



The Dramatic World of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, one of the exponents of modern Indian English drama, a renowned Sixty one year old playwright from Bangalore is often compared to Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams in his practice of stagecraft, has given a fresh lease of life to Indian drama in English along with Gieve Patel, Shashi Tharoor, Uma Parameswaran and Manjula Padmanabhan. He frequently takes as his subject the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire. Though he lives in Karnataka, he writes about the whole nation of India, and about the whole world he lives in. More than that, he is able to merge the past and the present as well as geographical locations. The present paper is an attempt to highlight Mahesh Dattani's plays in the present scenario of Indian people and their lifestyle with different themes. His plays depict the struggle between individual and the society. He discusses about the gender related issues, problem of the eunuchs and the concept of feminism.

Key Words : Drama, theatre, feminism, society, culture, gender, nature.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is the first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998. Dattani believes in the fact that a playwright should write about the evils present in the society of his time and present it before the audience. For this purpose Dattani uses the medium of stage to present the problems to the audience as theatre is very close to real life. The greatness of Dattani lies in the fact that he expresses himself easily and naturally in a voice loud and clear. In an interview with *The Hindu* (2003), Dattani says :

"I write for my milieu, for my time and place middle-class and urban Indian ... My dramatic tensions arise from people who aspire to freedom from society ... I am not looking for something sensational, which audiences have never seen before ... some subjects, which are under-explored, deserve their space. It's no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalized, including the gays. Each of us has a sense of isolation within given contexts. That's what makes us individual."



The personality of this playwright cannot be easily sidelined because of his contemporaneity. The greatness of Dattani lies in the fact that he is one who believes that theatre is an art with a function. Mahesh Dattani is one of the few leading Indian English dramatists today. As a drama teacher, a stage director, as an actor, a Bharatnatyam dancer, a screenplay writer and as a sociologist, he explains various complexities of society. Dattani's contribution is an asset to Indian writing as a whole. He was born in Bangalore on August 7, 1958. Like Bernard Shaw, Dattani also wants to use the theatre as a powerful tool to bring about the necessary social change. He excels in mirroring his society. Like Mohan Rakesh and A.K. Ramanujan, he takes the family unit as the locale of his plays. Family is the nerve centre of his plays. Human relationships and the family unit have indeed been at the heart of Dattani's representation. He relates modern Indian families to contemporary reality and re-creates the characters in their situations. Therein lies his appeal to the audience and success as a playwright. What distinguishes him from other playwrights is his courage of conviction in depicting innovative themes like portrayal of sex preference by men and women which were until recently considered to be taboos in our society. He seems to say that our fate lies not in the stars but in our own hands.

In 1998, Dattani set up his own theatre studio dedicated to training and

showcasing new talents in acting, directing and stage writing – it is the first of its kind in the country to focus on new works. In 1998, Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays*, published by East-West Books, Chennai. Mahesh Dattani is India's first playwright to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to the world of drama. His plays deal with religious tension, sexuality and gender issue. The Sahitya Akademi Award citation says : "Mahesh Dattani's work probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender...a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English." (*Collected Plays*, 2000, Cover Page).

A theatre personality, Dattani is actively involved in stage production and performing on stage, drawing inspiration from the Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar. But unlike Girish Karnad - who lays emphasis on history, myths and scriptures - Dattani concentrates on contemporary society and reality in the fast changing world. His plays are topical dramas, and the questions he addresses are those relating to feminine identity, religion, communal tension, and sexuality. Dattani writes about issues which are very contemporary in nature like gender issues, gay, homosexuality, lesbianism, communalism and religious issues. His plays depict marginalized groups of society, people who are considered



misfits in a society where stereotyped attitudes and notions reign supreme.

The plays of Mahesh Dattani have emerged as 'fresh arrival' in the domain of Indian English drama in the last decade of the twentieth century. The plays have a great 'contemporary' value. 'They are plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time they are plays which embody many of the classic concerns of world drama'. The most significant contribution of Dattani is perhaps his use of language. In his plays Dattani uses the kind of English as spoken by people in India. While talking of Mahesh Dattani, Rehmat Merchant says, "Mahesh Dattani's pathos-with-a-punch approach picked with a dash of humour, makes him the perfect candidate for chronicling urban angst. His plays are peopled with city slickens wrestling with issues in a manner close to the modern psyche ... change-the-world brand of range and impulsiveness, threatens to upset some apple carts ... subtext of complex relationships eager to understand mind contrasted by informed prejudice character growing build in conflict in marriage ... collapse of certain stereotypes prejudice holder forced to look outside the cosy community circle. (Rehmat Merchant, *India Today* 2000). Dattani is considered to be a true successor of Girish Karnad and responsible for the revolutionary progression of Indian English drama.

The Plays have a universal appeal. They can be staged anywhere in the world; they would draw full attention of the audience. Dattani moulds his subject in such a way that it is both topical and universal. His plays speak across linguistic and cultural barriers. It may however be noted that these plays are essentially rooted in the Indian setting. The Playwright makes an abundant use of Indian mythology, rituals and traditions and contemporary problems India is beset with, but he elevates these themes to a higher level, touching the human chords that emanate love, happiness, sexual fulfilment and the problem of identity. What is most notable about Dattani's dramatic art is that the stage for him is no plain expanse of space but a complex multidimensional area in which vital incidents placed in time may be viewed and reassessed, an area in which atmospheric details related to humidity and air-temperature, insignificant though they may seem, are not overlooked. The arena of performance for him is a space in which the written text of a play assumes the form of an enactment and the use of masks represents a deep ritualistic meaning.

Dattani's plays do not evoke the myths and legends of ancient India. Here, there is no intertextuality – no going back to the Indian epic or dramatic tradition, as one finds in Girish Karnad's plays. His plays are about post-modern India and contemporary social situations. His plays have purely performance-



oriented scripts that elicit from the audience an emotional as well as a strongly intellectual response. His plays are a commitment to what Iyengar calls the "manifestoes of the new realism and conform closely to the requirements of a play that communicates for." (K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, 195). As M.K. Naik observes, "a play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, needs a real theatre and a live audience." (M.K. Naik, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*, 151). Dattani has created a vibrant, new theatrical form which is a marked development on the hitherto stagnant Indian drama in English.

In his plays, Dattani takes on what he calls the 'invisible issues' of Indian society. By pulling out taboo subjects from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of 'India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre. His plays have varied content and appeal. Michael Walling (*A Note on the Play*, 229) says that the plays of Mahesh Dattani "fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It is a potent combination, which shocks and disturbs, through its accuracy, and its ability to approach a subject from multiple perspectives. Post-colonial Indian and multi-cultural Britain both have an urgent need for a cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the

mingling of eastern and western-influences can take place. Through his fusion of forms and Influences, Mahesh creates such a space."

In a span of twenty years, he wrote ten plays. Some of them are : *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Seven Circles Round The Fire*, and *Brief Candle*, *Where did I leave my Purdah ?* and *The Big Fat City*. The plays like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Thirty Days in September* etc. deal with various issues like homosexuality, gender discrimination, communalism and child sexual abuse.

Dance Like a Man, published in 1989, is his first play set in Chennai where dance is an integral part of life and a favourite mode of aesthetic expression. It harks back to a time when dancing was considered a harlot's pursuit and reveals the duplicity of society's moral standards. The play deals with the recent and ancient history of India in personal terms and probes three generations of conflict. It is juxtaposed against a background that evokes the highest achievements of ancient Sanskrit theatre and classical religious dance. Ratna wants her daughter Lata to achieve distinction as a danseuse as she herself had been thwarted in her desire to make her mark as a dance artiste because of the repressive patriarchal dominance exercised by her father-in-law, Amritlal, who expected all the members of his family to prostrate themselves before him.



Rebellion surfaces in the family the very moment Amritlal breathes his last. *Dance Like a Man* has left the spectators spellbound with its dexterous interplay of emotions. In 1998 *Dance Like a Man* has won the award for the Best Picture in English awarded by the National Panorama.

Tara, a play in two acts, published in 1990, is predominantly a play about gender discrimination and about the Indian parents' preference for a male child over a female one. In *Tara*, a mother is forced to choose her son's welfare over her daughter's and this wreaks havoc in the lives of the whole family. It is the story of a pair of twins, a boy, Chandan, and a girl, Tara, who love each other immensely but are separated from each other by design. Even after their unjustified and manipulated division which is done against the law of nature, they are emotionally united. Both of them share similar mental agony. Tara dies in a shock when she learns that it is her mother (whom Tara trusts more) who is involved in the conspiracy of her unfair separation from Chandan. Though Chandan physically survives this trauma, he could never lead a peaceful life and so, he migrates to the suburbs of London, changes his name and attempts to create a new identity. Through Tara's death, Dattani demonstrates the unfortunate consequences of differentiation between children on grounds of gender.

Dattani's magnum opus is the *Final Solutions*, published in 1993, is a play

about Hindu-Muslim conflict which was slated to performed for the *Deccan Herald* Theatre festival in Bangalore in December 1992. A week before it was scheduled to be staged, the Babri Masjid was demolished. The festival organizers fearing calamitous repercussions rejected the play. It was finally staged the following year in Bombay and Bangalore in 1993. The play focuses on the problem of communal disharmony between the Hindus and Muslims in India, especially during the period of the post-Partition riots. The analysis of the cause of friction between the two communities offered by Dattani carries conviction as it is endorsed by a study of human psychology offering valid explanations of the proclivities and susceptibilities of individuals under circumstantial pressure. In 1998, Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi Award for this play *Final Solutions*.

Another play in which Dattani makes use of expressionistic technique to proclaim the contemporary urban Indian's longing and working against the existing social order is *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* published in 1998. Dattani made a cinema 'Mango Souffle' based on this play. In this play a whole range of homosexual characters are presented and their experiences throw light on various aspects of the struggle of homosexuals in the traditional Indian society.

Where There's a Will is another play in which Dattani's recurrent motif of patriarchal paramount appears. A



woman is generally looked upon as a commodity and her prime 'functions' being to dance, to attend upon her husband and to be an exciting partner in bed. This undemocratic nature of man is what repulses a woman, be it daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mistress.

The play *Thirty Days in September*, published in 2001, has dramatized the issue of child sexual abuse and its effect on an individual's psyche which becomes more poignant when it involves the gamut of incestuous relationships. The play portrays the issue of incest through Mala and her mother, Shanta. Both the daughter and the mother are sexually molested in their infancy by the same person Vinay, who is Shanta's own brother. The sexual molestation affects both of them differently as one is dragooned into bearing it silently due to social pressure and taboos and the other revolts against it.

Brief Candle is Dattani's another play, published in 2009. Though the play addresses mortality, it highlights the importance of the quality of our lives rather than how long we live it. The play is a hilarious farce with some extremely funny situations revolving around a hotel room near the airport. As the characters in the play await their departures, which are delayed due to a storm, they end up in comic situations. They entangle themselves in surreptitious dalliances and complicated love affairs. As they rehearse the play however, all the

characters, including the inmates, the doctor and the hospital aide, discover similarities between themselves and the characters they are playing. It is clear that the dead playwright is speaking to them. The metaphor of arrivals and departures representing life and death, leaves them with a reflection of their own needs and struggles, and a realization of their brief time on this earth. Joy Sengupta, Amar Talwar, Suchitra Pillai, Zafar Karachiwala, Manasi Parekh and Satchit Puranik play the characters. On the day of the performance, the playwright appears, and unfolds a love story that crosses time, space, life and death.

The Play *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. Dattani conveys his vision through his women protagonist who exhibit exemplary resilience despite confronting the turmoil of partition.

The play highlights Dattani's attempt to explore how every society ascribes meaning to women's bodies; in effect, women's body becomes a space of control. Women bodies are constructed as a contested space over which different ethnic, political and religious groups fight to acquire this symbolic territory.

The humiliation and dishonour which women were subjected to during partition has been depicted in the life



of an octogenarian former muslim film star Nazia Sahiba who is forced to recollect her glorious days of historical theatre in the pre partition days. However, with her determination and courage she revives her faded theatre in 1950s despite her husband's betrayal and society's denial of her talent.

The play is a poignant depiction of a series of tribulations which Nazia faces during partition be it the trauma of being gang raped by men of other community in front of her husband; giving birth to a child who is born out of this heinous act or witnessing the cold blooded killing of her sister. After experiencing the pain of all these incidents Nazia's character undergoes a complete transformation which is not that of lamenting at the past but looking towards the future.

Dattani alludes to the myth of Shakuntala to exhibit how Nazia revolts against the patriarchal image of women in India. Shakuntala epitomizes patriarchal subjugation of women who is beautiful and is destined to submit herself to male hegemony where she is used, abused and reduced. Nazia in her pre partition career as a film star rejoiced at performing the role of charming and sacrificing Shakuntala. Nevertheless, her encounter with the savagery and barbarism during partition evolves her into a rebellious woman who openly rebels against the established mores of patriarchal setup despite all her social criticism.

When the play begins, Nazia has been portrayed as a frail, wrinkled woman in her eighties. Though she is aware of her fall from grace yet she remains a go-getter. She abandons a film shooting when the director of the film, Sanjay wants to restrict her to a single line.

Dattani has used the technique of flash back in the play to merge the interior and exterior personalities of the characters into a single whole. Nazia was playing the role of Shakuntala and her co-star Suhel was Dushyant during a theatrical performance in Pakistan when the horrors of partition were being felt. During the performance, suddenly pandemonium breaks out and a woman from the troupe shouted that they should not allow Hindus in the troupes who are to be migrated to India. Nazia's character changes from a meek Shakuntala to an assertive woman when she declares that there is no Hindu in the group "except artistes".

Through the episode of Zarine's killing and Nazia's gang rape, Dattani portrays the gravity of sexual violence which women's bodies were subjected to during partition. Such treatment of women was the outcome of patriarchal power where women have always been treated as instruments for men to display their power and honour.

Dattani through the predicament of his women characters portray that women are always conditioned by the patriarchal society to conform to the established norms of patriarchy but



they have to understand that conformity is the bane of creativity and one has to fight against it. Both Nazia and Ruby have tried to search for an authentic, unitary self against the forces of fragmentation and alienation that threaten to undermine their veracity.

Dattani's women characters make bold endeavor for recognition of their qualities and an appreciation of their contribution to society. They begin to rise in conflict against their tormented selves, against men and society. He powerfully portrays the strong emotions of religious freedom and resentment by using the vision of his characters, particularly females. He uses his female characters to exhibit their internal enigmatic narratives of freedom at the same time depicting the religious hostility held by them. He attempts to articulate the voices of those women whose voices have remained inarticulate with the dominant structures of power.

Dattani's latest play *The Big Fat City*, first performed on 22 June 2013 at the Tata Theatre (Mumbai), was directed by Mahesh Dattani himself and produced by Ashvin Gidwani. The play was first published in Dattani's semi-autobiographical book *Me and My Plays* (2014) by Penguin Books India. The book is a collection of an autobiographical essay entitled '*Me and My Plays*' and two stage plays, namely *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* and *The Big Fat City*.

The play combines three stories - a corporate couple in a financial quandary, a popular soap star with a troubled marriage and an aspiring starlet with shocking secrets. The story is set in a fancy Mumbai apartment, where a couple (Pooja Ruparel & Ivan Rodrigues) invite an old friend (Nasir Khan) for dinner, so that they can get some financial help in clearing off their home loan. But in a bid to save their apartment, they forget all ethics and land up becoming accomplices in the murder of their neighbour and friend's (Achint Kaur) husband. And it's not just them, every character puts themselves and their own agendas over truth and morality, which is a little disturbing. But then, the story revolves around the theme of what greed can do to people. People in the big fat city.

To conclude, one would like to answer two basic questions : (i) What's Dattani's contribution to Indian English drama ? (ii) In what way will he be a source of inspiration for the dramatists in the twenty-first century ? Dattani's contribution lies in bringing everyday problems in contemporary society and taboo subjects (i.e., gay and lesbianism) into the realms of drama. Real life situations which we generally face are reflected in his plays. His technical innovations in the form of stage directions, 'thought' and 'speech' which represent sub-conscious and conscious mind, conversational idioms, are hallmarks of his plays. Future dramatists will look forward to him for making innovations both in themes



and techniques (as he has done in his plays) in their plays. For the range of his themes, sky is the only limit. The most significant and fascinating feature of his dramaturgy lies in his craft of presenting the dynamics of personal and moral choices while focusing on human relationships.

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