

# Finding the Voice of Indian Urbanity – Through the Selected Texts of Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani

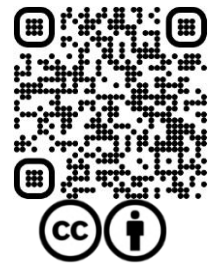
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**Abstract**— *In the present paper, I have endeavored to review the development of Indian English theatre since 20th century to emphasize the common themes and dilemmas that the Indian playwrights writing in English had to deal with special reference to the process of assimilation of Indian themes with the Western genre. The focus is upon analyzing the text from a post-colonial perspective. The aim is to show the manifestation of hybrid cultures in the urban areas as have been successfully represented by the Indian dramas by Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani.*

**Keywords**— *Post-colonialism, Indian-English theatre, dilemma, hybridity, identity.*



Indian-English drama is the most under developed genre in Indian-English literature. The reason for the decimated development of the genre even after independence is that drama is ‘a composite art involving the playwrights, the actors, and the audience in the shared experience on the stage.’ Drama, thus have its own problems, however lately though slowly a “change in climate is perceptible” (Iyengar 730). Post- Independence has seen increasing interest in Indian-English literature abroad and though many plays like Gurcharan Das *A Fine Family* have been staged in Europe and U.S.A, but these did not lead to the establishment of a regular school of Indian-English drama. This was because regional language theatre had already monopolized the theatre and “Indian-English drama was left to feed on crumbs, fallen from its rich cousin’s table” (Iyengar 730). This problem was also pointed out by Mahesh Dattani in *Me and My Plays* when he realized:

“I was disappointed the plays in English weren’t expressive enough like Hindi one I had seen. I then saw a Kannada version of Hamlet. The play made more sense to audience in Kannada than if it were performed in the language of the playwright. That’s when I realized I was doomed. I didn’t have an audience, because I didn’t have a language.” (Dattani 30) Thus, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian-English drama was the ‘adept’ phase of this genre of

post- colonial literature, and it was up to the new playwrights to find the voice of Indian-English drama. The modern playwrights have been writing in prose, according to M.K Naik “Tagore- Aurobindo-Kailasam tradition of poetic drama continue even today but with a difference in the hands of Manjri Isvaram, G.V.Desani , Lakhan Dev and Pratish Nandy.” (Naik 268) Desani is known for his play *Hali* which is both a poem and an allegorical play. Isvaram’s *Yama and Yami* is a good example of use of Hindu mythology in poetic prose play. Lakhan Deb wrote historical plays in blank verse. Asif Curimbhroy regarded as the “most prolific Indian-English playwright”(271) by Naik, belonged to the larger group of playwrights who wrote in prose. His plays dealt with the current Indian situation and attempted to bring forth the various economic, social and psychological problems. While Curimbhroy was successful in presenting realism on stage, he failed to give the suitable treatment to the effective themes of his plays. Another important playwright was Nissim Ezekiel. His plays expose oddities of life and human behaviour.

The postcolonial era, is about the intrusion and colonization of minds with ideas. This is what the Kenyan writer Ngugi WA Thiong’o meant when he talked about “decolonizing the mind” that the colonizer and the colonized both carry colonialism in their minds long after

the state has gained independence, thus the Indian post-colonial drama focuses on exposing the colonist ideology. The idea of capitalism and dream of urban life is the result of this colonist ideology. The idea of English as the language of the colonizer and thus its superiority is the result of colonization which playwrights Dattani attempt to defy by using it as their native language.

“The term ‘Hybridity’ in post-colonial studies is associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose analysis stresses interweaving of the elements of the colonizer and colonized, thus challenging the validity and authenticity of any essential cultural identity. “Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the ‘Third Space of enunciation.’ Cultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space, which for Bhabha makes the claim to a hierarchical ‘purity’ of cultures untenable. For him, the recognition of this ambivalent space of cultural identity may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate.” (*literariness.org*) Thus modern Indian playwrights portray the hybrid Indian culture.

The playwrights chose realism as their mode to communicate with the audience as it is only by presenting the Indian experience in its fidelity can they both entertain and educate them. Urban realist and predominantly domestic plays have become a new trend among contemporary playwrights of Indian-English theatre. Like the 18<sup>th</sup> century English society wherein Addison and Steele took the task of educating the new middle class, same was the case with 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian urbanity where the playwrights rose to make the audience aware of the roots and philosophy of their social and psychological struggles.

The contemporary Indian-English drama is notable for its almost complete deviation from European tradition and revisits the incredible history of India, the myths and legends and most importantly the reality of the current situation in all its colours to both enlighten and entertain the audience by presenting the culture they can relate to in a language they speak in. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad laid the foundation of contemporary Indian-English drama.

Badal Sircar created a genuine people’s theatre known as the third theatre i.e. a theatre supported and created by people. His plays are aimed at bringing social change. Vijay Tendulkar, the pioneer of using modern techniques was highly influenced by Marathi theatre. He used his plays to expose the agonies of Indian middle class. His

play *Ghashiram Kotwal* comments on the corruption and immorality of the upper class. The play is a historical drama set in the time when Nana Phadnavis was the ‘peshwa’ of Pune. Tendulkar describes the play:

“This is not a historical play. It is a story, in prose, verse, music and dance set in a historical era. Ghashirams are creations of socio-political forces which know no barriers of time and place. Although based on a historical legend, I have no intention of commentary on the morals, or lack of them, of the Peshwa, Nana Phadnavis or

Ghashiram. The moral of this story, if there is any, may be looked for elsewhere.” (Mahida 1)

Tendulkar used the human wall in the play which served as a chorus to comment on the development of plot and also as a symbol of secrecy and hiding and revealing in the play wherein the sacred and pure masks that people wear are being pulled off to expose the dark reality. He also used ‘sutradhaars’ or narrators in his plays. Thus, the political and social satire is displayed as blend of folk dance and ballad along with a touch of opera.

Manjula Padmanabhan is another notable playwright; she is known for her plays like *Lights Out*, *Harvest* etc. *Harvest* is a futuristic play that exposes how first world countries have taken over our mind and our body quite literally. It creates dystopian world within Om’s family who has been chosen to be the organ donor and thus him and his family is forced to follow certain rules and restrictions that turn their lives upside down. The play satirizes materialism and warns against capitalism. The play jerk the people out of their seats at the point when Jaya, Om’s wife, breaks the screen through which the western company had been keeping their keen eye on them. The glass breaking was the shattering of the western and capitalistic standards which has made a modern Indian its slave.

Girish Karnad (1938- ) the noted Kannada actor, director and playwright. “His first play, *Yayati* (1961), was written neither in English nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead, it was composed in his adopted language Kannada. The play, which chronicled the adventures of mythical characters from the Mahabharata, was an instant success and was immediately translated and staged in several other Indian languages” (Naik 274). He translated his own plays *Tughlaq* (1962) and *Hayavadana* (1975) from Kannada into English. *Tughlaq* was his second play and was sufficient to earn Karnad a secured place among the Indian English dramatists. *Tughlaq* is a historical play on the life of Sultan Mohammad Bin Tughlaq of the fourteenth century India.

“Karnad projects the curious contradictions in the complex personality of the Sultan, who was at once a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel and godless. His two

close associates- Barani, the scholarly historian and Najib, the politician seem to represent the two opposite selves of Tughlaq, while Aziz, the wily time-server, appears to represent all those who took advantage of the Sultan’s visionary schemes and fooled him” (Naik 274). “Tughlaq’s history found a parallel in the contemporary political situation in the post- Nehruvian India when people found themselves disenchanted by the past idealism of Government policies. The use of history to portray contemporary with all its complexities embodies in the protagonist made the play a huge success. Hayavadana is considered as the playwright’s experiment with folk motif and use of mime, chorus and masks to present the modern theme of search of identity in the midst of tangled relationships. Karnad derived his themes from ‘Katha-sarit-sagara’ which Thomas Mann used for his novel. Karnad based his work on the novel version of the Sanskrit tale.” (Naik 275).

Karnad’s career as a dramatist started by chance. “As a young man studying at Karnataka University, Dharwar, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Mathematics and Statistics in 1958, Karnad dreamed of earning international literary fame, but he thought that he would do so by writing in English. Upon graduation, he went to England and studied at Oxford where he earned a Rhodes scholarship and went on to receive a Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics.” (Naik 276) He wanted to earn fame as a poet, however he realized that is drama that comes naturally to him and that too in Kannada not in English:

His dramatic genius was influenced by the ‘Company Natak’ as can be seen in his use of shallow scenes and deeper scenes technique in his play Tughlaq. The shallow scene were used for street and comical scenes, while the shallow scene was on the deep scene was prepared for a garden or a palace scene. The *Yakshagana*, another traditional Kannad theatre also influenced him, however the greater influence was that of naturalistic drama of Henrik Ibsen and G.B Shaw. Naturalistic drama is the drama which reflects life to its utmost fidelity. Naturalism in literature stems from modern realism and depicts everyday life especially the lower class without artificiality of plot and with “scrupulous care for authenticity and accuracy of detail” .Naturalistic drama attempts to reproduce “everyday speech as exactly as possible, and more and more emphasis... on surface verisimilitude.” Naturalistic drama thus attempts “to deceive nature, not reflect it.”

Girish Karnad mixes the mythical stories and historical characters to display everyday struggles of modern life. His naturalism lies in his honest observation and straightforward prose dialogue and psychological realism depicted through his main characters trapped in modern life as he does in his play *Boiled Beans on Toast*

*Boiled Beans on Toast* by Karnad is a commentary on the life in the modern city in India represented by Bangalore. The title of the play is the very key point to understand the themes and the aim of the writer. It is derived from the mythical story behind the name of the city – Bangalore. “In the eleventh century, King Veera Ballala went out hunting, lost his way jungle, and after wandering through the night, arrived exhausted at a lonely hut where an old woman saved his life by giving him a handful of boiled beans (‘benda kaalu’ in Kannad). In gratitude the king named the place of ‘BendaKaalu’ place of boiled beans, which the time corrupted as ‘Bengaluru’, later anglicised as ‘Bangalore.’ Karnad thus emphasizes on the hybridity of the culture used Boiled Beans in context of the original traditions and nostalgia of the past and ‘Toast’ is obviously the reference of the western influence and urbanization of a small town. . ‘The play was first presented in a Marathi adaptation titled, ‘Uney Purey Shahar Ek’ at the Yaswantarao Natyagruha, Pune, by the Aasakta group on 1 March 2013. Later, director Lillete Dubey staged the play, *Boiled Beans On Toast*, for Mumbai audiences.” (Karnad 1)

The play deals with the complexities and problems of the life of the residents of a large metropolis. Each character is affected by the machination of the environment which has compelled them to abandon human values and become more and more materialistic, apathetic and immoral. The centre of the play is the Padmanabhan household and people connected with it. Anjana Padmanabhan, the mistress of the house finds a purpose in life by working in the hospice, serving the cancer patients and looking after her household staff, she keeps herself busy to escape the ghosts of her past. Her son Kunaal is a rebellious teenager who is an aspiring musician. His character development represents the journey of audience from ignorance to knowledge as with him the audience realized how each individual who comes to the city is sucked into trap of despair and self-destruction. Dolly Iyer is first found sitting in Anjana’s drawing room is a character so blinded by the light of the city and probably in a loveless marriage that she passes her time by duping innocent youths like Prabhakar. This behaviour seems to originate from her desperate need to project herself as an important part of the people’s lives even though she ends up ruining them. Prabhakar

represents all those migrants who aspire to live the better city life and are ready to pay any cost to achieve success. Same is the case with Muttu's brother Shankara whose envy with the city life his sister got to live, tears the family apart. Vimala, the chef is a shady character, he character has the semblance of a demon as the city has separated her soul and she lives for her own gains, hurting people in process. These and many minor characters make the organic whole of the city that is a 'Big Black Hole' that attracts everything in its vicinity and in the make them a prisoner of its light.

The play is an example of naturalistic drama and can also be characterized as problem play. The opening scene with "fighting, shouting, bumping into each other, the background noise of traffic" thus representing a common street of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Bangalore. There is no water fountain or the chirping birds, nor even thunder and lightning like Shakespearean plays but the noise of the busy city on the move. Some of the problems and conflicts dealt are stated at the very outset like the traditional village versus the city and the breaking of the family as visible in the quarrel between Muttu and Shankara. The plight of widowhood embodied by Muttu's mother, in contrast to all the progress and higher standard of living Shankara refers in the city, his mother represent the decadence of the ancient Hindu tradition of total isolation or abandonment of windows. The character is a reminder of the real problem that India needs to deal. One of the most central problems is the breaking of the families in the face of materialism and migration of men to the cities for job opportunities, leaving their family behind. Prabhakar was forced to leave his family in the village on the promise of getting a job at Wipro, Singapore. The play deals with creation of the concrete jungle at great environmental costs. The "rain tree" the City Corporation is chopping down symbolizes the nostalgia of the past and also the careless attitude of people and government towards environment. Two opposing point of view are presented by Anjana who grieves the loss of her beloved tree and is troubled with the increasing machination of her surroundings on the other hand Prabhakar, the opportunist is amazed by the wonderful new city, everything even the pollution of the city dazzles him, his naiveté is laughable: "the city air, however polluted, is an oxygen chamber after the suffocation of a small town. Karnad's play *Boiled Beans On Toast* embodies the concept. The title itself is the assimilation of the two cultures and is appropriately applied to Bangalore, the city where Eastern traditions have been stirred by western ideals of freedom, material wealth and capitalism. Karnad's Bangalore represents the 'third space' with all its problems, never providing a

situation. Kunaal's music in the end is the final manifestation of Bangalore's hybrid culture. He decides to set up "Purandara Dasa's music" to the music of his guitar. The play does not give a solution to the problem of the new hubbub of this culture but ends with a note of defeated acceptance

The family of Padabidris depicts how each individual has created an isolated cell to avoid contact with each other. Each member of the family tries to escape the reality of tattered weave of relationship. Anusuya, the grandmother indulges in gambling and has no aversion on cheating on her family, the situation is laughable and ironical. The lack of communication in the family makes each member a prisoner, trying to be free. The character of Anjana Padabidri is the central character in the play, the woman trapped in the four walls and left alone with a baby while her husband pursues his ambitions. She falls in despair as she finds her world purposeless; her only refuge was her singing. When her friend left her, afraid "to be trapped in a relationship with a married woman" that word "trapped" made her clear the action she needs to take to get out "I used to suffer from insomnia those days. Had a large cache of sleeping pills. I ground some in milk and fed them to you. I swallowed the rest...and went to sleep."(Karnad78). However, death eluded her she lost her singing voice. The character embodies existentialism, defined by Sartre in 'Existentialism and Human Emotions' as in the world void of meaning and Universe where no higher power exists: "Existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and in addition declares that every truth and every action implies human setting and human subjectivity."(Sartre 2)

Existentialism emphasizes on human responsibility to define their identity and way they perceive the world around, "existence precedes essence." The play ends on the existentialist truth which Kunaal realizes after finding out that his mother tried to kill him and herself:

"I may never have existed, and yet the world would've continued to be exactly as it is now. I mean. The world, this city, Bangalore, my friends, family, you-everything would have existed, but not me. I could be inside some black hole! I wouldn't exist...But if I didn't exist, whether the rest of the universe existed or no, that wouldn't have mattered in the least, would it?" (Karnad 79)

Thus, the play depicts the individual and social reality of modern Indian city, with human lost in the hustle bustle of the city and actions have no meaning. Materialism rules all and identity is lost in the city



described as “Big Black Hole.”

Mahesh Dattani belongs to the younger generation of modern Indian-English dramatists. He like Karnad seeks to find the appropriate voice to depict the Indian experience in English. “He is an Indian director, actor, playwright and a writer. He has a number of plays to his credit as *Where there’s a Will, Dance Like a Man, Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen, Final Solution, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Thirty Days in September, Seven Steps Around The Fire, The Murder That Never Was etc.*”(Naik 273) In *Me and My Plays* he describes his first experience of seeing a Gujarati play. His encounter with Gujarati plays is the most significant phenomenon in shaping his mind for theatre business. He did a number of workshops with Bangalore Little Theatre and later founded a his own theatre group called Playpen and did many Western plays. However, it was when he attended Hindi theatre he realized the need of communicating to the audience in their familiar language, thereon he wrote his first play for Deccan Herald Theatre Festival, called ‘*Where there’s a will.*’ Unlike Karnad, Dattani writes in English. He uses Indian words profusely in his English plays to make his language more relatable: “You’ve got to be true to your expressions. English is for me a sort of given. It’s my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad.”(Dattani 27) “English is a ‘hybrid language’ and spoken unobtrusively in India. Nevertheless, He puts transmission of message through performance and language.”(Shodhganga 4)

Dattani also talks of being influenced by *Bharatnatyam*, the dance form that he claims to have opened his mind to “all the tools needed for a dramatist; from the ‘bhavas’ and ‘rasas’ to precision and rhythm on stage”. This is evident in his play *Dance Like a Man*. Alyque Padmasee discovered this play and ended up being one of the significant factor in Dattani’s success.

“Dattani is also known to be Avant garde feminist. John McRae has rightly regarded him as “the voice of India now” as his plays mostly deal with the problems of the women and the oppressed. The play ‘*Bravely Fought the Queen*’ tells of cloistered life of married women in the city of Bangalore. The play makes use of multi-dimensional stage to make use of spaces and parallel scenes to display the emptiness and isolation of women and unscrupulous life of men, to reveal the inner psyche of the outwardly seeming conventional family. The play is an example of the drawing room drama and is a perfect display of Dattani’s art of stage direction.

Dattani’s play mostly deal with social problems and traces the individual attitude towards them. He is the

only English playwright to be awarded Sahitya Akademi Award. The citation for award reads: “Dattani...probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender...a brilliant contribution to Indian English drama.”

His play *The Big Fat City* exposes the dangers and evils hidden behind the pretty and bright face of the Indian city Bombay. Materialism, corruption, drug and alcohol abuse, adultery and honour killing are highlighted in the play. The play is a dark comedy that emphasizes the irony of the contrast between appearance and reality of city life. The play consist of three strings of stories- a corporate couple in financial crisis, a soap actor with a drug addict son and alcoholic husband and an aspiring actress in a secret love affair, all brought together by a shocking murder. They all become accomplices for nothing but greed, overriding all their ethical conundrums and human responsibility. In the end, however, when Harjeet kills his sister for proposing an inter-caste marriage, all of the characters are left in lurch as even they did not get the logic behind killing someone for “honour.” The question is addressed to the audience as to which one is a bigger sin – killing for wealth or killing for blind belief. Thus, in the face of all progress and wealth, what really needs to develop is the Indian perspective.

The play like *Big Fat City* starts in an urban drawing room in Mumbai instead of Bangalore. Niharika and Murli are stereotypical urban couple from a small town who are ready to do anything to be successful in the city of dreams- Mumbai, especially the wife, who serves as the director of the drama of happy life they pretend to live, to impress their rich friends like Lolly and Sailesh. The first scene, where they are preparing for Sailesh’s visit is hilarious with Niharika growling at Murli to wear the “silk Kurti” and get rid of “old banyan.” They are practically broke and are in huge debt and are desperate to mask it. Sailesh, on the other hand is a corrupt banker and turns out to be as desperate as Niharika and Murli. All three of them are trapped in a vicious circle of wealth and fear and when time comes end up becoming accomplice to murder. Lolly takes the audience behind the dazzling lives of film and soap actors, stuck with an alcoholic husband and dealing in drugs to earn money when her career comes to an end. Her apathy towards her husband, Kailash’s death and all she cares about is “fifty lakhs” worth of drugs that Murli has unknowing washed away with Kailash’s clothes. Her sudden affection for Sailesh and their relationship exposes how marriage and family have lost all meaning and all that matters is wealth. A society totally operating on ‘pleasure principle’ equals chaos and thus points to the huge money in the

drug market as more and more people are coming under its influence to get through their pretentious lives, devoid of any meaning and values. The reality of Mumbai as city of illusion and disappointment is exposed. Anu belongs to a wealthy Gujarati family and has come to Mumbai to become an actress however when her boyfriend Puneet murders Kailash she not only became an accomplice to the murder but offers everyone bribe to get out of their financial problems. She is representative of all the people who are aware of the real nature of city and is one with its spirit, thus is the only one with all the solutions to the problem.

Dattani makes use of LED screen to convey the dramatic irony and also give a cinematic effect to his play. It is used to display the text messages which in turn served as tools for depicting the inner thought for example Sailesh's message to his wife about Niharika: "His wife is a pretentious, snooty bitch". Another example is of Lolly's message to and from Ekta Kapoor which reveals the actual state of her career on decline and her desperation for getting a job. LED screen is also used for news flash about the murder which serves the turning point of the story. It is in the news that Harjeet, saw Anu with Lolly and Puneet and grew suspicious of her, thereby he decided to come to Mumbai himself instead of sending the required money. The play in the last act not only reveals the apathy, selfishness and greed of urban people and the corrupt nature of western idea of materialism but also the dark side Indian tradition and blind beliefs and complete absurdity of both. Thus, another dark practice hidden in the name of "sacrifice" as Harjeet calls it is that of 'honour killing'. The modern Indian city with all its attraction and big money is inflicted with the problem of extremities, on one hand there is extreme immorality and greed on the other hand there is so much blind love for one's so called honour and beliefs, in both cases there is diminishing value of human life and loss of individual humanity. Thus, the play itself doesn't have long discussions and debates, however makes audience wonder at the present situation.

The linguistic hybridity is quite visible in the play, thus is an example of Dattani's Indian voice in English. It also points to the effect of western and colonial culture on Indian ideology. The idea of better life connected to economic welfare, is reminiscent of American Dream of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is visible in the desperation of people to live and prosper in the city. The idea of living in one of the big cities has become equal to making progress and living the dream. This idea has been imposed by the colonist who treated rural people as inferior and themselves lived in cities as the hallmark of their superiority. Thus, Niharika's obsession with living in the city can also be seen as an effect of the colonist

psychology. Dattani in his play has thus successfully the reality of the illusion of beautiful city life.

Thus, Both Karnad in *Boiled Beans on Toast* and Dattani in have explored the truth of urban life in the post-colonial Bangalore and Mumbai, respectively. Both attempted to expose the social and psychological trap of urban life through their characters. Both the plays are examples of Indian-English language in the theatre. The theme of materialism and overreaching ambition is the dominant in both the plays. However, while Karnad play ends with a note on existentialist philosophy, Dattani ends his play on the darker note of the diminished value of human life in the face of greed and blind beliefs. Karnad's play is episodic and seems to emphasize the absurdity of human actions as he makes no effort to connect the cause and effect of the actions of his characters, thus the influence of modern English theatre is visible. Dattani, on the other hand made use of LED screen to explore the theme of deception versus reality and give his drama a cinematic dimension.

Both Karnad and Dattani have criticised the burgeoning force of capitalistic ideology especially visible in Indian cities. Thus, both the plays call for Marxist analysis. Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as the representation of the imaginary relationship between individual and state can be used to see how the ruling class with its emphasis on material wealth ever since the Independence has created a hierarchical urban-rural relationship, wherein the cities appear as the superior and progressive one, creating a cultural and psychological trap which lure people towards it.

Both the plays can be categorised as problem plays exploring the tensions and conflicts of a hybrid culture of Indian cities. The plays though seem to be regional have a universal appeal. The language of both the plays is naturalistic which makes them relatable to the audience like the popular regional theatre. Both the plays are serious attempt to both entertain and smash the myth of the good city life. Thus, both the plays successfully sound the real voice of Indian urban population.

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