

Facticity and Fictionality: Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*

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Abstract: Literary writings advance crucial insight in understanding history and it is assumed that a literary text is coterminous with history. The notions of “history in literature” and “literature in history” or the “historicity of text” or the “textuality of history” as propounded by Brannigan and Montrose, respectively, are of profound importance in contemporary literature. Literary writers have used the medium of fiction to explore those areas of political and socio-cultural history that have been unvoiced or unwritten and mostly debarred by the dominant narratives of official history. The aim of this paper is to study Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* (2012), by applying interpretative strategies and approaches for analyzing the dynamic fusion of the past with fiction, an imaginative combination of historical facts, memories and conjured up scenes and characters that he laces with subtle. By examining *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, this paper also endeavors to explore the literary representation of partition as a potential means of presenting much of the suppressed or silenced history of the marginalized women whose perspectives have largely been excluded in the embryonic discourse of history. In fact, the backdrop of the historical partition in this play allows for a re-thinking and re-visioning of alternative versions of partition, mainly from a woman's perspective.

Keywords: Facticity and Fictionality, Mahesh Dattani, *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, Partition, history in literature

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By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the Social embedment, of all modes of writing—also the texts in which we study them. By the

textuality of history, I mean to suggest firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question. (15-26)

Literary writers have used the medium of fiction to explore those areas of political and socio-cultural history that have been unvoiced or unwritten and mostly debarred by the dominant narratives of official history. The aim of this paper is to study Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* (2012), by applying interpretative strategies and approaches for analyzing the dynamic fusion of the past with fiction, an imaginative combination of historical facts, memories and conjured up scenes and characters that he laces with subtle humour. By examining *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, this paper also endeavors to explore the literary representation of partition as a potential means of presenting much of the suppressed or silenced history of the marginalized women whose perspectives have largely been excluded in the embryonic discourse of history. In fact, the backdrop of the historical partition in this play allows for a re-thinking and re-visioning of alternative versions of partition, mainly from a woman's perspective.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the pioneering Indian playwrights writing in English, who explores the controversial or taboo issues "that people wanted to be kept in darkness" (*Me and My Plays* 32). He tries to give voice to the deep agony of the people who have largely remained on the periphery as exploited, and sometimes as unheard and at other times as muted beings: women, gays, lesbians, disabled and those belonging to the third gender. Dattani has also tried to unravel the religious hatred, communal frenzy and painful suffering of the people through his plays. *Where did I leave my Purdah?* first performed on 27 October 2012 in Mumbai illustrates Dattani's awareness of the fine line between fact and fiction as a means to accomplish the larger truths of life. He has blended facts with fiction through a close juxtaposition of "time and memory" as he himself asserts, "(these) are important elements that provide a plot to my plays" (40). Additionally, through the parallels between the past and the present in this play, he is able to probe the themes of isolation and estrangement, undercurrents of hidden and transferred resentments, religious communalism, embittered and thwarted relationships between a man and a woman, and a mother and a daughter, breaking away from the patriarchal hegemony, quest for identity, truth versus falsehood, tradition versus modernity, acceptance and rejection, all via the sinister echoes of the partition that linger on in the personal and collective memories.

Set in the world of theatre and cinema, against the backdrop of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, it explores in depth, the guilt-ridden past and the success-filled career in dance and drama of Nazia Sahiba's life spanning nearly sixty years. The paper traces the psychological journey of this actress, who decides to move to India during the Partition, leaving behind her the *Purdah* of Muslim traditions in order to establish her own theatre company in India. The opening of the play introduces Nazia as a wrinkled, frail, funny, and grotesque woman in her late eighties, who looks like the "quintessential widowed dadi maa of television and Bollywood movies" (54). She seems to be a feisty, self-assertive, dominant and self-absorbed diva, who wants to live life on her own terms and who does not want to compromise at any cost. She is fed up of playing the monotonous one-line roles of a mother or a grand-mother in the films. At the moment, upon coming to know that Sanjay, the director of the film has not altered the role according to her instructions, she decides to leave the films and rejoin her theatrical world. She remembers her days of glory as one of the most successful theatre dancers and actors of her times. She unabashedly says:

Times have changed...This is it. There is always a time in your life when the truth strikes you...why didn't I see it? What am I doing here? I don't belong here! (*Taking off her wig*)
No more grandma roles for me. I am going back to the theatre! Dancing! That's it. I am leaving. (58)

Nazia's decision to rejoin the theatre is a moment of realization for her that in turn reveals her all-consuming passion for the theatre and her preference to live life on her own terms and conditions:

No matter what, nobody can take away the dances you've already had...I want more dances. Dances that nobody can take away from me. Oh! This van is too small! It can't take my dancing. Your cinema is too small for me. My life is big. I am BIG and GENEROUS! Only the theatre deserves me! (59)

She intends to resurrect her theatre company named "Modern Indian Theatre" to interestingly renamed, "Post-Modern Indian Theatre" by staging the modern version of the grandest production in her repertoire, *Abhijyan Shakuntalam*, renamed *SHAKU*. She plans to portray Shakuntala, the abandoned pregnant wife as a modern and liberated woman and Dushyant as an impotent man, which suggests her strong desire to subvert the male hegemony and present an

example of a society free from patriarchal domination. However, the sponsor wants Nazia to stage the original version. So, she straightforwardly rejects reconsidering her plan:

He doesn't want a modern version?...No, I don't want to do the original. He can take it or leave it...Okay! And tell him his Shiraz tastes like a mix of vinegar and cow piss anyway! (84)

Another aspect of the play is that Dattani's Nazia, the veteran theater actor, living amidst the backdrop of partition and involved in various theatrical activities, is based on the experiences and artistic accomplishments of Zohra Sehgal. She is modeled on Zohra, who has defied the expectations of the traditional patriarchal society and has made unconventional choices in her personal and professional life. Sehgal, despite being a Muslim woman, is "a quintessential Bollywood diva who essayed character roles with aplomb in a career spanning over seven decades in both theatre and cinema" (*The Guardian* 1) and is known to be India's first professional ballet dancer and theatre diva. Dattani himself asserts:

It explores the life and travails of Nazia, a stage actress who has lived a life in the theater for sixty years. The play is a tribute to the great actresses of company theaters, who were courageous enough to pursue their passion for the stage at a time when stage actresses were, looked down upon...my inspiration the legendary Zohra Sehgal...somewhere the spirit of the doyenne lives in Nazia. (*Me and My Plays* 40)

Dattani has combined various facts of Zohra's life with his fictive imagination. To achieve his goal, he has innovatively and artistically presented Nazia working in a film with real actors like Ranbir, Deepika, and Rishi, directed by Sanjay, and sharing close relationships with actors like Waheeda and Nanda—the popular actors of their times for "the reality effect" (White 15). In fact, Zohra has acted in her last Bollywood film *Saanwariya* (2007) with Ranbir Kapoor and Sonam Kapoor directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The inclusion of elements like Nazia's unstoppable spirit, her acting skills and dancing ability, successful cure from cancer, and so on are based on factual elements of Zohra Sehgal's life. She is known to be the leading dancer in, "Uday Shankar's troupe and danced across Japan, Egypt, Europe, and US...in 1994 she got cancer but her will power beat that too" (*The Guardian* 2). The play can be called a docudrama in which "[E]verything is presented as if it were...both real and imaginary—realistically imaginary or imaginarily real" (White 68).

The play is not merely set against a theatrical backdrop, Dattani has imparted the story a unique intensity and complexity that heightens the tension by placing the core of the story during India's partition, with all its upheavals and far-reaching physical and psychological consequences that remain in the sub/consciousness as shown through the reminiscences of Nazia. As Lillete Dubey notes:

A story set against the backdrop of the theatre, tracing some of the theatrical forms that constitute our history, recounting a tale that mirrored the stories of a multitude of women artistes who were consumed with a love for their craft, almost at the cost of everything else. These were dynamic women who were driven by a deep compulsion to fulfill their artistic needs, in spite of the fact that their work would live only ephemerally in memory. And so was spun the story of the irrepressible, irreverent, iconoclastic and utterly human Nazia, who is inspired by a legion of Amazonian legends that have blazed across the stage, living, loving and even sacrificing all for their art. (*Me and My Plays* 48-49)

Partition, the most catastrophic event of recent Indian history has been used to revise much of the suppressed or silenced history of those women who witnessed and suffered partition, and tried to not only resist but reconcile and refashion their lives in the changed situations. Dattani's juxtaposition of Nazia's traumatic and disturbing experiences, and her troubled and embittered relationships with her loved ones with the historical moment of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent by using psychological concepts like memory, forgetting, remembering and misremembering have played an important role in making facts become fiction and fiction become fact. The play is especially occupied with the moments when personal lives are entangled within the forces of history and depicts the importance of replaying the past to come to terms with it, of confronting loss, acknowledging guilt, and taking responsibility. The fictional trials and tribulations that Nazia endures in her personal and professional life during and post-partition reflect the truth of the problematic, risky and challenging lives that women have been subjected to or lived throughout the history. Though Nazia wants to free herself of the cruel past by all means, she realizes that ghosts of the past cannot be buried so easily. She painfully explains that to forget one's past is not an easy task:

You think it is so simple? ...Things don't get finished. They just hide in a dark corner like a ghoul and grab at you when you are not looking. And sometimes you have to beat the shit out of the ghoul to make it crawl back into the dark corner. (89)

The play's temporal shifts to the pre/post-independence era and the intermingling of play-within-the-play, *Abhijyan Shakuntalam*, are integral to the development of the plot. Dattani, through these techniques, not only links the past with the present but also reveals the true motives behind Nazia's decision to abandon her husband and hiding the truth of Ruby's parentage. Lillete Dubey avers:

The play operates within the different time zones and realities. The present, the past and the play-within-the-play (where we rediscover a classical play Kalidasa's *Abhijyan Shakuntala*) flow seamlessly into each other, but with their own individual rhythms and beats. Each segment mirrors and echoes the other, the whole coming together like one piece of music, underlining the trajectories of the protagonists on many levels, including off the stage and on. (49)

The play reflects the horrors of the partition when the action shifts to Lahore of 1948, soon after Independence, and Nazia and Suhel as Shakuntala and Dushyant are performing a scene where Dushyant saves Shakuntala from the bees, when suddenly the pandemonium of violence breaks out. Suhel is a Hindu and a woman of the troupe shouts, "we should never allow Hindus in our troupe...Hindus must leave! Go to India" (75-76). But Nazia acts quickly and gives Suhel a Muslim (praying) cap and handles the violent mob, "[T]here are no Hindus here. Only us artistes" (77). But a man while leaving the theatre remarks:

We know the kind of plays you put up, prancing around naked on stage. And then you move around with that Hindu. Whores like you will find no place even in hell. (77)

Dattani poignantly portrays the animalization of human values in the midst of the vitriolic violence that saw the killings of millions of Hindus and Muslims, and more specifically, resulted in the brutal molestations, rapes and murders of countless women during the forced migration. Through the scene that takes place midway in the play, he effectively conjures and conveys in a fictional way the realistic accounts of the partition about the human realities of the 1947 upheavals, and the sexual violence that accompanied it. The announcement of the partition

makes the erstwhile peaceful Hindu and Muslim neighbours suddenly awaken to and realize their differences with horrific consequences. Nazia's decision to migrate to India with Suhel costs her too much. Her sister, Zarine, sacrifices herself for Nazia's life. She is brutally molested and murdered by the violent mob in the train, "The infamous Flying Mail 9 Down" (128) to India. Nazia recalls the whole frightening incident:

She gave me her burqa. She was always the one who was uncertain. She was always the one who was uncertain. She was always afraid of making a wrong decision! But now-- she did not think twice! There was no doubt in her mind... (130)

More than the primary events of the partition itself, this play explores the sexual exploitation of the displaced girls and women by men, irrespective of their religion or region. A gang of Hindu men sexually molests Nazia while Suhel watches on inert. This makes her feel betrayed, and sad and desolate. She feels more victimized when she gives birth to a child as a consequence of this gang-rape. This and similar violence against women symbolizes the vulnerabilities of the women whose bodies are used as battlegrounds by men for taking revenge and preserving their fragile and false male egos. The play offers a realistic depiction of the gendered aspect of partition like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1987), Kamleshwar Singh's *How Many Pakistans?* (2000), Sadat Hasan Manto's partition stories and *What the Body Remembers* (1999) that artistically depict the vandalism women have had to endure during partition. Menon and Bhasin in their book *Border and Boundaries* rightfully opine:

Sexual violence—against women—now charged with a symbolic meaning that serves as an indicator of the place that women's sexuality occupies in all-male patriarchal arrangement of gender relations between and within religious or ethnic communities...The most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by "dishonouring" their women. (41)

Dattani, too, through Nazia's words, gives the graphic details of the heart-wrenching incident of violence against Zarine and her:

The butchers were on her and all the others...We crossed the border after bribing someone...I was still wearing that piece of black cloth. But we were in another country, with a different set of demons...They came at me. They pushed me down behind the

bushes. Five or six or seven, eight of them. I don't know. They tore at my clothes and at my flesh. All I could think of is why isn't Suhel saving me? These are his peoples! I stopped looking at those eyes, so much anger and hatred! Hell bent on humiliating me. I stared back with hatred too, but they hurt me even more till—I stopped looking into their eyes. . .The train arrived from across the border. Filled with bodies. . . I recognized Zarine. Only just then. She was killed by her own people. I . . . (131-133)

Nazia gets married to Suhel but the play poignantly expresses the truth of her hollow, disjointed and frustrated relationship with him, which can never be like before:

We only remembered the pain...We are not who we were. And I think it is a good thing. Of course, I wish I were beautiful as I was. I wish you were too. We were both beautiful but what's the point now? It's over. No point. Cobwebs...He (Suhel) said he would bring up the child as his own...but – I could sense it in his touch. Somewhere, we had forgotten each other...we only remembered the pain. (134)

By mingling the scenes from the play *Shakuntala* between Nazia and Suhel as Shakuntala and Dushyant onstage and offstage, Dattani truthfully mirrors the deep agony of Nazia and the dismantled love/marital relationship between the two. Nazia's soulful rendition of *Shakuntala*—her feelings of empathy with *Shakuntala*'s suffering—prefigures the fate of the protagonist as well as that of Nazia. The dialogues of the play uttered by Suhel as Dushyant make her feel that Suhel wants to convey to her his feelings which he can never express to her in real life:

NAZIA. Why is it that when you play Dushyant—especially this scene—I feel that—you are accusing me?

SUHEL. Maybe because I am a good actor...

NAZIA. Why are you all so cruel to me?...

SUHEL. Is it the company you care about? Or the roles you play? *Jasma Odan*, *Shakuntala*. You choose the scripts with care making sure you have the meat, while you feed the rest of us the bones!...

NAZIA. Move on? I am trying—trying to do that, but you keep reminding me of what happened...I just have to look at you and it all comes back! I can't play *Shakuntala* because of you. And in the court when you spurn me, the look in your eyes! You mean every word you say!...I can't love you anymore.

SUHEL (*unbelieving*). You still blame me for what happened?

NAZIA. You did nothing to stop it! Nothing!

SHAKUNTALA. Look at me and say you have not married me under the gandharva tradition.

DUSHYANT. How can I, by accepting a woman with obvious signs of pregnancy, invite upon myself the infamy of being called the husband of a woman who is pregnant by some other man?...Even females that are not of the humankind are clever without training to be so. Don't you know that the cuckoo, whose voice seems sweet to everybody, displays such cleverness that she keeps her young ones in the nests of other birds!

SHAKUNTALA (*angry, more as Nazia*) NO! NO! O Mother Earth!...Please take me away to some place far away where I can forget my troubled past. (95-105)

These also explain Nazia's insistence on staging a subversive retelling of *Abhijyan Shakuntalam* with a sturdy Shakuntala and an impotent Dushyant, since this was what she had felt like after her horrific experiences during the partition and later on during her loveless marriage. Nazia decides to look forward in life with strength and self-will and never peep into the reprehensible past. She commits to not following the stereotypical boundaries of the male dominated society and to create her own world free of the patriarchal set of norms, those partial sets of feminine norms which assign a woman the role of an obedient and subservient wife and selfless nurturer as a mother, and who passively and silently endures all cruelties. Therefore, in order to free and unburden herself from the memories of her sinister past, she abandons her husband and declines to be the mother of an unwanted child. Then she unveils the truth about Ruby's parentage which turns out to be a horrific revelation for Ruby:

You were born....You were my flesh, wounded, humiliated. I didn't cry when you came out. I was relieved—that the tapeworms infesting my belly, left by those pigs that ate at my flesh, were out of my body...I could not hold you...Not because I hated you, but because I hated myself...even today when I look at you...it comes back. I tried really hard to forget. I tried. And I will keep trying. Help me. Just leave me alone! (134-135)

Thus, the primary reason for neglecting Ruby becomes clear. Ruby is an unwanted child, a living emblem of the horrors perpetrated on Nazia, and hiding Ruby's true identity is one of her

defense mechanisms to forget the dreadful and horrible memories of her past life. And, Ruby after knowing the truth of her parentage expresses her inner pain of being a neglected child and Nazia's apathetic behavior towards her, "I didn't exist. Everyone sympathized with me. Poor girl, her own aunt doesn't want to look at her... You were so close to me and yet you may as well have been thousands of miles away" (124-125). However, what is lamentable is the fact that this cycle of pain, neglect and apathy continues in Ruby's behavior towards her daughter Nikhat. The partition has not only made lives insufferable to those who had to go through it but has repercussion for the coming generations as well as the cycle of hate and suffering continues. Nikhat endures the same agony, the rejection and neglect by her mother as her mother, Ruby, had gone through before her:

NIKHAT. You gave what you got. Oh, you were always around at home, trying to compensate and making sure I didn't go through the same feeling of abandonment. But even when you were holding my hand waiting for the school bus to pick me up, you were thousands of miles away... There was a whole week when you would give me my lunch box without packing my lunch in it, and at a lunch break, I would open an empty lunch box. You went through the motions all right of being a caring mom. But you weren't. You couldn't. I was angry too. (126)

As the play reaches its resolution, the line between the past and present blurs, as they become one in spirit—an emotional reunion of Nazia with her daughter Ruby, and Ruby's reunion with her daughter Nikhat—that ends the hidden resentments within them against one another. But the whole scene imaginatively portrays the real pains and physical and psychological traumas that both of these women have suffered, during partition and post partition.

Thus, the study shows that the historical and fictional elements are amalgamated deftly in the play. The play not only reflects but also rather actively participates in the reconceptualization of the historical moment of partition. It analyzes how Dattani integrates historical facts within the fictional framework to present a deeply personal yet almost universal story of fortitude and courage, as well as the tragic tale of loss and pain ably and aptly, speaks of the agony of women by employing a feminist retelling of the partition and by focusing on the double victimization and suffering of women for being women through this journey of Nazia's. Additionally, Dattani, through his humanistic portrayal of the personal experiences during times of political and

religious upheaval, gives glimpses of the tribulations faced by avant-garde theatre actresses as a whole. Nazia's zeal to create a world of her own by denying to act in restricted roles, both literally and metaphorically, effectively unveils her true powerful self and of other women like her. Furthermore, adaptation and reinterpretation of *Shakuntala* as *Shaku* can be seen an endeavor to make women aware of and caution against internalizing the retrogressive patriarchal beliefs concerning the feminine which are meant to subordinate or marginalize the women in every sphere of life—political, economical and cultural. By linking fictive scenes of *Shakuntala* with the personal traumatic experiences of an almost real Nazia, with the continuous shifting of focus from the present life of the characters to their past and vice versa, Dattani has been able to bring out all the deep-rooted pains and desires of various characters, and perhaps hopes to achieve a similar catharsis for all those women who actually suffered during partition and others after them.

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