

Mahesh Dattani

His Stagecraft in Indian Theatre

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Decrypting Symbols: A Symbolic Reading of
Mahesh Dattani's *Ek Alag Mausam*

M. Anjum Khan

Literary artifacts are fertile with intellections and visions generating social response. There are signs and symbols embedded in text require unfolding of layers of meanings wrapped around them. Deciphering symbols is one of the best ways of interpreting literary texts. Sometimes, it is remarkable that the symbols delineated in a literary framework can intersect new avenues of cerebrating and bring in light the unexplored spheres. According to Barton and Hudson, a literary symbol designates "an object or a process that not only serves as an image itself but also refers to a concept or abstract idea that is important to the theme of a work".

World is inhabited with numerous symbols and signals in every walk of human life. Michael Ferber asserts: "After all, anything can be a symbol... ". A symbol is an object, person or a place suggesting more than the literal meaning attached to it. Sometimes the literal meaning of a symbol is absurd, so that the symbolic meaning overrides and annuls out the literal meaning. Symbols are concrete objects or explicit acts that retain their real nature while standing for ideas or values that do not have material existence. A symbol may have more than one meaning or multi-

layered meanings. As a matter of fact, it is observed that the most significant symbols do convey an indefinite range of meanings. Symbols in a literary structure refer to concrete and abstract ideas as well.

Irrespective of the genre of literature, symbols are employed in all literary works to invoke ideas and provoke innovative resolutions. Drama is one such genre which applies symbols which signify implicit ideas on and off stage. Mahesh Dattani is contemporary playwright articulating vibrant themes through his plays. John McRae appreciates Mahesh Dattani's craftsmanship: "There is no substitute for this kind of craftsmanship, as working with any major playwright will confirm". Through the genre of drama, Dattani sets a platform to contemplate on various contemporary and indispensable issues.

Mahesh Dattani's *Ek Alag Mausam* is a sensitizing play articulating the unheard voices of HIV positive patients and prejudiced society. The play projects emotional, psychological, medical and social ordeal of patients infected with HIV. The plot of the play whirls around the protagonist, Aparna who is in crisis, emotionally paralysed and disillusioned at one of the happiest moments of her life. She is traumatized by sudden kibosh of her motherhood and terror of approaching death. Besides Aparna, there are other characters enduring the approaching death and impending misery in form of physical ailment.

The play, *Ek Alag Mausam* furnishes two columns of people, one representing the HIV positive patients and the other representing the inane biased people. The rehabilitation hospital which is more likely an asylum is accommodated delineating the microscopic view of medically helpless and socially marginalized folks. The stark reality resonating in the emotional quandaries of the sufferers render the disintegrating and crumbling lives of

individuals. The social rejection of these ailing individuals elucidates the lack of awareness and narrow-mindedness of society. Beena Agarwal comments: "Dattani conceives the structure of drama *Ek Alag Mausam* with a socio-philosophical canon".

There are various symbols encrypted in play running parallel to the explicit motif presented. There are few objects, characters and places symbolizing notable themes and contemporary ambiance. Objects furnished in *Ek Alag Mausam* render various meanings and the characters limned in the play represent ideas as well. These symbols assist in decrypting the engrained themes in the play.

The character of Aparna symbolises numerous ideas latent in the play. She stands for unanticipated metamorphosis of happiness into misery. She in her prime months of pregnancy discovers that she is at the brink of life clutching desolation and desertion of her husband. Initially, she refuses to accept the reality that she is HIV positive and tries to back away from the ruthless verdict of kismet. She reaches Jeevan Jyoti under the pretext of volunteering her services for the HIV positive and when Dr. Machado shows that he is already been informed about her infection, she says: "Maybe I should leave. I have a headache" (490). However, she reconciles with her concentrated terrors and wake in a dawn of hope. She symbolises weakness. She is scared of death and so many other things in life. She says: "I am afraid of a lot of things". (490)

George represents rare kind of people who live cheerfully, selflessly and bravely fight back the pangs of approaching death. He symbolises courage, straight forwardness, service and social alienation. He is very courageous and seems fearlessly leading his life. He, unlike Aparna, accepts his syndrome in public and to his family. He diligently serves the cause of HIV positive patients

at Jeevan Jyoti and due to his intimacy with it, he is estranged by his friends and by his own parents.

There are many other characters representing some ideas. Rita symbolizing motherhood, prostitution and humility. Suresh representing defeat and betrayal. He stands for hopelessness and says, "How can I help when I am dying too" (482). Dr. Machado representing hope, service and life. Every character seems representing some idea or some phase of life. Paro represents young blossom which is tendered and nurtured with mother's affection. She is protected by her mother in spite of her mother's bodily and moral decomposition. She symbolises a sense of normality in Aparna's life. She brings up the girl and prepares a normal life for her. She is brought back to normal routine by the responsibility of bringing up Paro for life.

Social hostility, prejudice and lack of awareness are symbolised through characters in the play. Sukhvinder representing ignorance, lack of awareness and social prejudice. George's fellow villagers represent collective social prejudice against the HIV positive patients. His parents stand for filial estrangement and antagonism. His parents turn him out in order to avoid contamination and social humiliation: "You may live for another seven years. But you have killed us before we have entered our graves. What face do we have left in this village? Don't come back. Leave. Go George!". (537)

Truck is usually considered as a symbol of conveyance and movement. George's truck in *Ek Alag Mausam* symbolises conveyance of death. George explains to Aparna that as even municipality vehicles refuse to transport the corpse of a HIV positive, his truck performs the task. He says: "Who do you think takes the bodies for cremation? The municipality van won't even enter the compound" (497). George truck stands for mobilization

and freedom for George. He adoringly declares: "I like driving the truck, Mother. I like to move. I am most happy when I am moving" (536). It is a symbol of economic independence as well. George earns his bread and of which his mother is very proud.

The truck is a symbol of rescue. It rescues the sufferers from pangs of humiliating and painful life. Moreover, it rescues the establishment of Jeevan Jyoti by availing adequate financial security. George's truck symbolises economic security for Jeevan Jyoti in the moment of crisis: "Don't you know? He sold all his trucks and his godown to pay for the lease agreement on Jeevan Jyoti" (544). George's truck signifies joy and glee for the children who eagerly wait for him. When they hear the horn of the truck, "The children suddenly get some life in them". (502)

Car is an icon of, luxury and mobility. Aparna's car represents economic luxury and independence. George's truck scales his position in society as a truck driver belongs to lower-middle class strata of society, whereas, Aparna's car renders a high position in the social ladder and other characters addressing her as *Memsahib* bonafides this idea. It is a rare privilege for Indian women driving cars and Aparna enjoys one such privilege which attests for her independence in life.

Aparna's car symbolises her mobility to and fro from Jeevan Jyoti. It facilitates a movement in her life which seems stagnated by traumatic assaults. She recognizes the visits to Jeevan Jyoti as means of escapades from her own frustrated panoptic living. she tries to rummage through the wreckages of other HIV positive patients life in order to identify her own invisible ruins. Her car smooths the progress of her reconciliation with abrasive truth. The car symbolises a means of run for Aparna. She refuses George's proposal of love and accelerates her move: "Aparna backs up the car and speeds away". (520)

Travelling and movement are recurrent symbols in *Ek Alag Mausam*. As Aparna is limned driving her car all through the play and George is shown moving on his truck, the movement of life can be interpreted in these moving action. Life is a journey moving forward and marching towards progress. This inevitable movement indicates life, some travel long and some are destined to travel brief. So is life, some people live long and some live short. The lives of Aparna and George are measured in terms of travelling and stopping by Dr. Machado. Dr. Machado observes: "You two are travelling in different trains. Here is travelling non-stop to the final destination and yours is stopping at all the small towns. Besides... has it ever occurred to you that she is travelling first class and you...". (530)

AIDS is another major symbol embedded between the lines of the text signifying a contemporary theme, the term 'Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome'. It is caused by the virus HIV. AIDS is a disease of disorder of the body's immune system. Immunity is body's natural resistance to fight against germs and resist diseases. The body of AIDS infected person stops producing natural defences against diseases, so victim often dies from cancer or other infections that it cannot fight.

AIDS is regarded as a symbol of death, terror, humiliation, contamination, hopelessness, misery, discrimination and marginality in the society. The AIDS patients are fatal sufferers anticipating their doom which comes quickly over them with humiliation and shame. As there is no stable remedy for AIDS, death is the only solution of the misery endowed by this ailment. The persons infected with HIV suffer from social humiliation, marginalization, emotional wreck and physical deterioration.

Ek Alag Mausam unfolds the life of few of the HIV positives whose lives are eclipsed with contempt and misery. AIDS travels

fast but carefully choosing the one who are not cautious and pursue the course of forbidden. Besides, there are victims who are forced to rot by others. Aparna is a healthy married woman until she gets HIV infection from her husband who is guilty of betrayal, lechery and murder. AIDS seems ever tolling the knell for the sufferers: "How can I forget? It is there! Written in our medical reports. Our death warrant". (533)

The wooden soldier toy is an iconic fillip of comfort and encouragement. Soldier is an epitome of braveness, courage, resistance and defence. Whereas, a toy is a symbol of joy, recreation, comfort, solace and contentment. The wooden soldier in *Ek Alag Mausam* fulfils the requirements of a soldier and that of a toy. Suraj intakes doses of valor from the toy soldier to retaliate the fangs of approaching death. He clings on it when his death seems gaining over his life.

Suraj is delineated as a cheerful young boy laughing over the humility and negligence which he is bound to receive from society. He is told, "Live like a soldier, die like a soldier" (506). He musters strength from the dummy soldier to defend his ailing bodily constitution from the virus. When ever, he falters in his resolution, he is reminded by the small icon of soldier that death should be bravely fought and heroically encountered.

The tape recorder is a twentieth century invention amusing people with music and is an apparatus of education as well. *Ek Alag Mausam* presents the tape-recorder as a symbol of pleasure, amusement and abundant joy for the children who are segregated from the mainstream of life. George uses it to entertain the children and Aparna uses it to test her credentials. The children dance enchanted to the tune played by the tape and urges Aparna to play it again, when it is switched off: "Aunty. Play the music" (503). It proves a symbol of improvement and progress in life.

The colored pills represent hope and longer chase of death. Dr. Machado is a medical doctor and the proprietor of Jeevan Jyoti. He imports some pills from America in order to slow down death and increase life span of HIV positive patients: "I smuggled some in from America. They will help them live just a little longer" (489). These pills imported from America shows India's poor medical supplies and doctor's jubilant efforts to sustain life. The pills are brought by diligent efforts by the doctor to append at least one day in an individual's life. George beams at the sight of the pills: "GEORGE (smiling). Aha! Looks like some of the children will just have to live a couple of years longer! (542). The dearth of pills symbolises death receding life among the patients.

The card game is a symbol of recreation and sportiness. In *Ek Alag Mausam*, the card game represents a hope for success and a tool for mocking death. The patients play with a dying patient to ease his pain and make him feel distract him. The dying man is Ramnath who clings on to the cards in spite of his paralysed efforts. Ramnath is engaged in playing card game in his death bed and building a sense of success. Manoj says: "You can't beat death. But you can beat us. Try!". (492)

Soap bubbles appear in the play twice, once in Jeevan Jyoti and the other time on hills in Panchagani. The soap bubbles are dallies enjoyed by the children who cherish the colorful and attractive pattern it leave in the air. The bubble symbolises short-lived life. Life is like a soap bubble which pops out and stay very briefly on earth and the lives of HIV positive is comparatively shorter. As a soap bubble is savoured and relished by the on lookers, so should the life be relished and enjoyed utterly. Life is colorful and attractive like a soap bubble hanging in the air for brief moment. The span of a bubble varies from one to another and so as human life's span. The stronger bubbles manage to live little longer than the weaker-ones, "Paro is blowing bubbles. We

follow the bubbles till they all break except for a few strong ones” (557). However, all bubbles break and it symbolises that death is inevitable.

The breaking of glass filled with water awakes Aparna from her dream and bring her into the reality. The dream succeeding the break of glass scars Aparna as she sees herself playing the card game with the dying man and she loses it. It shows her panick-stricken psyche. The broken glass symbolises the shattering of her dreams of being a happy life with her baby and her husband. The glass filled with water stands for the life which had happiness. However, the glass tumbles, breaks and the content is spilled. So is, her happiness snatched and her life is disintegrated.

Football game is a sporting activity involving stamina, pleasure and spirit. George entertains the children with a tale that day and night are consequences of a foot ball match which God plays. He says: “God is playing football with the sun. He always scores a goal” (518). This tale relating God’s football match symbolises life is a series of matches containing subsequent defeats and victories. The football signifies a new day and so the rolling of the ball means the passing of days.

The symbol of Jeevan Jyoti is very remarkable setting representing an asylum for the discarded persons in society it is a symbol of ghettoic life. The HIV positive individuals seek comfort and refuge. Jeevan Jyoti hospital which literally means light of life symbolises the same. It supplies light in utter darkness for people lost in it. It offers light to those who seems lost in darkness and fret for death. It supplies medical assistance, emotional support, recreation, and moral support to go on in life which is anchored by the hooks of fear and uncertainty. The children of Jeevan Jyoti muster courage to live vibrantly and improve on: “We wanted to find ways to keep this place running to help the

children. Now the children are keeping this place running with their shows so that we can be happy". (541)

The hospital of Jeevan Jyoti is a symbol of segregation and sequestration as well. The people are neglected and dumped like trash in a corner of society. The municipality vehicles refuse to come near the place fearing infection from the air and people frequenting Jeevan Jyoti eventually become hostile to social standings. Sukhvinder detests George for attending the requirements of Jeevan Jyoti hospital and so his villagers despise him and eventually expel him from his own village. George warns Aparna that she will lose social footing, if she keeps coming to the hospital. Obviously indicating, that Jeevan Jyoti is a prohibited ghetto in the society which is regarded as a symbol of contamination and contagious suffering.

Jeevan Jyoti symbolises mutual trust, symbiosis and fuel for life. The children cheer each other and live helping each other overcome their emotional and physical impediments. The card game played at the bedside of a dying man is purely an act of recreation and easement for the sufferer. The doctor in charge, who renders his service as a tribute to his late son attempts his best to orient the socially mislaid and traumatized people at the moment of crisis in their lives. He facilitates medical relief, food, shelter and vigor to live. Besides rendering medical services, he bestows emotional stimulations by group therapy. He cheers his wards: "So let us all say together—'I am alive, this moment, this day!'" (486)

TV is another wonderful modern invention used as a means for entertainment, information and education. *Ek Alag Mausam* furnishes a TV which symbolises hope, happiness and a striking mirage. TV is an appliance which forms a bridge between the real world and the world of illusion. It presents fascinating things

which are dubious and seldom practical. In the play, Rita watches her daughter on TV and she gets a glimpse into the future that her daughter will be spared from the miseries and will live a happy life. she sees her daughter, Paro performing, "Rita is so thrilled she rushes to the TV and kisses it" (540). She foresees a glowing future and visualizes her daughter as a little princess: "Oh! My little Paro came on TV! She looks like a little princess". (540)

The unborn baby is a symbol of approaching motherhood in *Ek Alag Mausam*. The unborn baby of Aparna symbolises the unattained happiness and her fall into the abyss. Aparna is very hopeful and happy to welcome her baby in her life. The baby symbolises dream of every mother and Aparna yearns to tend her dream. The baby is a symbol of promises and happiness for her future. When the doctor says, "Aparna... I would strongly advise you to.. give up your baby" (478). Somehow, they mean symbolically that Aparna should abort the prospect of happiness in future. The abortion of the baby indicates the crumbling image of her happiness which to a great extent relied on her motherhood. The doctor's advice to give up her baby seems the end of her world to Aparna and the illusion of happy life fades away into gravity of world.

The flask of orange juice conveys a symbolic meaning latent in emotions and actions of the characters. Aparna fills up a flask of orange juice for their journey to Panchagani by car. This orange juice symbolises rejuvenation and refreshment. The flask of juice in the play, is a symbol of a parcel of happiness which Aparna tends for Paro. She gives Aparo the flask to drink in the happiness which awaits her way in near future. When, Paro intakes a sip of happiness from the flask, Aparna demands a swig from the flask to: "I'd like some of that too" (474). This can be interpreted that Aparna longs to rejuvenate her life and wish some happiness as well.

The admission letter for the boarding school in Panchgini is a symbol of new prospects and promising tomorrow. Aparna intends Paro to pursue her higher education in boarding school with educational hierarchy and academic perfection. The admission letter symbolises reappearance of elapsed happiness. The matron of the boarding school neglects and disregards Paro and Aparna, when she learns that they have not brought the admission letter with them. The absent letter seems symbolizing carelessness and irresponsibility on Aparna's part from Matron's point of view. She rebukes Aparna: "Not a very good example to your ward, are you? (551). However, the letter is found later on the car seat and thus resuming the course of happiness and hope for them. The letter, when rediscovered in the car elevates Aparna's joy and so does the reappearance of George impart happiness. Parma in the past has been lackadaisical with George's affection and loses it temporarily. However, the reappearance of George brings her back hope, prospect, and elapsed happiness.

Each symbol encrypted in *Ek Alag Mausam* divulges few very substantial and salient themes. The symbols employed in the play enumerate different purviews. There are various relevant themes conveyed through the conveyance of these simple and complex symbols. Sudden transformation for good or worse in life; emotional trauma caused by the fear of death; social estrangement and marginalization; the sturdiest tread from illusion to disillusionment; are few of the many ideas implicit in the play.

An analysis of these symbolic means elucidate various phases of life and different roles of the society. The adoptational problem encountered by HIV positives is mended by the selfless and caring services of an establishment, Jeevan Jyoti. The characters representing the aura of suffering and emotional devastation expound the premise that life is not always secured and gleeful.

There are different seasons in one's life ranging from desolate winters to joyous summers. One such season occulted by misery has befallen on few individuals' lives. However, blossoms can be tended in this bleak season as well with hope of some miracle: "While waiting for that cure to be invented or discovered, let us not forget—that miracles are known to happen." (556-57)

Motivation intertwined with tenderness can spam away the anxieties of approaching peril. The play culminates with an optimistic note presenting ceasefire between apprehensions and qualms. Awareness of AIDS in the mainstream society recruiting social norms against discrimination, marginalisation, subversion and estrangement of HIV positive patients underscores the ending note of the play. Tout ensemble, a symbolic reading of *Ek Alag Mausam* assists in decrypting the underlying themes in the text buried under the motifs of hope and despair; dream and disillusionment; endurance and annihilation.

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