



# Hidden Trauma in Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*

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## Abstract:

In Mahesh Dattani's *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, the inter-generational trauma, that is an important part of the Indian subcontinent due to a series of communal conflict, is explored through the play's themes and techniques. In the first part of the paper, the complexity of trauma, memory and identity is explored through Coleman's idea of denial and repression of reality and Caruth's theory of trauma. This helps in elucidating the silences in the play as acts of articulation of witnessing traumatic events. The second part of the paper explores Dattani's layering of Nazia's ordeal through the use of the technique of play within a play.

**Keywords:** inter-generational trauma, play, Dattani, memory, identity, violence

Dattani's 2012 play, *Where Did I leave My Purdah?* displays his unique approach to the theme of partition, highlighting the strength, vocalism, and resourcefulness of his women protagonists. Dattani, known for addressing "unconventional and taboo themes" (Thakar 2), acknowledges in his "Preface" to *Collected Plays* that his works reflect the contemporary challenges of society. Dattani's insight into human nature and relationships, as noted by Bijay Kumar Das in *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*, is characterised by honesty, sincerity, and objectivity. Das says, "Dattani's themes strike us for two reasons- novelty and authenticity" (60).

The play explores human spirit, particularly through the character of the protagonist Nazia Sahiba. Dattani's treatment of women characters with sympathy and empathy is evident, as he draws inspiration from Tennessee Williams in portraying women as fighters in a violent society. Nazia Sahiba, despite her troubled past of migration, murder, and gang-rape, emerges as an indomitable and passionate woman. Her love for theatre becomes a metaphorical journey to cleanse her past, represented by the recurring motif of cobwebs. The play encapsulates Nazia's relentless pursuit of an ideal life, as dance symbolises the unattainable but sought-after world. Despite the challenges, Nazia's character embodies resilience and an unwavering passion for life. It is in light of such a portrayal of Nazia that Dattani's words during an interview to Sachidananda Mohanty can be better understood, "I relate to Tennessee Williams because he writes about vulnerable women in a very violent society. I think I tend to do that as well, although I don't see my woman as vulnerable, in the sense that they do fight their battles" (173). A similar sentiment is echoed in Lillete Dubey's "A Note on the Play" that describes Nazia as "irrepressible, irreverent, iconoclastic and utterly human Nazia, who is inspired by a legion of Amazonian legends" (48).

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of Hindu-Muslim conflicts, with the central character Nazia Sahiba, initially portrayed as an eccentric and authoritative elderly woman. Ruby, who refers to Nazia as her aunt, asserts that Nazia wrongfully took credit that rightfully belonged to Ruby's mother, Zarine, who is Nazia's sister. Ruby charges Nazia with being exceptionally self-centered and deceitful. Unbeknownst to Ruby, Nazia is concealing a significant secret that has the power to alter lives. Beneath Nazia's lively and unconventional facade lies an internal struggle—a concealed history of trauma that she deliberately chose to bury in her past. In the tumultuous year of 1948, amid the Hindu-Muslim riots in India and Pakistan, Nazia, alongside her lover Suhel and sister Zarine, collaborates on a theatrical production of *Shakuntala*, a Hindustani dance drama, in Lahore. They decide to launch their own theatrical company in India. Their journey to Delhi involves boarding a train, which tragically becomes the scene of a massacre perpetrated by Muslim extremists, targeting Hindu passengers near the border. A woman on the train told them to wear a burqa to save themselves. As Suhel dons a cap and Zarine retrieves her burqa, Nazia struggles to locate her own. Unbeknownst to Nazia, Zarine discreetly places her burqa in Nazia's trunk. Eventually, Nazia wears the burqa and questions why Zarine hasn't put on hers. It's only later that Nazia realises her sister's selfless act. Unfortunately, by then, it's too late. Devoid of her burqa, Zarine is misidentified as a Hindu, leading to an assault by individuals from her own religious group. In a state of shock, Suhel drags Nazia away as they witness the tragic fate that befalls Zarine at the hands of the "butchers" (131).

However, "a different set of demons" await Suhel and Nazia as they enter India, as Hindu extremists assault Nazia, who is wearing a burqa, subjecting her to a brutal gangrape (132). Subsequently, a train from Pakistan arrives in India, carrying the lifeless bodies of Hindu

passengers. Suhel identifies Zarine's corpse by recognising her ring and shows it to Nazia. Despite enduring the trauma of her personal assault and witnessing the brutal murder of her sister, Nazia finds the strength to honour Zarine's memory by crafting a dignified shroud using the same burqa. Following this harrowing incident, Nazia chooses never to wear a burqa again and maintains a silence regarding her own experience of rape. However, Nazia's ordeal doesn't conclude there. She becomes pregnant as a consequence of the gangrape. Despite marrying Suhel, she acknowledges that concealing this truth from him is impossible. When her child is born, Nazia cannot bring herself to look at the baby, as its presence serves as a constant reminder of the trauma. Consequently, she decides to maintain a distance between herself and her child.

The convergence of Nazia's gangrape and Suhel's lack of action in that pivotal moment establishes an insurmountable rift between them. In societies dominated by patriarchy, accounts of rape are frequently deemed taboo, and survivors unfairly bear the stigma of being defiled and degraded. Given few alternatives, Nazia silently lays her traumatic past to rest and endeavours to progress in life as a woman of strength and resilience. She informs everyone that Ruby is the offspring of her late sister, Zarine. Her sole link to the past is Suhel, her former husband, from whom she has become estranged. Over the years, Nazia employs silence as a strategic means to endure the violation of her body, the ensuing trauma, and to lead a life of dignity. While possessing a rebellious spirit, Nazia chooses to conceal her past from everyone. Even when faced with persistent taunts and inquiries from her own daughter, Ruby, Nazia strives to deflect questions and project an unaffected demeanour. As Cathy Caruth explains in *Unclaimed Experience*, trauma demands, "profoundly and imperatively", both a "language" of its own and "silence of its mute repetition of suffering" (9).

In terms of her use of silence as an existential tool, Nazia admits that, despite an internal awareness of the facts, there's a reluctance to acknowledge the truth, fuelled by a sense of hope. This prompts a crucial question about whether she has been deceiving not only others but also herself. Described as a "feisty, passionate, and self-absorbed diva", Nazia is portrayed as someone who revels in living life to the fullest (Dubey 48). Engaging in practical jokes and fearlessly challenging authority figures, she demonstrates a bold spirit. However, when confronted with the authority of patriarchy, she recognises the impossibility of completely erasing it. She says, "We all weave these tangled webs around the truth so we can strangle it and make it disappear. We are all deceiving one another" (127). Nazia maintains a resolute silence until she encounters her granddaughter Nikhat, who bears an uncanny resemblance to her. Upon witnessing Nikhat, Nazia, much like King Dushyant recalling his past upon seeing Shakuntala's ring, finally shatters her silence. It marks the first instance where she opens up about the traumatic experiences she endured as a young Muslim woman after the partition.

A significant theme of *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* is the enduring impact of violence on the lives of its protagonist, Nazia, and the subsequent generations. The play offers a psychological study of the role of violence in inter-generational suffering and trauma, examining Nazia's coping mechanisms, defence-oriented reactions, ultimately providing emotional release through the revelation of suppressed memories, the opening up and sharing of pain. This psychological motif along with the play's portrayal of the long-term consequences of violence, especially in the context of communal tensions beg a more detailed analysis. Theatre and plays have the unique ability to evoke strong emotions in the audience, providing a multi-sensory experience. Violence, a significant element in drama, can be both physiological and psychological, with various forms such as domestic, communal, and structural violence.



Mahesh Dattani's plays aim to raise awareness about societal violence and its impact. Nazia's facing of communal violence during the partition leads to profound effects on her life including the disintegration of her marriage and her distaste towards her own offspring, Ruby who is even denied the truth of her parentage and whose "presence still irks Nazia" (65). Ruby's existence and acknowledgement, for Nazia, is an unconscious acceptance of her traumatic past, one she has chosen to repress. The brunt of this suffering is borne by both mother and daughter as the following exchange between them will reveal:

NAZIA. Of course I want you to call me Nazia. I hate being your aunt.

RUBY (with some bitterness). That I know. (63)

Nazia grapples with denial in her attempt to manage trauma and stress, yet the unfolding events and individuals in her life persistently bring forth the harsh realities of her past that "hide in the dark corner like a ghoul and grab at" her unawares. In these moments, she can only "beat the shit out of the ghoul to make it crawl back into its dark corner" (89).

Nazia's approach to dealing with the trauma of violence and rape can be characterised as a defensive response pattern to cope with stress. Her reaction encompasses a blend of two patterns: denying the reality and repressing, as elucidated by James C. Coleman in his book *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life* (1988). According to Coleman, "denial of reality is an attempt to screen-out disagreeable realities by ignoring or refusing to acknowledge them" (qtd. in Arya 184). The inclination toward perceptual defense is a component of the tendency to deny or evade reality. This is evident in Nazia's behaviour, such as her denial of being Ruby's mother and in her attempt to erase her relationship with Suhel, as illustrated in these dialogues:

NAZIA. I don't know any Suhel.

VINAY....He says he is Suhel—your husband.

NAZIA (shouting for the benefit of the caller). I don't know any husband! He heard that so why don't you just hang up? (88-89)

Coleman's analysis of repression is that it functions as a defence mechanism that keeps distressing or painful thoughts and desires out of conscious awareness. Nazia strives to push her past aside by engrossing herself in the theatre and concentrating on the present. Nevertheless, all the suppressed memories come to the forefront when she encounters Nikhat, her granddaughter. Her repressed past makes a return.

The manner in which Nazia copes with the stressors, namely the murder of her sister and her own rape, results in complications within her interpersonal relationships. Persistently confronted by the ongoing presence of stressors, the pain becomes overwhelming, leading Nazia to make the difficult decision to leave her husband, Suhel. Her suppressed feelings for Suhel outpour thus:

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. The first time I see you as Dushyant, I look away because it reminds me that I once made the mistake of falling in love with you. When you kill the bee it reminds me that I killed for you. When you take me in your arms as Dushyant I-I want to throw up! (99)

A graver effect is on her relationship with her daughter Ruby whose heart wrenching words flow thus:

RUBY. You are capable of anything! I could kill you right now for destroying me. I hate the sight of you. Even as a little girl, being handed over from actress backstage to a seamstress to the washerwoman.....You only looked at yourself. Never at the world around you. I didn't exist. Everyone sympathized with me. Poor girl, her own aunt does not want to look at her. Send her to her uncle. No, no, he is married again. His wife will not want her....I hate the theatre, I hate my father for deserting me like this, but I hate you more than anyone else. You were so close to me and yet you may as well have been thousands of miles away. (124-125)

This pain and bitterness is, unfortunately, not contained within this relationship. Its toxins spill over to the next generation as the trauma cycle affects Ruby's relationship with her own daughter, Nikhat whose words echoe thus:

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...you were thousands of mile away...You went through the motions all right of being a caring mom. But you weren't. You couldn't. I was angry too. You didn't know but Dad took me to a therapist in New York. ...He understands that your anger came out of your own unhappiness. It's okay, Mom, to let go. I am trying very, very hard. (126-127)

Nazia remains unsettled with her past, and as a result, it continues to haunt her. To escape from the memories, she has woven a web of lies. Her evident aversion to cobwebs, which cause irritation, may symbolise her disdain for the falsehoods that she is compelled to live with:

NAZIA...(Pulling at a cobweb) Look at these cobwebs! No matter how often I clean them all, they keep coming back. (107)



Nazia discovers peace solely through the candid revelation of her heart. It is by publically embracing her truth that she feels liberated from her internal turmoil. The animosity and fear within her dissipate and she joyously exclaims the desire to meet her beloved sister in heaven:

NAZIA. Come on, spin me up! Don't stop! Thank you! Thank you, Zarine! I will see you in paradise! (142)

The play focuses on a production of the classic Sanskrit play *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa, which enhances the plot's theatrical impact. Nazia, who decades ago took on the role of Shakuntala, reveals her intense aspiration to portray the character to the spectators. However, in the current era, as a director of Modern Indian Theater, she is on a quest to find an apt actress to embody Shakuntala. As Dr Manish Kumar opines, "The inter-textual reference of *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* invokes a live contact between the dramatist and the audience as the play is a part and parcel of our cultural heritage" (qtd. in Rafique and Mukhtar 54). The play thus employs a crucial dramatic technique of 'play within a play'. Dramatic critics have often explored the deep seated union between real-life actions and stage performances of artists. In other words, the emotions of characters engaged in role playing on the stage can often be read to represent their lived reality and its multifarious feelings. This is something that Erving Goffman stresses on in his description of dramaturgical analysis. Goffman essentially maintains the view that life is a theatre. This is especially manifested in Nazia's engagement with depicting the story of Shakuntala and Dushyant, a tragedy patterned on her own life. Regarding the role of expression in conveying impressions of the self, Goffman offers the following view:

Underlying all social interaction there seems to be a fundamental dialectic. When one individual enters the presence of others, he will want to discover the facts of the situation.

Were he to possess this information, he could know, and make allowances for, what will

come to happen and he could give the others present as much of their due as is consistent with his enlightened self-interest. To uncover fully the factual nature of the situation, it would be necessary for the individual to know all the relevant social data about the others. It would also be necessary for the individual to know the actual outcome or end-product of the activity of the others during the interaction, as well as their innermost feelings toward him. Full information of this order is rarely available; in its absence, the individual tends to employ substitutes—cues, tests, hints, expressive gestures, status symbols, etc.—as predictive devices. In short, since the reality that the individual is concerned with is unperceivable at the moment, appearances must be relied upon in its stead. And, paradoxically, the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances. (160-161)

Seen in this light, Nazia's portrayal of Shakuntala's character is Dattani's design to give cues about his heroine's life to the audiences within the play and a full circle understanding of her truth to readers outside the text. As Dr Manish says, "the modern version of *Shakuntala* also symbolizes Nazia's attempt to break away from the painful memories of the past. But the past is part of the present and has seeds for the future" (qtd. in Rafique and Mukhtar 56). The dialogues abound in theatrical references and discussions of dramatic technique as well as stage-craft. Nazia's discussions about the staging of the play, the various costumes to be designed, etc. further contextualise the dramaturgical technique of 'play within a play'. Nazia's reference to the "moth-eaten costumes" not only serves to cement the dramaturgical aspect of the play but also to bring forth the relevance of history and past in the play. The "moth-eaten costumes" are heirlooms of Nazia's family, forever engaged in the theatre business (69). When Ruby believes

that the dress belongs to her late mother and is therefore Shakuntala's costume, Nazia's clarification- "I was always Shakuntala"-affixes Nazia's identity with that of Shakuntala's by underlining her ancient yearning to always enact the role of Shakuntala (72). These dialogue references, carefully peppered by Dattani, serve as narrative links to the past helping audiences and readers to turn the pages of history in Nazia, Suhel and Zarine's life back to the 1940s of Lahore. Therefore, Dattani complements this technique of 'play within a play' with another: entailing the use of flashback. Readers/audiences are faced with echoes of the past skilfully blended into scenes of the present. The dramatic rendering is therefore founded in both time past and time present. This device serves to register Nazia's traumatic past and gauge its tight hold on her present life in the mind of the reader.

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