



Performative Aspects of Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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Abstract— *Modern theatre in India comprises mainly of English, Hindi, Marathi and Hinglish (comprising of a mix of Hindi and English dialogues) plays. English theatre was brought to India during the British rule and was watched mostly by art connoisseurs of the rich, upper class. This, however, changed after independence, as, many Indians entered the fray and theatre slowly became open for common people too. The post-independence Indian English drama is notable for a wide range of subjects treated, issues presented and also it takes into its compass some globally appealing issues. It displays a remarkable growth and maturity. Mahesh Dattani is a dynamic dramatist, a professional Bharatnatyam dancer, a drama teacher, a stage director, and an actor. A person, who has touched almost every aspect of the theatre and has received the first 'Sahitya Akademi Award' (1998) for writing in English, he is rightly called the successor of Girish Karnad for his innovations in dialogue writing, pragmatic stage decorations, light arrangements, etc. One of his major contributions is that he has infused actability into Indian drama in English. It seems that, all the limitations, which in a way marred the beauty of Indian English theatre down the decades, are finally overcome. As Reena Mitra observes, 'Dattani confidently challenges the traditional denotations and connotations of the words 'India' and 'Indians'.¹ What makes his plays 'performance oriented' are his dramatic techniques. The paper intends to focus upon the aspects which make his drama stand out.*

Keywords— *Dramatic Techniques, dialogue, symbolism, and staging.*

Michael Walling thinks that Dattani's plays 'Fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigor 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.'²

'A drama is the imitation of a complete action, adapted to the sympathetic attention of man, developed in a succession of continuously interesting and continuously related incidents, acted and expressed by means of speech and the symbols, actualities, and conditions of life.'³ Dramatic techniques are used by the playwright to enhance the meaning and understanding of drama by the audience.

The different devices add the suggestive meaning, totality to the action, and enable the 'Organic' perception of the act or performance on the stage. They help the audience to feel the act through sensory mediums as much as possible. The use of the techniques varies from person to person and the result they want to achieve.

Dattani has a whole range of themes. What makes him different is the treatment given to the themes. He turns even the controversial and topical themes into the highly entertaining themes. In 'Bravely Fought the Queen' he presents the conflict between traditional and contemporary cultures that has created a new social lineage. His themes have striking contrast they deal with most extraordinary or sometimes *Taboo* issues in the most simple and straight way. Gender-identity, gender discrimination, marginalized genders, etc. Dattani uses theatre as a powerful tool for mirroring the society. Right from the moment any idea comes to his mind he very well knows that it is to be

performed on the stage and takes every care that it should be easily transformed to the audience in visual form. The journey from script to proscenium happens smoothly because he is aware of the fact that,

‘Actors are some of the most driven, courageous people on the face of the earth. They deal with more day-to-day rejection in one year than most people do in a lifetime. Every day, actors face the financial challenge of living a freelance lifestyle, the disrespect of people who think they should get real jobs, and their own fear that they'll never work again. Every day, they have to ignore the possibility that the vision they have dedicated their lives to is a pipe dream. With every role, they stretch themselves, emotionally and physically, risking criticism and judgment. With every passing year, many of them watch as the other people their age achieve the predictable milestones of normal life - the car, the family, the house, the nest egg. Why? Because actors are willing to give their entire lives to a moment - to that line, that laugh, that gesture, or that interpretation that will stir the audience's soul. Actors are beings who have tasted life's nectar in that crystal moment when they poured out their creative spirit and touched another's heart. In that instant, they were as close to magic, God, and perfection as anyone could ever be. And in their own hearts, they know that to dedicate oneself to that moment is worth a thousand lifetimes.’⁴

Speech Directions and Dialogues - The characters are easily differentiated by the register of English they speak, sometimes there are accent or language power play that come into play. One of his most appealing plays, in ‘*Clearing the Rubble*’, main action of the play is largely located in a Gujarat village, in Kutch region. The protagonists represented are from that cadre of the society who do not have access even to the basic human essentials most of the time, let alone an English language education, yet the action and the speech is always convincing, never harsh or incongruous. The characters’ psyche is revealed through their dialogues which offer a plane for the dramatist to display his wit and wisdom as well as his humour. The writing of Mahesh Dattani is reflexive of the, ‘here and now’. This is so very well expressed through his choice of language, a vibrant, colourful and remarkably recognizable *Indian* variety of English. One of many striking aspects about the characters of Dattani that they use a variety of English which is neither stilted, nor outdated. His expression seems to be the most ‘natural.’ Today’s suburban and urban speakers use exactly same language. The language in his plays contains the natural cadences of the bilingual speaker- whether the character is Gujarati, Kannadiga or ‘de-regionalized’ urban, the speech patterns and vocabulary are both expressive as well as indigenous.

Diction- when his silences are pregnant with meaning and articulate volumes, Dattani’s every word is power packed. The diction is enriched with devices like code mixing and code switching. The language does not appear to be a burden in the mouth of the actor nor does it appears out of place for the Indian audience. His scripts are very short. The length of the dramas is moderate, which is the demand of the changing times. When asked, ‘*Your dramas are comparatively short, (in script,) is there any special reason behind this?*’

M.D.- *No. It is the need of the day. Nobody in the theatre nowadays has an attention span beyond two hours.*⁵

Content- Each of Dattani’s play has certain issue to deal with, certain message to convey and neatly crafted described result to be achieved at the end of the play. He presents a slice of life on stage. His content is the ‘cross sectional’ study of the society around us, our cultural memories and collective consciousness regarding some issues and human psyche. ‘*Final Solutions*’ inhabits the communally charged world of the Indian subcontinent and brings out the nuances of the communal intransigence and proclivities, missing in what Suzanne Langer calls the ‘virtual past’ of narrative literature.’⁶

Symbolism- Symbolism begins with the title of the play itself, viz, ‘*Where There is a Will*’, ‘*Seven Steps Around the Fire*’, ‘*Final Solutions*’, etc. In ‘*Bravely Fought the Queen*’ the intriguing symbol is that of Kanhaiya, who is both present and absent at the back of the kitchen door. He, with his typical name stands for Radha’s eternal lover in the Indian Mythology. Lalitha cannot digest all this fictional character of Kanhaiya and related things, but audience and Dolly as well as Alka know that it is an escape for them to shun down their frustration, suffering and trauma.

In “*Final Solutions*” the use of black color in chorus is very suggestive. As no other color could be painted over black hence it represents impartiality and justice. There are five Hindu and five Muslim masks which again stand for equality and the people in mob also become the chorus by wearing any one of the two masks. This technique of using masks has helped the dramatist a lot. As mob never has any identity for individual it is considered as a ‘mob’ only following any particular thing. The different masks speak differently but chorus – 5 speaks sense, who represent intellectual, scientific and rationale group of people. But no one pays much attention to them and their views. A look at their conversation gives us the thought processes and inner psyche of the members,

Hindu Chorus

‘CHORUS 1: The procession has passed through these lanes every year, for forty years;

CHORUS2, How dare they?

CHORUS1,2, 3: for forty years our chariot has moved through their mohallas.

CHORUS4, 5: Why did they? Why did they today?

CHORUS2,3: they broke our *rath*. They broke our chariot and felled our Gods.

CHORUS1,2,3: This is our land. How dare they??

CHORUS 1: it is in their blood.”

Muslim Chorus-

‘CHORUS 1: Their chariot fell in our street!

CHORUS 2: Their God now prostrates before us!

CHORUS 3: So they blame it on us!

CHORUS 1: Was the chariot built by us!

CHORUS 2,3 : Blame the builders of those fancy thrones.’

‘CHORUS 2 : That we broke their chariot today.

CHORUS 1 : That we will bomb their streets tomorrow.

CHORUS ALL : Why would we? Why? Why? Why? would we?

CHORUS 5: (emotionally) Why would we ?’⁷

The mob is used very skillfully. The mob says, *‘The demons of communal hatred are not out on the street.... they are lurking inside ourselves.’* Each member of the mob is an individual yet they meld into one seething whole as soon as politicians play on their fears and anxieties.⁸

You very symbolically entitle your plays, *‘Seven Steps Aaround the Fire’* and the burning of the eunuch Kamla, and the suicide of Sabbu, *‘Bravely Fought the Queen’* contrasts with the feeble place of women in urban and educated families, *‘Seven Steps Around the Fire’*, shows the hypocrisy and impure intentions behind the marriage, *‘Where there is a Will’*, where the pun is intended, *‘Thirty Days in September’*, to show the temporary love relations in the protagonists’ life. *‘Brief Candle’*, etc. What would you like to say about this? Do you feel that the title is also one of the strong symbols?

M.D.- Yes absolutely. The title should have meaning beyond its words,

probably highlighting the dramatic irony.⁹

Stage- Stage loses its traditional identity and achieves a new dimension at the hands of Dattani. He has used it as a powerful weapon through his dramas. His experiments with the stage and stage settings have given his dramas the rare quality of Performability and theatricality. The exact lacuna of the English theatre has found its answer in Dattani’s dramas, and one of the reasons is his stage settings. Dattani like Shaw and Arthur Milller gives very meticulous stage directions in the script. It helps the reader to visualize the actual drama. At his theatre group ‘Play

Pen’ he himself directs the first performance of his plays and edits the script if necessary, this gives him first hand experience and that’s the reason of his scrupulous stage directions. Like Shaw he gives full descriptions of rooms, colours, lights, persons, vital properties on the sets, etc.

His plays are meant to be performed. He uses multilevel sets to introduce with many rooms in the house and the whole ambience is available to the audience and they can see things simultaneously happening at the same time. For his theatre is an art with specific function. For the spectators his plays are like a treat and a fulfilling experience. The use of proscenium is his mastery. The geographical locales collapse in his plays and the interior and exterior merges. *“In short, his settings are in pieces like the families who inhabit them.”*¹⁰

‘Seven Steps Around the Fire’ was written as a radio play, the stage directions are very precise. As it was meant for listening Dattani highlighted the use of sound.

In ‘Muggy Night in Mumbai’ Dattani uses dark expansive areas to show the innermost thoughts of the characters. The stage where, Kamlesh’ flat is shown it is divided into three acting spaces- the living room, beautifully decorated in ethnic fashion; the bedroom hidden behind a gauze wall somewhat mysterious and secret; and a completely non realistic set comprising three levels, dark and open. At the backdrop of this setting the Mumbai skyline can be seen. The partial view of the ‘Queen’s Necklace’ suggests that the flat is located in the upper market area of Marine Drive.

‘Do the Needful’ is yet another play where Dattani uses yet another experimental device is that is double dialogue. Through this technique the first reaction of the character is given as a ‘thought’; and then what the character actually says at the point is called as “speech”

‘Bravely fought the Queen’- In this drama Dattani has used very apt, subtle and suggestive symbols. If all the other plays of Dattani are considered at one hand and this particular play, ‘Bravely Fought the Queen’ is considered, this play will prove more impressive in the use of symbols. Overall it’s a symbolic play. It’s full of symbols and the provision for their multiple interpretations too. The most striking of all of them is of the symbol of ‘Bonsai’. Lalitha’s passion for growing Bonsai is symbolically reflective of her own mindset. The stunted growth and the ostentatious but useless fruits are the mindsets of many characters in the drama and around us in real life too! The quaint and attractive bonsai uncovers ugly and grotesque realities. The bonsai Sridhar keeps on the table at the office is a symbol of the distorted relationships both the brother have with their wives. Baa’s paralytic condition is highlighted by her wheelchair, though it is never used throughout the play. Jiten is carrying the emotional

baggage of the guilt in his mind, and the beggar woman represents it. The facemask that Dolly has applied and is careful that it should not crack by laughing but besides the precaution it cracks, this cracking is also symbolic. Earlier it represents the normal life of a housewife, but it cracks open and gives the audience a peep into the dark secrets of her life. This drama is the drama of falsehood and hypocrisy. Through the stage settings the living room is the made up face of the family, where every care is taken that it should not reveal to the audience. Reality is shown in the inner chamber of the house- and the center is the kitchen which is a place for real as well as fictional happenings, and Baa's bedroom which is upstairs indicates detachment from reality.

In 'Tara' Dattani has used a multilevel set. The lowest level occupies a major portion of the stage. It is used only when the scenes from the past and memory are to be staged. The stage settings here are very bleak and dark. The next level presents the bed sitter of the older Chandan. He takes every precaution so as to make the stage look real and the audience should feel that they are actually participating in the dialogue and identify with the characters. About this he opines,

D.M. 'The experiment with 'Proscenium', sets you apart from other dramatists, and adds a lot of theatricality and 'Performability' to your plays. Do you feel that our audience too should change their perspectives of going to the theater?

*M.D.- Audiences want to be challenged and are more than happy to look at different ways of exploring theatrical space.'*¹¹

Stage craft and stage directions-

He never appears to be didactic of straightforward rather he allows the drama and the situations created there to take their own time and hit the right place at the right time.

In 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' these are the stage directions,

"Sanskrit mantras fade in, the ones chanted during a Hindu wedding. Fire. The sound of the fire grows louder, drowning the mantras. A scream. The flames engulf the scream.

Interior- the office of the superintendent of police.

*Whirring of fan (stays throughout the scene.) Rustle of paper. Footsteps approaching."*¹²

These meticulous and subtle notes is the directors to direct a particular scene.

Dattani breaks up the theatrical/ dramaturgic space into interrelated, sacred zones which, in turn, help to build an integrated and collective theatrical experience.

Split stage: Over the years Dattani has used very skillfully the space of the proscenium. To show various rooms in a house, or office he uses multilayered stage sets that are accompanied by different lighting to highlight and enlighten a particular area at a particular time.

Detailed work on prop and costumes adds a lot to the performance. In 'Where There is a Will', different rooms in the play are shown thus where simultaneity is made sure and audience can watch all the characters at the same time and observe their actions and reactions. With this technique the proscenium is used to its fullest and it gives a feeling of watching a T.V. screen with different windows. To show flashbacks too he has used a particular area where the characters talk to themselves and indulge in the past memories.

Music-on and off stage-

D.M. The effective use of music in the play 'Tara' and 'Bravely Fought the Queen' is one of the techniques you have used very excellently, how this idea struck to you and how you executed it so superbly?

*M.D.- I am fond of music. I feel theatre is more akin to music than it is to literature. Music and drama are both temporal mediums, relying on time for their execution*¹³

In 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' audio effects are achieved with extensive use of sounds. Clang of gates, banging of metal plates, whirring of fan, etc. are used. In 'Bravely Fought the Queen', the Thumris of Naina Devi that are being played on the stereo system symbolize the urge for sincere and devoted, true love from the partner, it also evokes the need for fulfillment and acceptance which is felt by all the major characters in the play. By playing the thumris of Naina Devi Dattani echoes the example of heroism of the singer. Naina Devi fought against the oppressive patriarchal order of the day due to which she was called as a 'tawaif' or whore. The legendary woman was later on entitled as the queen.

In 'Final Solutions' 'a stone hit our gramophone table, breaking it. Krishna chose to destroy what I love most. My entire collection of records is broken lying about like pieces of glass. Shamshad Begum, Noor Jehan, Suraiya. The songs of the love that I had learnt to sing with. Those beautiful voices cracked.'

¹⁴

With dexterous use of chorus he has communicated the frenzied emotions related to communities and religion in Indian society.

The melodies of Beethoven and Brahms are very suggestive which alerts the audience about the erasure of memories. Because Beethoven was deaf when he created his major musical compositions. He was a great influence on Brahms too. This has the similarity in the influence of Tara upon Chandan. Tara identifies with Beethoven, As G.

J. V. Prasad Observes, 'she says that Beethoven must have been a passionate man but when told that she has been listening to Brahms' first concerto, she wants the record turned off. However, soon she wants it played real loud, because, 'Beethoven was never as good as this.'¹⁴(335), and asters her desire to lead a life which is not constricted by others' perception of her disability. '.... Music and Beethoven should alert us to the other thematic that runs through the play- not just how we treat the disabled, but how we view them and ourselves- our ideas of beauty and the personal aesthetic.'¹⁵

In this play further Dan's ultimate statement to Dr. Thakkar is about to quit his memory. 'Get out of my mind, you horrible creature! You are ugly and I Don't want ugly people in my memories.'¹⁶ Though Thakkar is normal but appears to be ugly to Dan because he caused the separation of this brother-sister duo.

Flashback (theatrical art) –Flashback is used as a necessity of the theme in Tara. Dan who is Chandan is tossing to and fro between past and present. All his memories are haunted by the injustice done to Tara in the past. Dattani's other plays like 'Thirty Days in September' also have Past Memories in its backdrop. Where the protagonist is a victim of child abuse. Every time on the verge of forming a new relation with any male she is uncomfortable, and cannot hold on that relation for more than thirty days. The past memories of abuse make her restless and develop self hatred as well as hatred towards all the male gender. In the play 'Bravely Fought the Queen' Baa remembers her past where she was bitterly beaten in the house by her husband. She speaks in hollow,

*'You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! (Jerks her face as if she's been slapped) No! No! Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? Not on the face. I beg you! hit me but not onaaaaah! (Covers her face weakly as her scream turns silent and the light on her face fades out).'*¹⁷

This indicates how baa is still disturbed by those horrifying memories from her past. The most striking part with Dattani's dramas is that 'memories' in his plays are so well crafted and organic.

Recurring imagery- Suggestive symbols continue to appear and reappear on the stage. In '30 Days in September' the image of Krishna appears many times and is referred to quite often. In 'Bravely Fought the Queen' the image of a stunted Bonsai keeps the audience attached to the image.

Monologues- his monologues are a challenge for the performer. In 'Brief Candle' the play that deals with the

trauma of cancer patients there is a monologue of one of the characters about her life before and after breast cancer. The waltz that was done during the monologue was like a cherry on top of the cake. The soliloquies in 'Where There is a Will' by Hasmukh Mehata are humorous and witty in nature.

Voice Over- 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' has a voice over device used.

*'UMA- Case 7.a brief note on the popular myths on the origin of the hijras will be in order, before looking at the class-gender-based power implications. The term hijra, is of course, of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi Persian and Arabic, literally meaning, 'neither male nor female.'...not for them the the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of May you be the mother of hundred sons.'*¹⁸

Language and length- The terseness of the spoken word and the silences loaded with volumes of meanings is the stylistic feature of Dattani. His unspoken silences are overflowing with profound meanings and undertones. In the play, 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' his use of the medium of language is very skillful. *Hizras* are treated very brutally by the society and it is very clear from the following dialogue,

Munswamy: you may see the hizra now if you wish. Madam.

Uma: Will she talk to me?

Munswamy : (Chuckling). She! Of course *it* will talk to you. we will beat it up if it does not.'¹⁹

Regarding his dramatic technique and thematic aspects of the play 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai' John Mcrae observes, 'each act builds to a climax of revelations and self discoveries. By the end of the play, Ed is seen as the most pathetic and self deluding by all characters, but Kamlesh too deceives himself and exploits others (the Guard for example). The photo of Ed and Kamlesh together becomes emblematic (again a typical Dattani touch) of all that was good in their love, but which has now turned, or been turned against that love.'²⁰

Characterization- Though mainly her character is revealed through narration is in not in need if any action.

Many of the characters are multidimensional, and it on through the situation that other aspects of their characters are brought to light. For instance the characters of Nitin, Jiten and Prafull, Maximum of the major characters of Dattani are struggling to be normal, to lead a normal life but the abnormality of life is so harsh upon them that they cannot afford the normalcy. His characters are fully rounded men and women. They are often questioning their identity and feel isolated in some way.

Dramatic irony- Irony is used in the play 'Tara', where Bharati, mother of Tara has already been shown of thrusting too much love on Tara and her health. Bharati always tries to make Tara strong and that she should be able to face the world boldly. Tara too is very much attached to her mother and asserts that she is strong because of her mother. The irony is that she doesn't know how much she owes her mother or how much her mother owes her. Tara's statement to Roopa that Chandan is writing a story about her –'Strong. Healthy. Beautiful'²¹– is ironic in more than one way: while Chandan isn't strong or healthy. Dan comes in right after his saying that Tara 'Never got a fair deal. Not even from Nature. Neither of us did.'²²

Metaphor- Tara is a play which has the most striking metaphors of all. Dattani uses the metaphor of Siamese twins in order to focus the male and female self. This suggest that in the words of Dattani, 'It (the cultural difference between man and woman) is an artificial difference... biologically there are polarities between the genders which is meant to seek the union of another, but the cultural polarities are artificial, and actually the boundaries hinder the natural unions of male and female whether its body-to-body or within oneself.'²³

Humour- Dattani uses very gentle and mild humour. He believes in laughing 'with' the characters rather than laughing 'at' the characters. At times he hits very hard and appears sarcastic, but a note of light humour runs through all his dramas.

Black Comedy- is a tricky genre and Dattani knew that before attempting it in 'The Big Fat City', 'We are not too familiar with this concept in theatre. Situations that have tragic consequences in our lives are usually approached with an appropriate degree of sobriety or decorum. But sometimes we say, feel or do the weirdest things. Things we would not approve of if we were to follow proper etiquette. As a director, I have revealed in my own script's ability to make me go beyond appropriate conduct and see how funny we all really are. Laughing at ourselves, we learn to come closer to the truth of our lives,'²⁴

In the play Tara, Roopa is the main source of humour. Dattani has used her as a comic relief she abates the grim reality and gloominess of the entire drama.

Foregrounding- By making the subaltern speak, mainstreaming the marginalised in the plays like 'Muggy Night in Mumbai', 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' and tackling the taboo issues like that of eunuchs he certainly raised voice and fore grounded the issues.

Setting- A close reading of the following paragraph will reveal how meticulous and exacting is Dattani regarding the settings. This is one of the reasons why he chooses to

direct the very first Staging of his plays. This conveys his ideas perfectly to the world.

'On A Muggy Night in Mumbai, 'The stage is divided into three acting areas. The first on a small flat, beautifully done up in ethnic chic fashion. A huge poster of Meena Kumari in Pakeezah offers relief to a stark wall. The windows overlook the Mumbai skyline and act literally as a window to the city with its glittering lights. The flat is too high up for the noise but the partial view of the 'Queen's Necklace' suggest that the flat is located in the upmarket area of Marine Drive, though not quite Pali Hill...'²⁵

The second area, a completely non realistic set comprising three levels, is black and expensive. Characters in this area are immediately suspended in a 'Shoonya' where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts.

Below this is Kamlesh's bedroom. The bedroom is realistic, but hidden behind a gauze wall, giving it some mystery and secrecy.

Lightings- Lightings in the plays creates the right ambience and increases the visual impact many folds.

D. M. Do you consciously plan the techniques or they 'naturally fall' in the course of your writing?

M.D.-I allow my natural sense of technique to take over.

Good technique is one that is imbibed and at the same time allows you to be creative.'²⁶

Thus a very sensitive medium of drama in the hands of an immensely creative person reaches to newer heights and the performative aspects are being chiseled to craft his own niche and a signature style of his own. In the years to come we will witness many such enthralling performances by the dramatist.

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