

Mahesh Dattani's *The Big Fat City*: An Exploration of Urban Reality and Change in Societal Dynamics

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Abstract

Using Mahesh Dattani's *The Big Fat City*, which is a realistic portrayal of life in a contemporary Indian city, this article attempts to analyse the connected themes of urban reality and societal progress that are present in the novel. The disillusionment, alienation, and moral compromises that are inherent in metropolitan existence are something that are investigated in the drama, which takes place in Mumbai. In its capacity as a social force, the city functions as an organic organism, offering a perspective that conflicts with others on human ties. When the characters are unable to notice the passage of time and the shifting social structure, they are put in a difficult situation that causes them to experience sorrow within themselves. In the course of this discussion, we will investigate how Dattani's novel *The Big Fat City* functions as an emotionally affecting commentary on the confluence of urban challenges and societal transformation in contemporary India.

Keywords: Urban Reality, Social Transformation, Metropolitan Life, Contradictions, Contemporary Indian English Drama

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani (born 1958), a prominent Indian English playwright, actor, director, and founder of the theatrical ensemble Playpen, has received the Sahitya Akademi Award. Dattani's plays are generally performance-based and address important and bold issues that affect Indian middle-class urban life. As a social realist, he writes about the current social, political, and cultural scene of India. As Asha Kutahri Chaudhuri explains, "He engages with sexuality and gender issues, religious tension, and the workings of personal and moral decisions as he investigates a range of human interactions. From *Where There's a Will* to the matrix of gender roles in *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara*, to *Bravely Fought the Queen*, which explores the shams of the upper-middle-class joint family, to *Final Solutions*, a gripping and sensitive play about the Hindu-Muslim conflict, to *Do the Needful*, originally a radio play that comically talks about alternate sexual choices as do *On Muggy Night* in Mumbai and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, to *Thirty Days in September*, which looks at incest and child".

A great example of a contemporary Indian English drama that examines the effects of metropolitan settings on the mental landscape is Mahesh Dattani's *The Big Fat City*. Like a cave, a mackerel run, or an anthill, the city is a natural phenomenon. It is also a deliberate piece of art, integrating numerous simpler and more personal types of art into its general structure. Urban forms shape the mentality, which in turn shapes the city. The fast-paced, nonstop existence of Mumbai is encapsulated in the dark comedy

The Big Fat City. The play illustrates urban materialism and the mutually reinforcing interaction between thought and matter. On June 22, 2013, the drama made its debut at the Tata Theatre in Mumbai.

Mahesh Dattani claims that *The Big Fat City* is a dark comedy about the dull, lonely, and intriguing lives we lead in this dream city. It might be a hilarious farce. Imagination and the city have a close and complex relationship that takes numerous forms. Throughout history, cities have served as stores of myths and fantasies, sometimes emulating the utopian ideal; they seem as locations of opportunity, excitement, enchantment, fulfillment, and desire. On the other hand, they can portray a dystopian world characterized by a threat to social order, disorder, disease, crime, corruption, alienation, anomie, and terror. Just as these landmarks have historically attracted the attention of social scientists, reformers, philanthropists, and politicians, they have now become crucial to stories in literature and film.

Up until recently, only social scientists and lawmakers were able to describe and outline urbanism. Humanity has made an effort to comprehend its interaction with the environment throughout history, from ancient Greece to contemporary India. Numerous specialized fields, including politics, philosophy, sociology, demography, geography, and other related sciences, have examined this quest for meaning. The city has been a common setting for the creative discovery of humanists, especially those who are studying literature. The current context of knowledge development through multidisciplinary approaches in Performance Studies presents an alluring opportunity to integrate social science theories with literary works. This synthesis makes it possible to create strong arguments regarding how people and groups interact in the ever-changing urban environment.

The narrative takes place at the home of Murli and his wife Niharika in a posh area in Mumbai. Each of the three portions of the novel features people from different origins who happen to meet beneath the same house. Murli and his wife Niharika are the subject of the first narrative. They live in a small apartment in “*The Big Fat City*” with a kitchenette and a single bedroom. Despite his termination as an Associate Managing Director at Lotus Inc. India, Murli is still required to pay the monthly mortgage on the home they purchased.

Since they are unable to meet their EMI deadlines, Niharika arranges a dinner for Sailesh, a college friend of her husband’s, in the hopes that he may assist them in resolving their financial predicament. To make her gathering more enticing, she asks her neighbour Lalitha, a former well-known television actress, for assistance. The managing partner of Jalaram Bank, Sailesh Ganatra, is visiting for personal reasons; he wants to make arrangements for a payment of 40,000 rupees in order to balance a client’s account. In the following narrative, Lalita Jagtiani, better known by her stage name Lolly, discusses her waning career in the Indian television business, her battles to support her family’s lavish lifestyle, and her heroic efforts to get a part in Ekta Kapoor’s daily soap opera. Lolly was well praised for her depiction of Yamini in the daily soap opera *Saas Bani Saperan*.

In the last tale, Anu, a young, ambitious actress, and her male companion Puneet had relocated from Haryana to Mumbai. Even though they both want to get married soon, their choice will undoubtedly go against family customs and lead to the Khap Panchayat’s censure. When Puneet walks into Anu’s rented bedroom in Niharika’s apartment, she finds Kailash, Lolly’s drunken husband, lying on the bed half-naked. In a fit of wrath, Puneet strangles Kailash to death because she thinks he is the producer that Anu was having an affair with. Anu comes up with a plan to exonerate Puneet of murder allegations, which involves offering monetary rewards to witnesses in return for their participation. She then gets in touch with her elder brother, Harjeet, and asks for a big quantity of money for a movie, making him think she has a big part in the film. But when Harjeet shows up out of the blue, driven by his misgivings about his younger sister’s motivations, the plan falls apart. When he learns that Anu and Puneet left their village on purpose to be married, he becomes determined to preserve the family’s honour.

Although there are three killings on stage in the drama, none of the characters’ lives are disrupted. When Niharika and Murli are unable to rescue their Mumbai home, they migrate to Tirunelveli in search of safety

at Murli's mother's house. At the same time, the newly widowed Lolly starts dating Sailesh and Usman Bhai, an underworld character, in an attempt to live affluently. Rahul, Lolly's lone kid, departs from her life in the meanwhile, disappointed that she cannot be a responsible and caring mother. The little one-bedroom hall kitchenette apartment where the drama is set is furnished with handcrafted props. Basic amenities like a television and air conditioner are conspicuously lacking, yet there is a wealth of Bollywood-inspired women's apparel and costumes. With red projections for incoming talks and white ones for departing messages, a portion of the stage mimics the text message screen on a mobile. Until it is replaced by another message, the message stays on the screen to draw the audience's focus from action to text. The breadth of the performance goes beyond simple stage appearance to include language that is just as significant to the audience and the play's action.

Numerous serious themes are explored in the play, such as the unrelenting stresses of urban life, being unemployed, addiction to drugs, the underground world of crime, avarice, uninteresting relationships, economic hardships, existential insignificance, and deep-seated problems like honour killings, mortality, and social norms. These weighty issues are deftly intertwined inside a light humorous framework, heightening the gravity of the narrative's two parts. Act One is made up of two scenes, whereas Act Two has four. The imbalance of behaviours is well related with the term fat, which denotes an unhealthy expansion. The play uses performance and theatre to communicate a meaningful societal message. The stagecraft, metalanguage, language, setting, and issues all contribute to an excellent statement on modern concerns about urban materiality.

The work's narrative illustrates Mahesh Dattani's transition from a wide-ranging viewpoint to a more focused examination. The narrative is set at Niharika and Murli's house, where they are trying to give Murli's college friend Sailesh the impression that he lives a comfortable and prosperous life. The drama challenges the idea of a successful outcome, which Dattani presents as an unending search. Sailesh is the Managing Partner of Jalaram Bank, while Murli is the Associate Managing Director of Lotus Inc. Both of these IIT alumni hold esteemed positions. Despite their outward appearance of wealth and stability, both people are incredibly miserable and in dire need of assistance. Sailesh calls her Yamini throughout the play, illustrating how a televisual identity masks a person's actual identity in this urban environment. Each individual, whether it's Niharika or Lolly, is writing their own tale while staying involved with the fleeting urban landscape. To elevate their own social standing, they employ "socialization." Like the other characters, Lolly poses as a well-known television personality to convince them of her objectives in her line of work. However, the text exchanges show her severe financial needs and willingness to succumb to numerous forms of abuse, exposing her true nature.

The dramatist gradually adds other characters, including Lolly, a woman in her forties working in the television industry. Despite her low means, she considers herself a star and keeps in contact with renowned television producer Ekta Kapoor. She lives in the same block and lives a life full of the pretentiousness that comes with stardom. Niharika invites Lolly to impress Sailesh and plans to move the home loan account to Sailesh's bank because Murli is unemployed. Dattani gradually increases the gravity of the scenario when another figure, Anu, enters the stage. She represents the younger generation joining the ideal metropolis, complete with its own set of rules and regulations. Homeowners sometimes refuse to rent to unmarried women, the casting couch phenomenon endures for many aspiring performers, and relationships are commonly regarded as unremarkable. Anu is a tenant at Murali and Niharika's home, and she is publicly acknowledged as Niharika's cousin.

Maintaining a sustainable lifestyle in a large city like Mumbai brings major problems. Each character in the play is depicted as being enslaved to consumerism. Murli's job loss has left him and Niharika in serious debt. Meanwhile, Sailesh embezzled money and plans to reimburse them. Lolly is also extremely indebted, having purchased narcotics for 20 lakhs from Usman bhai, a significant chunk of which was accidentally lost when laundry her husband's clothes. Overall, it appears that money dominates people's life.

Mahesh Dattani presents the ghetto as a group of people whose lives are defined by financial complexities, producing a sense of community among them. Monetary dependence is a crucial aspect that forces all characters to concentrate on one region. Broadening our understanding of performance involves more than just action; it also includes historical, sociological, and psychological components.

Mahesh Dattani excels at handling the difficulties of language. Indian English drama has prospered due to its linguistic richness, which includes regional accents and terminology to keep an Indian identity. Characters return to their native language in times of panic. This performance is authentic and improves multicultural representation. He has a keen capacity to approach sensitive topics. The drama critiques the Khap community while also capturing the vibrant energy of Mumbai. The drama ends with Murli and Niharika relocating to Tirunelveli. Lolly comes to see them for the last time and gifts them the painting of the city Mumbai, as she rightly observes, "I saw it outside Jehangir Gallery and thought the artist managed to get the feel of the city with all those people and the old buildings! Many individuals view life solely as a means to an end. The drama finishes with Murli reaffirming her intention to return.

Dattani's plays regularly depict a genuine view of the city and its sensibility. The city serves as a social force, acting as an organic entity and providing an ambivalent view of human connections. His plays are extremely thought-provoking because they reflect the difficulties of modern life. He uses fresh theatre approaches that are appropriate for the theme and bring out the best in the play. In this play, as well, he innovated in dramatic style by using text messages. The text messages flashed on the screen help the viewers grasp the characters' inner feelings and cognitive processes.

Conclusion

In summary, the play by Mahesh Dattani centres on three main ideas: the social environment, urban materiality, and the various nuances of urban space. Dramatic space digitization is a symbol of cultural hybridity, urban materiality, and social transformation. The physicality of the city is closely intertwined with its mindscape. The *Big Fat City* highlights how social isolation and alienation are inevitable in metropolitan settings. The "lonely crowd" is joined by others. The phrase "the lonely crowd" was made famous by Riesman to refer to middle-class white-collar workers in American cities and urban regions. Riesman warned that if individuals ignore their innermost desires and sentiments, as well as their autonomy and social freedom, they may experience loneliness in a throng, even while they are with their coworkers. Perhaps no writer understood the amazing power of cities as well as Mahesh Dattani did. In contrast to the city's vast, anonymous, and heartless deterministic forces, which deprive people of any agency, his characters seem inconsequential. The massive fat city enchants and engulfs the life of its inhabitants; it is neither dead nor empty.

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