



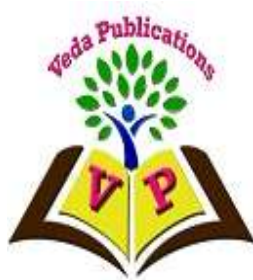
## MAHESH DATTANI'S *EK ALAG MAUSAM*: A SCREENPLAY ARTICULATING THE PREDICAMENT OF THE HIV/AIDS PATIENTS IN INDIA

Dr. Jaspal Singh

Head, Department of English, G.G.D.S.D. College, Hariana, District Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India-144208

Email: [jaspal.79@gmail.com](mailto:jaspal.79@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT



Mahesh Dattani is one of the most influential playwrights writing in Indian English in the present period. He has written plays for stage, radio and for the 'big screen' and has been successfully vocalising the dilemma faced by the invisibles and the marginalised in a traditional Indian society. He has efficiently dealt with some of the most controversial and taboo themes and has effectively sensitised the audience to the issues that are often hushed up from being openly discussed. The present paper focuses on one of his most successful screenplay, *Ek Alag Mausam* that deals with the predicament faced by the HIV/AIDS patients in India. They are subject to social isolation and segregation because of some myths prevailing in the society regarding the disease. What Dattani has tried to put forward through this screenplay is that all these patients are equally entitled to love, life and respect irrespective of any presuppositions of the society. They should be dealt with love and care instead of hatred and isolation.

**Keywords:** *Predicament, Isolation, Disease, HIV/AIDS, Prejudice, Dilemma.*

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Mahesh Dattani is one of the most versatile playwrights of the contemporary period. He has brought to stage some controversial issues that other playwrights in India had been avoiding. He is the first playwright to be awarded by Sahitya Akademi in 1998 for his distinguished contribution to Indian English Theatre. In 1984, he formed his playgroup PLAYPEN or 'Mahesh's Studio' as it was popularly called. He initiated his directional career by directing English and Greek plays. He started writing plays in 1986 with *Where there is a Will* and tried his hand in screenplays by directing *Mango Soufflé* in 2002, the screen version of his own stage play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. He has written a number of plays over a span of more than three decades that has established him as one of the most significant playwright of the modern era.

Dattani's success as a playwright paved his way to try his hand in radio and screen plays. He has written seven radio and four screen plays. Real contribution of Mahesh Dattani lies in the fact that he has created new aesthetics for theatre. His plays delve deep into the minds of the characters and successfully reflect on the stage the conflict between their fears and fancies, thoughts and imaginations and between the self and the society. It is because his long experience of the theatre that Dattani has been successful in reflecting the inner psychological self of the characters on the stage. The sensitive dramatic self of Dattani is a fine synthesis of a dancer, director, actor, playwright, audience and commentator moving collectively towards a single direction. (Agrawal, 2009, 24) He has sharp theatrical vision and a sharp artistic perception that looks through the happenings going around. That is why it is attributed:

Dattani succeeds in negotiating the various global issues so successfully beyond the cultural context and geographical territories. With his innovative art and thematic novelty, he has heralded a new era in the field of English Drama. Within the canvas of his theatrical art, he reflects upon some serious issues of contemporary society. His theatrical canvas is coloured with socio psychological realism. (Parmar, 134)

The screenplays that have established Mahesh Dattani in the film industry are *Mango Soufflé*, *Morning Raga*, *Dance Like a Man* (co-written with Pamela Rooks) and *Ek Alag Mausam*. It is his sincere dedication to art and his first hand knowledge of theatre that he has become a successful screenplay writer and a director as well. *Dance Like a Man* was awarded as the Best Picture in English by the National Panorama in 1998. He has brought to stage, radio and screen those issues that are intentionally ignored by the writers. The traditional conservative Indian society does not allow controversial and taboo topics to be discussed in open. But Mahesh Dattani very effectively and efficiently spotlights such themes and sensitises the audience regarding these topics. He focuses on those subalterns and marginalises individuals who are caught up in the web of social tangles and are torn between their true self and the expectations of the society. That is why Mortimer says, "Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties, his characters encounter, instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions. (3)

He dares to take up controversial themes like that of the 'gays' in his plays like *Do the Needful*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, of 'eunuchs' in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, of 'sexually abused children' in *Thirty Days in September*, of a 'male classical dancer' in *Dance Like a Man*, of bias faced by religious 'minorities' in *Final Solutions* and *Clearing the Rubble*, of the 'hypocrisies' of middle class people in *The Big Fat City*, of the 'crisis' faced the aspiring women in *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* and in *Tara* and of and the 'predicament' faced by terminally ill patients in *The Brief Candle* and *Ek Alag Mausam*. Most of his plays bring to the centre stage the invisibles and the marginalised people living in the society who are in a constant dilemma as whether to come out with their true identity in the society or to live as the society expects them to do.

*Ek Alag Mausam* was directed by K.P. Sasi and released on 4<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2005 with the help of Actionaid India, an NGO working for the betterment of HIV/AIDS patients in India. Anupam Kher, Nandita



Das, Renuka Shahane and Rajit Kapur played the key roles in the screenplay. R.A. Siddiqui while praising the effort put into the film, affirms, "The film is the first-ever attempt in India to be made on AIDS with a well-known cast, and is produced by no Bollywood producer but ActionAid India, an NGO working with the poorest and marginalised sections for 30 years." The screenplay is based on the situation of the HIV positive patients in India who are branded as the 'touch-me-nots' in the society. They are looked down upon with hatred and disgust. Even the family members of most of the patients refuse to own them. The moment of revelation of this ailment dooms them to isolation and misery. There is no sympathy or fellowship with the others. They are forced to draw into a shell of their own. In the outer world, hiding their ailment becomes their best defence. Those who try to boldly live with their illness by not hiding it from society are pushed to the margins. The hypocrisy on the part of society creates an identity crisis in these patients. They are at a loss as to decide between the true and false side of their personality. The society accepts the false side and rejects the true one, encouraging hypocrisy.

The problem that these patients face is whether to come out boldly and face isolation and segregation or to let them hide their ailment so that they are not isolated by the society as other patients are. Beena Agrawal comments, "*Ek Alag Mausam* is a play with a message, it is not a question of the love of the two people but it is a question of love with life." (2008, 140) What the playwright wants to communicate to the audience/readers is that these patients are equally entitled to love and life, as the other people are. The society out rightly brands an individual suffering from this ailment as a person indulging in immoral practices. What they never think is that there are other means also by which an individual, be it anybody, can get infected from this disease. These patients are to be dealt with care and sympathy, kindness and compassion rather than with hatred and disgust that they often get.

The treatment that these patients get from the society deteriorates their suffering further. *Ek Alag Mausam*, deals with the harrowing tale of Aparna's marginalization due to patriarchal domination, incurring HIV positive for no fault of

hers, social apathy and loss of her baby. (Bhadury, 107) It is a realistic portrayal of the crisis in the conscience and in the consciousness of these patients who face humiliation and insult at every step of their life because of their illness. Through this play, Dattani has tried to emphasis the vacuity created by the ignorant society for such patients. The vacuum has to be filled by love and understanding. Making the audience aware of the psyche of the patients who experience this type of isolation and "to make the world 'understand' [is] the real mission of *Ek Alag Mausam*." (Trivedi, 5) Society forgets the human side of an individual that craves for love and understanding. The play is a call to one and all to treat the HIV positive patients not with disgust and revulsion but with sympathy and understanding. As Dr. Machado in the play says:

Let us remember the lives of those who died of the virus and respect the dignity of those who are living with HIV. Today's enemy is not other human beings from another country or people from another religion or race. The real enemy today is a tiny invisible creature – a virus. The Aids virus knows no barriers of caste, creed, religion, age, gender, race. It is not prejudice, fear or ignorance that will win the battle against Aids. (CP2, 557-58)

In reality, there is a lack of understanding and sympathy on the part of fellow beings which creates a crisis in these patients. They are at a loss to understand their position in the society. But more than the disease, these patients are afraid of the social stigma. The shame and disgrace related to the disease is so great that the patients like Aparna find themselves unfit even for their legitimate chance of life and happiness. The fear of death in the offing is nothing compared to the social ghettoisation and contempt they are confronted with. (Roy, 101)

Jeevan Jyoti, the non profit organisation run by Dr. Machado is the most suitable and secure place for the HIV patients who find peace with their co-sufferers. It is a place where an individual has "nothing to hide" (CP2, 488). The signboard outside Jeevan Jyoti is symbolic which says 'Leave Your Prejudice Outside' (CP2, 500). It is the 'prejudice' of the society that they are struggling with and hiding in



a little shell of Jeevan Jyoti. But people of the outside world do not see Jeevan Jyoti without 'prejudice' and do not tolerate those related to this organisation in their world. At Jeevan Jyoti "Death is not a news over here. Life is" (CP2, 504). But the patients learnt to live with the disease. They have learnt to "Live like a soldier, die like a soldier" (CP2, 506) and Dr. Machado inspires them to keep on fighting. He encourages them not "... [to] feel ashamed of being positive. It's not your fault. It's your duty to make the world understand that." (CP2, 545)

The entire play focuses on Aparna who is suffering from intense internal crisis and condemns herself of being unworthy of happiness. The playwright articulates the fears and frustrations of the HIV positive people through Aparna. Her story is the plight of all the HIV patients who try to live with dignity in a biased society. She gets the virus from her unfaithful husband. She longs for love and care but is afraid of making any commitment because she has her fears of death. She is repulsive towards George, though she loves him in her hearts of hearts. She is afraid of watching George sink towards death inch by inch. George tries to bring her round to acceptance of life with HIV and their entitlement to happiness in spite of the disease, "You have branded yourself Aids, Aids, Aids! You have put a big red stamp on yourself. I thought only an uncaring, unfeeling society would do that to us. But no. We don't have to worry about society. We are doing it to ourselves! I refuse to brand myself" (CP2, 533). George tries to fight out a situation of happiness for himself, but Aparna takes the disease as a death warrant, the doom that has been pronounced by fate on her.

The play is a call to the society to treat the HIV positive patients with love and care instead of hatred and prejudice. They should be taken as the normal citizens of the society with equal rights and opportunities. Awareness is the only way out. It is the lack of education and knowledge about the disease that these people are isolated in the society. The crisis in their identity will automatically be resolved if they are dealt with understanding, love and care. Terry Almeidae, the chief executive of Action AIDS Indian Society, rightly comments:

It is a film that will make people sit up and start thinking about the issue seriously so far. We have only seen marginalization of such people. Through *Ek Alag Mausam*, we hope to put the problem in a different perspective and help audience to understand the issue better. We used the film medium to reach out to not only HIV positive people out there who are feeling isolated, but also a large cross-section of people. (Subramanyam, 1)

To conclude, one can say that the play focuses on the crisis and predicament of the HIV/AIDS patients. How to survive in the hypocritical world that promotes lies is the question. Dattani's plays do not deal with characters in isolation who have stereotype roles and places in the society. Rather they are individuals who have an inner self that is often in conflict with the outer world. The crisis in identity emerges in the characters when they fail to strike a balance between their true inner self and the expectations of the society. Society exercises a great control over the individuals. The chains put on man by society are so strong that they not only control an individual physically but psychologically also. The emotions, howsoever private they may be, that disturb the social balance are immediately suppressed. But in spite of all the social themes and unconventional attitudes, Dattani does not claim himself to be a social reformer. His intention is to put the problem in front of the audience and then leave it for the individual to ponder over it. To him, theatre is not a place for cheap entertainment; it is for the sensitisation of the audience to the prevalent issues of the society. He brings the margins to the centre and leaves it for the spectator to decide the right and the wrong.

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