kurti indicates the impending shedding off of masks of each and every character.

Though Niharika has arranged a 'little get together' to "socialize" with others but this superficial sham socialization would lead the characters of the text towards a heinous climax. Throughout the text the characters are trying to put their mask tightly only to retain the leas of the glitzy Mumbai life. Having a taste of the so-called urbanized upper class life, Niharika is constantly plotting not to lose that bit of life. Niharika's arrangement of get together turns out to be a play within a play where she is the self-employed director who includes (Sailesh and Lolly) and excludes (Anu and her boyfriend) the actors according to her demand. The 'big fat city' drives them to put on mask but it cannot be stuck to their personality longer. Murli in a conversation blurts out the truth of his being fired from the job: "I didn't! I was fired! I lost my job!" (Dattani 164) When at this point Niharika's plot and ploy are staggering for her own husband there appears in their house her another invited actor (literally and figuratively) Lalita Jagtiani to back it up. She is invited to produce awe and aura of telly soap's actors. By impressing Sailesh they want to sanction their loan only to live in the 'big fat city'. The character of Lolly shows clearly how the glamorous world of Mumbai quietly blurs one's own real identity and extracts from one the humane values only to thrust one on the surface reality. Here everything happens on the surface, moves on the surface and goes on the surface. Lalita as Lolly is recognized by Sailesh as Yamini, the character in Ekta's serial "Saas Bani Saperan."

Throughout the text Sailesh would refer her as Yamini which quietly shows how a televisual identity blurs out the real identity of a person in this urban space. Whether it is Niharika or Lolly everyone is scripting their own plots only to cling to the superficial city space. They all use "socialization" as a tool to secure their own social position. Lolly, like other characters, is using the façade of a popular television star to convince them about her demand in her sphere. But the text messages reveal her true self that she is in dire need of a

single role. Dattani's stagecraft always reveals his uniqueness. Here in this text also the innovative incorporation of the 'screen space' to project the messages contained in outbox and inbox reflect the inner mindscape of the characters which they cannot expose before others. This technique is used probably for the first time in Indian theatre. 'Telling' one thing and 'showing' off another on the screen become discrepant in case of Lolly when she brags before Sailesh about her switch over to different kind of professional involvement:

LOLLY. ... I am doing one of those serious plays by Hamesh Dattani. There is so much more depth to that kind of work.

Lolly sends her message.

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 168)

Very ironically here the real space reflects the unreal things and the virtual space reflects the real things. In her dire economic condition Niharika rents one portion of her small apartment to Anu, a struggling actor from Haryana. Anu and Puneet (Anu's possessive boyfriend) are forbidden to enter into the contrived space of Niharika's get together. But arousing disgust of Niharika she bursts into her apartment and this creates another space in this hybridized and multidimensional Mumbai city.

Being drunk when Lolly's husband Kailash enters into their apartment the entire plot drives towards its nodal point. Struck by the stardom of Lolly, Sailesh gears up to help out Kailash from that miserable condition. Niharika's comment in this condition reveals the failure of 'socialization' on the surface level as it has no strong hold on the real ground. In this make-belief Mumbai world money substitutes the moral space and pretence turns out to be the pivotal strategy of the characters in the play:

NIHARIKA. He has no wallet ...

SAILESH. Still – a man has to have a wallet, yaar. Even just for pretence.

MURLI. I do that! I even keep my cancelled credit cards in my - (Dattani 178)

With the rise of acquisitiveness and piggishness the city space transforms a man into a thing. Again the mechanism of message reveals the true self of a person when Lolly asks Nikki to 'dump' her husband like a trivial object of a household in a corner:

SCREEN (*from Lolly*): ... NIKKI DUMP HIM IN A CORNER SOMEWHERE PLEASE ... (Dattani 175)

After taking out Kailash's clothes they make him lie on Anu's bed. Anu and Puneet storm into the house with their dispute and when Puneet enters Anu's room and finds out Kailash on her bed he becomes apprehensive of an intimate relationship between Kailash and Anu. Puneet strangles him to death. This death episode is the nodal point of the play as it tears everyone's mask and shows the putrid rapacious nature of each and every character who are struggling to retain their place in this city.

After Kailash's death everyone indulges in their scheming to get rid of their own problems. At the very beginning Niharika starts her own play-acting and when it totters in the midway she hands over the baton to Lolly but at last the baton would be handed over to Anu to lead the plot and the play-acting to its proper execution. Lolly, the 'star' after her husband's death not mourns for him but gets tensed to find out a packet of drugs which costs fifty lakh. But to her great disappointment Niharika divulges that they put his clothes in washing machine and finds out that the content is washed out. On that very 'muggy night of Mumbai' police arrests her son Rahul. In their dire condition everyone transfer their resentment on other and the habitual blame game of city politics goes on and on in its full swing. To save her boyfriend Puneet Anu offers money to all of them (Lolly, Sailesh and Murlu) and devices a plot to extract money from her brother Harjeet. Anu invites her brother to finance a film where she is doing a good role and arranges her own play with Murlu and Sailesh as script-writer and Lolly as an actor. After coming in Mumbai, Harjeet asks Lolly for a scene to act out. At this time Lolly finds herself in a horrendous position as her son is kidnapped by the goons for money and drugs. Not finding any 'solutions' she acts out her real situation and in this way in the character of Lolly Dattani blends the reel and the real in an amazing way.

At the end of the text Anu's 'hidden' story finally comes into the light. She dupes her brother by pretending that she is struggling to be an actor. But she pretends that only to be with her boyfriend and to marry him. But after Kailash's death the news channel shows Anu and Puneet together behind Sailesh and Lolly. All things become clear to Anu's family. Harjeet at the end of the play shoots both Anu and Puneet for the sake of their family's honour. The repetitive use of the word 'sacrifice' in Harjeet's mouth ironically involves the non-sacrificial self-centred deeds of the city dwellers. With the entry of Harjeet the country space confronts the city space, sacrificial values confront amoral rapacious attitude of the Mumbai citizen. Here in Mumbai everyone wants to cling to their glossy superficial life by denying their underneath humanistic values and hides their real stories under the garb of a

showy socialized life. The great greed for a materialistic life drives them out of their morality.

At the end of the play Murli and Niharika prepare themselves to go back to Murli's roots, his homeland Thirunalvelli. Here we can find that Murli and Niharika have different concepts about home. Niharika cannot think Thirunalvuli as her 'home' and Murli cannot adjust himself in that small Mumbai flat. Mumbai can hardly offer 'home' to a person. Murli is yearning to go back to his root and homeland: "Our balcony is as big as this flat." (Dattani 243) And again: "I don't want this job, I don't want this city! I just want to come home ..." (Dattani 185) At the very end of the play Lolly gives Niharika a painting of Mumbai city as a gift where according to her the artist tries to capture the feel of the city: "It's a painting of Mumbai ... So many people just going about as if life was all about ... getting somewhere." (Dattani 245) Dattani in this play uses the social networking sites in his own unique way. Murli and his friend Sailesh meet through facebook. At the end of the play it would get revealed that in spite of having a long list of friends one has not a single true friend at the end of the day. All the processes of socialization are wrapped up with a showy formality. The void of the city life cannot be substantiated with these kinds of socialization. The most mocking effect of social sites in everyday city life can be found in the words of Lolly just after her husband's death:

SWATI. Lalita you must be devastated –

LOLLY (*interrupting her*). I just want to thank all my fans who tweeted me all those messages of support. (Dattani 222)

The identity of Lolly's son Rahul mostly depends on virtual space. The messages reveal his traumatic situation in an inextricable position. The short speech is very much pregnant with many issues of city life. How the verbal relationship between son and mother has been degenerated we can get a glimpse of this – particularly from the use of language. Morality, values, respect towards elders all are getting dissolved day by day. The incident of greasing the cop's palm reveals the worm-eaten condition of administration. Money controls the lives of every citizen and it is the pivot of this city space. In this viral virtual space virtues are violated repeatedly. The motherly affection and duties also get strangled in this Mumbai city in a horrible way. The self-centred figure of a mother also comes to the fore in the speech of Lolly. "I am a bad mother! ... I let them take him away while I am hiding ... and I got him into this mess." (Dattani 203-4) Dattani reveals the nadir of this 'narcopolis':

SCREEN (*Anonymous*): EITHER GIVE US BACK THE PACKET OR THE MONEY. (Dattani 204)

Lolly's speeches reveal the horrible violence of this underworld: "I have to give them the money or they will do horrible things ... like throw acid on my face!" (Dattani 212) To cover up her boyfriend's heinous act Anu tries to grease the palm of every other character and also threatens Sailesh by declaring that she would make a story of his and Lolly's affair and that would get published in 'Mumbai Mirror' Newspaper. The name precisely reflects that the mirage of Mumbai not only haunts its admirers but also reflects the lives of its citizens in a plotted, scripted way. After throwing Kailash's body from the terrace, Anu starts to direct her 'script' and decides to reveal before everyone that Lolly drives Kailash to attempt suicide.

In this city everyone is continually thinking about oneself and by and by self-centeredness becomes the centre of this city space. The shallowness of the hollow men of this Mumbai city reveals through Lolly's switching over of affection to Sailesh just after the death of her husband. Her speech about her husband's dead body is a slap on the city's ugly face: "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 218)

Kailash's death is the nodal point of the drama which unravels 'hidden' stories of their lives and rips off the so-called socialized masks of each and every character. In a recent review of the play Mumbai based art writer Devina Dutt points out that in this play Mumbai is projected as "an unreal, ruinous, glitzy destroyer of lives and relationships." (n. pag.) The entire city space is so very much devoid of life, emotion, virtue and morality which are exposed in the insensible remarks of the haunting *paparazzi*. An actor's life is always to entertain his/her audience and to protect his/her real persona oneself even in one's most private pathetic situation. Everything is continually framed whether on newspaper, television or in the virtual space of networking solidarity: "A sudden series of flashes as photographers have a field day taking Lolly's picture. Her screams are drowned in the photographer's questions and 'Ma'am, look this way', 'Ma'am', 'Ma'am, Smile', 'Ma'am'." (Dattani 218) Longingness to have a slice of the grand city life drives all the characters to the big city but instead of receiving that imagined life they confront the real emaciated skeletal structure of the lifeless city. Rahul whom we cannot find on stage for once and his virtual identity reaches to its climax by revealing his pathetic condition in a kidnapped situation through an MMS where his mother finds him with a broken arm. The city emerges out as a character through reciprocity with its citizens – it is a space of socialization where "a mesh of social relations occur" (Hubbard 1). But at the end everyone can get to know that the big fat city has nothing big to offer but it extracts out from everyone not only money by indulging one in consumerism but sucks out the basic humane values and leaves one as a hollow man. Niharika

wants to save her small flat in this city space by renting one part of it, Anu wants from this city only to live a life on her own terms with her boyfriend outside her family, Lolly wants a better life by indulging in drug peddling. Ironically here everyone wants a life but this city has only lifelessness to offer.

Anu's brother Harjeet comes from Haryana to Mumbai to finance a movie and wants Lolly to act the role of a mother. Here in this Mumbai city wearing of mask becomes a ritual and recurrent putting on mask obfuscates one's own real identity and one wants to get the feel of real in reel life. Ironically 'reel' becomes 'real' in this way:

HARJEET. ...You are a mother aren't you? (Dattani 236)

LOLLY. I am ... an actor. I know how mothers must act. (Dattani 237)

Interestingly, the drama ends with the 'painting of a Mumbai bazaar with loads of people.' People flock the city centripetally but in this ever-moving ever-active city space one has to learn how to survive within it otherwise the city would throw one out centrifugally. It is very much understandable from the remarks that pretence is very much necessary to be involved in urban socialization as Dattani himself in his Introduction to the anthology titled *City Plays* (2004) marks out that 'hidden faces' (xii) are the obvious slices of the urban life. Thus the textual fabric of *The Big Fat City* captures the ever-moving ever-whirling spirit of Mumbai, the city of action where life never stops. The 'big fat city' is not void or lifeless but the gap of reciprocity renders it with barrenness that affects the city dwellers. Incidentally, the city enchants them, enthrals them, enraptures them and at last encapsulates their lives.

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