

Literature in the Anthropocene:(Re)Reading Mahesh Dattani's the Tale of A Mother Feeding Her Child

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Abstract

Set around a natural disaster, Mahesh Dattani's radio play *The Tale of a Mother Feeding her Child* primarily focuses on 'maternal love'. Interestingly, the very title of the play is suggestive of the fact that we, the children of the Mother Earth, are being fed by her with utmost care and affection since time immemorial. Are we reciprocal to that 'fond mother'? Dattani's play seeks to find the obvious answer to this apparently simple question. Presented as a monologue for a female voice, this heart-touching tale portrays the drastic picture of drought and the plight of human beings. We feel shocked imagining the predicament of the Mother Earth and her children. But then, this is only one aspect. We are simultaneously struck seeing the other side of the coin - even 'natural' disasters have their chosen victims! In other words, the play raises pertinent questions about the politics of 'distributive justice'. Thus, the play *The Tale of a Mother Feeding her Child* that had begun as a tribute to the great poet and author Geoffrey Chaucer on his six-hundredth death anniversary, forms an important corpus of the literature in the Anthropocene. The present paper seeks to explore how *The Tale of a Mother Feeding her Child* addresses the issues and concerns that are embedded in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocene, Earth, Drought, Distributive justice, Nature.

The history of mankind is essentially a story of success and progression. We have come a long way to establish ourselves as the most intelligent creature on planet earth and consequently have survived as the fittest. But while doing so we have wounded the Mother Earth, although we evolved in her lap. It is a pity that in the name of expansion of human civilization we are digging our own grave. Ever increasing rate of pollution combined with random felling of trees has made our planet inhospitable. It is unfortunate that even at the face of the approaching disaster we are not learning a lesson; we are not willing to give up our greed. After all, we live in the Anthropocene, the age of man, where man becomes the omnipotent. Our greed has taken us so far that we do not hesitate to kill a tree, even though we are, consciously or unconsciously, committing what Pramod K Nayar calls 'ecocide' (241). Gieve Patel, one of India's leading contemporary poets, has depicted this 'ecocide' in one of his most well known poems *On Killing a Tree*. In this poem Patel has ironically portrayed tree as an enemy of mankind and hence the execution of the tree has been presented as a ceremonial task. Indeed, in the Anthropocene, the approaching epoch, man is involved in frantic deeds. He has become the ruler of his own habitat and is now trying to expand his empire outside the periphery of the globe. 'The world is not enough' and hence man, with the help of revolutionary advancement of science and technology, is stepping out towards the Moon, the Mars and so on. He is cutting down trees at will, gobbling up fossil fuel, making dams to direct the flow of streams and making rapid industrial growth at the cost of tomorrow's earth. All these have resulted in global warming – a global trouble that is engulfing us bit by bit and forcing us to stand on the verge of extinction.

Against the backdrop of such unrestrained environmental plunder, it would be fascinating to explore Mahesh Dattani's *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child*, a radio play written as a monologue for a female voice. The focal point of the play is maternal love which has been presented through the backdrop of a natural disaster. Dattani is famous for his treatment of the 'invisible issues' in his plays. Gender, sexuality, alternate sexuality, communalism and such other 'fringe issues' find their expressions in the dramatic world of Mahesh Dattani. In *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child*, we, once again, find Dattani as the keen observer of human predicament. What is interesting is that here we find the ecocritical Dattani who unfolds the enigma of environmental hazards ushered in by excessive exploitation of nature and her resources.

The very title of the play *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* becomes symbolical when we see ourselves as the children of the Mother Earth. Through the play Dattani shows how we refrain from reciprocating the love that Mother Earth has bestowed upon us. First aired On 29 October, 2000 on BBC Radio 3, *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* is, as the title suggests, the poignant tale of a mother, an English woman named Anna Gosweb who has come back to a distant village in India that has fallen victim to a drastic drought. This seemingly simple and emotional tale rendered by Anna Gosweb assumes greater significance as we delve deeper into the plot and the narrative.

The play begins as Anna Gosweb arrives in India to find the village where lives the family of a rustic Indian with whom she had had an affair as long as twenty years ago. Her long journey from England to the far off village in India seemed too painstaking for her – an 'ordeal' she had never faced before:

I got on a plane and left for India . . . it was like stepping inside a furnace. I wanted to rush right back into the airport . . . the face of Jaman came back to me. I took the train to Gujrat . . . the air conditioning helped me sleep a little. I can't remember how long it took to get there – it seemed like for ever. (566)

The initial reaction of Anna Gosweb certainly reflects a few facts related to the age where men live and rule. It was an earnest yearning that compelled Anna to come to India, but on reaching her destination she found it nothing better than a 'furnace'. It is a fact that the whole world is turning out to be a 'furnace' as global warming is playing havoc on the global climate. Thoughtless exploitation of natural resources, especially burning of fossil fuel, has categorically contributed to the emission of greenhouse gases that prevent the radiation of heat from the earth. Anna Gosweb reached India on a plane, and took the train to reach her destination. Ironically, both of her conveyances use fossil fuel. And she talked about the 'air conditioning' that helped her to sleep a little. She belongs to the privileged class that can afford to have an escape from the 'furnace', but only at the expense of making the 'furnace' hotter. This does not mean that science and technology should not be used for our progression. 'A rolling stone gathers no moss' – so goes the popular saying. So, the stone must roll on, but not at the cost of living on this beautiful planet. It is worth noting what Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, former President of India and one of India's most revered icons said in this regard. In April 2012, while inaugurating Mahindra Research Valley in Chennai, Dr. Kalam emphasized the use of renewable sources of energy and advised to seek new technologies. As a solution, as Sumantra B. Barooah writes, he suggested if a hybrid system of '40 percent water and 60 percent diesel or petrol be developed' (29). Indeed, automobile, the child of the Anthropocene, is one of the prime sources of Carbon-di-oxide in the environment. As Dr. Kalam observed:

Worldwide, 30 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide is generated every day by burning fossil fuels. We must get rid of fossil fuels by developing injection systems for automobiles, which can run on bio-fuel. (India Today 29)

Indeed, in the Anthropocene we are advancing at the cost of our future. Dattani, in *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* shows how severe the future can be when he depicts the pathetic condition of Mother Earth struck by drought. As Anna Gosweb peers through the thick-glassed window of the running train, she knows she is looking at hell itself:

The land was tawny, deathly and broken down to flakes of dunglike . . . just bits of dried earth. The number of carcasses strewn around increase as the hours go by, and we get closer to Saurashtra. (566)

It is evident that drought has left its trail of death and desolation in the area and has reduced it to a death-bed. But has drought anything to do with human aggression and greed? Well, first thing that comes to our mind is the fact that drought is a natural calamity. But is it only so? Unfortunately, drought is no longer a mere 'natural' calamity, it has certainly been given an impetus by human activities such as unplanned irrigation, deforestation, farming in an excessive scale, soil erosion, environmental pollution and so on. All these thoughtless human activities have contributed to the rise of the average annual temperature of planet earth and have certainly triggered droughts worldwide. Dattani in this play shows how far-reaching the effect of drought can be on Mother Earth and her children. But what strikes us here is the fact that 'natural' disaster has its chosen victims – the depressed class. The privileged class has been spared from the perils:

There were patches of green land, the ones I came to know that belonged to higher caste farmers. . . Lakes that have been known to contain water for hundreds of years have dried up now. The water table has dropped to levels that make it impossible to access. (566 – 67)

This reminds us of the vital observation of Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen who in their book *India: Development and Participation* observed:

. . . in many cases environmental plunder is an infringement of distributive justice and the basic rights of the underprivileged . . . in rural areas, intensive groundwater exploitation on the part of the privileged farmers has often deprived others of access to irrigation and even (in some cases) to drinking water. (223)

Dattani in *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* has depicted how scarcity of drinking water ushered in by the severe drought has forced people to the death-door. Here again the playwright shows the distinction that exists between the high and the low of the society:

I parted with my bottle of mineral water to save a child from dehydration and certain death. Water was available in bottles and sachets, at a price . . . about twenty five paisa bottle. (567)

Environmental plunder, as observed by Dreze and Sen, affects the fundamental rights of the disadvantaged group. Dattani has shown how, especially in rural areas, casteism obstructs the equitable distribution of resources. Due to extreme hot wave

Anna felt dizzy and thirsty, but she didn't have any more water with her. She asked Shanti, Jaman's daughter for some water. She pointed to an earthen pot nearby. As Anna scooted over to where the pot was and looked inside the pot, she wondered how in the world they ever drank that water. She went out into the streets in search of a little water and realized how casteism had swallowed up the life of the underprivileged:

I imagine every home in that settlement belonged to low caste people. They were not allowed to draw water from the well close by. Now that the wells had dried up it didn't matter anyway. They had to walk three miles every day to fetch a pot of water from the relief tankers. There were too many villages affected by the drought and not enough tankers to go around. They only made it to the upper caste neighbourhood. They had to wait their turn. Which came after the others had their fill . . . (570)

This goes to show that even in the Anthropocene, we are clinging to the age-old beliefs and customs - the division on the basis of caste, creed and so on! This is pitiable and at the same time very much paradoxical. With rapid scientific growth and technological development, we are advancing to a new epoch, yet we have failed to eradicate the evils of our society. Dattani here juxtaposes the two faces of our growth and development. With the aid of science and technology we are moving forward and yet are not deviating from the conservative mentalities. We are cutting down trees in one corner and worshipping them in the other. We are flying to the universe and yet unable to uphold universal religion of humanism. It is in this context the play *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* emerges out as an emotional and heart-rending tale in the Anthropocene. Anna apparently symbolizes Mother Earth – feeding some while unable to feed all. It is true that man becomes the victim of the whimsicality of nature. But in most cases it is due to the impact of her child that the Mother Earth fails to feed all. Hence we can't blame her for her inability to feed us all. After all, we ourselves are responsible for her helplessness. Savindra Singh makes a significant observation in this regard:

With scientific growth and technological development since 1860 in general and after Second World War in particular man has emerged as a significant geomorphic agent/process and is capable of changing the earth's surface at the rate many times faster than natural geomorphological processes. (564)

What Savindra Singh is trying to stress here is the emergence of man as an 'anthropogeneous process' (Singh 564) which is capable of changing the face of nature. To quote Singh again, "man equipped with modern technologies and advanced scientific knowledge has become a very important factor in changing the environment process" (565). That is why Mother Earth is sometimes forced to give up on some of her child – she had given up on many a Jamans and she would have given up on innocent Shanti as well, had Anna not come as the Messiah.

Thus *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* draws our attention to the condition of Mother Earth in the Anthropocene where social inequalities still persist quite alarmingly and, as Marxists environmentalism believes, social inequalities do have its impact on nature. Pramod K. Nayar observes:

Eco-socialists argue that class inequalities influence the experience of the environment. As an example we can think of air pollution. The wealthier class escapes air pollution through the extensive use of (non-eco-friendly) air conditioning. The experience of polluted air is, therefore, restricted to the less wealthy classes who cannot afford rarified environments in their homes, vehicles or offices. Eco-socialism suggests that the difference in the distribution of wealth is at the base of such experience of environments. Social exclusion leads to environmental exclusion, where the poorer classes do have the same access to clean air or water (247).

To sum up, besides portraying an emotional tale of motherly affection, *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* also hints at the tragedy of mankind looming large in the Anthropocene. The play warns us of the imminent danger and seeks to build a sort of ecological vision. It lays emphasis on social inequalities as linked to environmental exploitation and thus becomes an interesting eco-text with embedded environmental consciousness – the need of the hour.

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