

# Dattani and His Dramatic Output- Social Reality on Stage

Dr. Alka Jain

English Faculty, Rani Laxmibai Central Agricultural University, Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, India

**Abstract**— Mahesh Dattani is one of the most dynamic voice of modern Indian English drama. He is widely acknowledged for his innovative techniques in stagecraft. He has shown new possibilities in dramatic techniques and devices to his contemporaries and future playwrights. He writes plays in English and is the first Indian English playwright to win the prestigious National Sahitya Akademi award for his play *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1994. His play *Dance Like a Man* has won the Best Picture in English award, presented by the National Panorama In 1998. The Sahitya Kala Parishad selected *Final Solutions* (1997), *Tara* (2000) and *Thirty Days in September* (2007) directed by Arvind Gaur, as Best Productions of the Year. Dattani is a fine artist, craftsman and visionary. All his plays have immense scope for performance. The paper examines the dramatic output of Dattani and tries to locate the inherent characteristics in them, with a view to determining his thematic concerns.

**Keywords**— Dattani, themes, dattani's plays, modern Indian Drama.

When asked in an interview, what it meant to be a playwright, Dattani says, "I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me, being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of a production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium" (Nair).

Mahesh Dattani was born on August 7, 1958, in Bangalore, Karnataka. He belongs to a Gujarati family originating from Porbandar, Gujarat. His parents lived in Bombay for some time and then settled in Bangalore, giving Dattani a chance to watch Gujarati and Kannada plays. Dattani studied at Baldwin High School and St. Joseph College of Arts and Science, Bangalore. Mahesh Dattani helped in his father's business for some time but theatre soon attracted him. He joined the Bangalore Little Theatre during his college days, in early 1980's and started participating in workshops, acting, and directing plays. He learnt ballet and also trained in Bharatanatyam. He graduated in history, economics and political science and

then post graduated in Marketing and Advertisement Management.

Dattani formed his own English-theatre group named Playpen in 1984. He turned to full-time writing in 1995 and set up his own performance venue in 1998. Dattani acts and directs for Playpen, and composes radio drama and screenplays apart from stage plays. He encourages young artists to participate in theatre. His plays have been compiled in two volumes called *Collected Plays Volume One* and *Collected Plays Volume Two* published by Penguin. Dattani wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's a Will*, on family inheritances, in 1986 followed by *Dance Like a Man* in 1989 on the problems faced by a male dancer. He directed and acted in both the plays. He then directed *Bravely Fought the Queen* in 1991 in Bombay. His third play *Tara* a domestic play on gender bias was directed by Alyque Padamsee in 1990, who then asked Dattani to write a play on communalism. The product, *Final Solutions*, was rejected by the Deccan Herald Festival in Bengaluru for dealing with a sensitive issue and Playpen staged the play in 1993. Besides being the best known dramatist, Dattani is also an accomplished actor, director, scriptwriter and dance teacher.

When asked about the themes in his plays, Dattani says, "I talk about the areas which the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about people who are striving to expand 'this' space. They live on the fringe of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe space for themselves as they can" (Dattani xiii).

Some theatre group used to perform Gujarati plays in Bangalore and Dattani enjoyed watching these plays with his family. He was impressed by the power of theatrical performance. It sustained his interest of watching Gujarati and Kannada plays for a longer period. Dattani uses Gujarati settings in most of his plays. He acknowledges that "The playwright Madhu Rye influenced me a great deal in his portrayal of middle class Gujarati hypocrisy. Vijay Tendulkar's *silence! The Court is in Session* and *Sakharam*

Binder impressed me with their complex portrayal of women characters” (Subramanyam 134).

Besides this, the American playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have influenced Dattani’s stage craft. Dattani has a very strong urge and affinity for Indianness. He uses Indian dramatic devices and techniques in ample measures. He writes plays for the urban middle-class people whose basic needs are taken care of and who strive to achieve their goals in life but are disturbed by the issues of family, individual freedom, corruption, social and cultural prejudices. When asked in an interview by The Scholar’s Avenue, as to where he got the inspiration to present strong characters belonging to metropolitan cities, Dattani says:

I am an urban person. I have a visitor’s experience with rural India. So, the environment in which I can express myself is comprised entirely of the urban spaces. My art is bound to express that. There are two things in art called the writer’s voice and the writer’s gaze. The writer’s voice is more important in the area of literature. In the theatre, the writer’s gaze is more important. And that is why my plays revolve around the urban current day India. (Interview with Mahesh Dattani)

Dattani’s *Where There’s a Will* is a humorous and witty play and has its protagonist a rich businessman, Hasmukh Mehta, who dies in the first scene but stays throughout the play as a ghost. He rules his household even after his death through his will. The play explores the lives and motivations of his wife, son, daughter-in-law and his mistress. In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani analyses the life of a couple, who are Bharatnatyam dancers. It is a play about ambition and manipulation, sacrifices and sins and questions the efficacy of the roles allotted to men and women by society and traditions. When asked by Lakshmi Subramanyam, why he viewed his women critically, with reference to *Where There’s a Will* and *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani says, “They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I am focussing on is the powerlessness of these people at the end of the play. I know it is always grossly misinterpreted as their come uppance for being ‘bad’ women” (131).

Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* shows the emptiness of urban business families. The story revolves around Jiten and Nitin, the Trivedi brothers, their mother, and wives Dolly and Alka. Some outsiders are also caught in the tangle and the undercurrents in the seemingly ‘normal’ family are revealed to all. The play talks about

familial violence, homosexuality, deceit and drudgery. The play *Final Solutions* takes on the theme of Hindu-Muslim hostility. He says that communalism has been carefully crafted in the minds of people through mental conditioning and deliberate restructuring of the past to effect the present. It shows the madness of riots and the political ambitions thriving on communalism.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani’s latest stage plays raise the issue of homosexuality and the fear of revelation. The Radio Play *Do the Needful* talks about homosexuality as well as marriage of convenience. In the Radio-play, *Seven Circles around the Fire*, broadcast on the BBC in 1999, Dattani looks at the *hijras*, who are treated as lesser humans and sex objects by society. Dattani’s plays deal with specific themes, the message being pointed and precise. He does not mince his words and hits at the audience openly with his versatile stage craft.

Homosexuality is a major, predominant theme in Dattani’s plays. He deals with it in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Patriarchal supremacy is another of his recurrent themes. In *Where There’s a Will*, he shows a dominating father who dominates the household even after death. In *Tara* he shows how Bharati’s father interferes in her decision and forces Patel and Bharati to barter their girl child’s happiness and future in order to give the male child an advantage. In *Dance Like a Man*, Amritlal is an autocratic father. Dattani shows a host of hurtful husbands like the physically torturing Jiten and his father, in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. It will be well suited to say that oppression itself as a dominant theme in most of Dattani’s plays.

Another concern of Dattani’s plays is gender identity. The constructs of men and women as gender, their roles in the home and society, the guardians of gender constructs, are all examined in Dattani’s plays. Hasmukh Mehta in *Where There’s a Will* feels that his son is not ‘manly’, Amritlal in *Dance Like a Man* feels that men should not dance and Patel in *Tara* say that Chandan should not talk about knitting. Dattani raises too many questions simultaneously. He ceaselessly raises questions regarding gender, sexuality and social hierarchy in his plays.

Dattani’s plays are revelatory in nature. There are always old skeletons in the cupboard and the past always rides on the shoulders of the present to create disharmony in life. There is a past action in his plays which is responsible for the turmoil and conflict in the present life of his characters. In *Tara*, a dark secret, when revealed kills Tara and Chandan inertly. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* the skeleton is Daksha and the revelation that Jiten’s violence

led to Daksha's abnormalities. In *Where There's a Will*, Hasmukh's secret mistress comes to rule his household. Like Henrik Ibsen, Dattani's works reveal a suppressed causality. Dattani is not interested in exposing the past. He is more interested in the process of revealing the past to explain the complexities of the present. When asked why he portrays characters trapped in unusual circumstances, Dattani says, "I feel that it takes unusual circumstances to really bring out the true character. It's only in times of crisis or when one is off centre that one's true nature is likely to be revealed" (Subramanyam 129).

Dattani shows us the hollowness of middle-class lives. He reveals the loneliness of the people behind their masks of normalcy. His characters are vulnerable and disenchanting, wanting in happiness and fulfilment. They seem absolutely normal but live with terrible pain inside. Dattani's families represent society at large. Just like the society, the family is also in conflict but no one is an easy victim. Even the women are strong strugglers, fighting for their individual space in the home which is their war zone.

Major Plays by Mahesh Dattani:

#### Stage plays:

1. *Where There's a Will*
2. *Dance Like a Man*
3. *Tara*
4. *Bravely Fought the Queen*
5. *Final Solutions*
6. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*
7. *Thirty Days in September*
8. *Brief Candle*
9. *Where Did I Leave My Purdah*
10. *The Big Fat City*
11. *The Murder That Never Was*

#### Radio Plays:

1. *Do the Needful*
2. *The Swami and Winston*
3. *A Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child*
4. *Clearing the Rubble*
5. *Uma and the Fairy Queen*
6. *Seven Steps Around The Fire*
7. *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*

#### Screen Plays:

1. *Mango Souffle*
2. *Alag Mausam*
3. *Morning Raga*

Indian English drama deals with some characteristic issues and themes. Having blossomed with time, by depicting varied content and themes, Indian drama has come a long way from being philosophical, religious,

historical, and mythological to being the Contemporary Indian English Drama. Dattani's drama shows the common man and his realities and he is a humanist committed to bringing a change in society. Contemporary Indian English drama takes up the themes related to the urbanised, middle-class, English speaking society which is undergoing a noticeable cultural, ethical, and psychological change. Issues like marital infidelity and homosexuality are common subjects of plays like *Do the Needful*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *The Harvest* and others.

The necessity to focus on the conflicts in the lives of contemporary Indians arises due to the complexities in their lives. Socio-cultural scenario of India was affected to a great extent by the colonial rule. Traditional Indian society which originally functioned in a caste-based hierarchy was further stratified with the master-servant paradigm of colonial rule. The Indian populace came to be marked by new personality traits like submissiveness, dependence and poor self-confidence. Modern living and westernized thinking encouraged people to break free from the shackles at familial, social and cultural levels. Economic growth has become a measure for individual growth and power. The self and its satisfaction is the main concern today.

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