

## **Mahesh Dattani: A Pioneer in Contemporary Indian Drama in English**

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### **Introduction**

Indian writings in English have cut across the national, international and global boundaries touching the zenith of honour and glory. In the genre of fiction writing, poetry and prose writing, the names of Indian writers are much popular and award winning. Indian writings are maintaining a great canon of literature except drama. It is only in the genre of drama that we can't claim much acknowledged works on the international platform. Dearth of Indian Drama in English is one of the facts which strike even a cursory student of Indian literature. The present paper is focused on the contemporary Indian drama in English along with a brief historical description. The paper will highlight the contribution of Mahesh Dattani as a dramatist in Indian scenario. The thirty-eight-year-old Bangalore-based Dattani has published forceful plays like *Where There is a Will*, *Final Solutions* and *Tara*. He has received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to Indian drama. In a span of ten years, he wrote eight plays. Some of them are: *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Final Solutions*. Like Harold Pinter, he too wrote for the radio. *Do the Needful* is the first in the series of radio plays.

### **Review of Literature**

In the history of Indian drama, Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh are the only two writers who have made contribution to Indian Drama in English. Tagore's plays have been failures upon the stage because they are excessively symbolic-lyrical poetic plays. In his play like *Chitra*, *Post Office*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, Tagore has tried to impart new values and symbolic significance to ancient Hindu myths and legends. They are not successful stage plays. Aurobindo's plays are regular poetic plays, entirely unfit for the stage. In his plays *Perseus*, *The Deliverer*; *Rodogune*; *Eric*; *The Veziers of Bassora* he used the blank verse of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, which sounds artificial and unnatural in the modern age. Hence their failure on the stage.

Indian Prose Drama in English also suffers from these very faults. Harindranath's *Five Plays*, A.S.P Ayyar's *The Slave of India* Asif Currimbhoy's *The Tourist*, rise above ordinary conversation in their dialogue and are dull, drab, flat and artificial. There is too much of speechifying, too frequent intrusion of colloquialism and wrong use of Indian phrases and idioms. Pratap Sharma is one of those raw Indian dramatists whose plays *A Touch of Brightness*, are more successful dramatically. They are good acting plays. But there is too much of verbosity and irrelevancy in dialogue.

Gieve Patel's *Princess* is singularly free from these faults. He succeeds in giving his language a touch of the local idiom which therefore, is more refreshing and natural. It is a landmark in the history of Indian drama for in it the dramatist has successfully tackled the problem of dialogue. Nissim Ezekiel in his plays *Nalini* and *The Marriage Poem* is successful in his quality of dialogues. Another successful play by an Indian writer Santha Rama Rau is *A Passage to India*, a close adaptation of the well known novel of that name. She shows great dexterity in the handling of dialogue. Girish Karnad (1938) an actor and film director is originally a Kannada dramatist who wrote *Tughlag* and *Hayavadana*. He successfully translated *Tughlag* and *Hayavadana* into English. *Tughlag* is a

historical play which deals with life and times of Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq of the fourteenth century India. *Hayavadana* is based on the *Kathasaritesagara* tale which Thomas Mann used for his novel *The Transposed Head*. It is a bold experiment in the use of folk motifs.

In short, Indian literature continues to grow and flourish and this despite all the misguided and prejudiced and politically motivated campaign against English as a 'foreign' language, a language which comes in the way of its growth. More Indians are writing in English than ever before, and the Indian writer is enjoying a much wider market. Thus contemporary drama has, indeed, a bright future. Very recently Indian English drama has shot into prominence. Younger writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing. Incidentally, both Dattani and Padmanabhan do not write on the traditional subjects. Dattani writes about mean, ugly, unhappy things of life. Mahesh Dattani, one of the exponents of modern Indian drama, is a renowned playwright and an active theatre practitioner. He is responsible for successfully launching the Indian theatre in English. He has carved a niche for himself not only in India but also in the West with his British production of *Bravely Fought the Queen* under the aegis of Michael Walling's Border Crossings. Dattani's genius comes from the fact that he is versatile as an artist. He is an actor, director, and playwright, adept at dancing and has even done screenplay for many of the plays. This is the reason that he is India's first playwright writing in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award.

#### **Mahesh Dattani as a pioneer**

Dattani's plays are written for the stage. As poetry is meant to be read in order to enjoy, the plays are meant to be staged. It is the visual quality and dramatic effect which are of paramount importance. Dattani accordingly suits his material to the space, reshaping and fine-tuning his texts constantly. Plays of Dattani have been quite successful on the stage and have captured the imagination of the middle-class audience. Dattani has written significant plays: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *where there's Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Final Solutions*. Dattani is also a film director. He has directed the recently-released film *Morning Raga*, after the award winning film on alternative sexuality *Mango Souffle*.

Dattani's plays have a universal appeal. They can be staged anywhere in the world drawing full attention of the audience. Dattani moulds his subject in such a way that it is both topical as well as global. His plays speak across linguistic and cultural barriers. It may however be noted that these plays are essentially rooted in the Indian settings. Dattani makes an abundant use of Indian mythology, rituals and traditions and contemporary problems of India but he elevates these themes to higher level, touching the emotions of love, happiness, sexual fulfillment and the problem of identity. More than that, he is able to merge the past and the present as well as geographical locations. The most significant contribution of Dattani is perhaps his use of language. Dattani uses in his plays the kind of English as spoken by people in India. It has been appropriately said that the starting point of many of the greatest plays in history is the family. This idea has been so with the Indian drama as also with European drama. Like Mohan Rakesh, Dattani takes the family unit as the locale of his plays. Human relationships and the family unit have indeed been at the heart of Dattani's representation.

The plays of Mahesh Dattani 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," writes John McRae in his introduction to Dattani's plays, "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." (Souza p.163)



The various plays that he has written deal with some issues prevalent in the society and exposes it most honestly, it is sometimes a cause, a point of view, a sense of contemporaneity and a social message too. Plays like *Bravely Fought the queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Thirty Days of September* etc. deal with various issues like homosexuality, gender discrimination, women exploitation, communalism and child sexual abuse. In 1998, Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays* published by East-West Books, Chennai. The Sahitya Akademi Award citation says: '[Dattani's work] probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender...a brilliant contribution to India drama in English.'(Dattani)

His characters are rooted in the urban cosmopolitan setting of modern middle class India. His plays *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* are set up in the metropolitan city of Bangalore and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is set up in the city of Mumbai. Writing from the late 1980s, Dattani's plays, like Tendulkar's, question some of the norms and conventions of society. In the process interesting questions regarding gender and other issue like homosexuality, lesbianism, child sexual abuse, etc. are thrown up.

Dattani, like Shakespeare, writes for the theatre. Dattani is also similar to Bernard Shaw who gives full description of rooms, persons and vital actions. Dattani, like Shaw, uses the stage to condemn many of the drawbacks prevailing in the society. Ibsen, Shaw and Dattani are similar in the sense that all three of them have dealt with women's issues strongly and all three of them have tried to work for the cause of women.

### **Universal Themes in the plays of Dattani**

The best aspect of Dattani's plays is that they represent the contemporary society, mainly the urban society. Here Dattani can be compared to Bernard Shaw who also represented his society in his plays and exposed the evils prevalent at the time in his plays like *The Devil's Disciple*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *Candida*, *Pygmalion*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. He deals with issues which are very much a part of the educated urban society but the people do not want to confront them and Dattani provides a platform for these issues, so that the people are aware of the fact that they are a reality and not just the fantasies of a playwright. Dattani's plays can be said to have been inspired by Ibsen, the Father of Realism. Ibsen dealt with a number of social problems in his plays like *The Pillars of Society*, which deals with an incompatible marriage and *The Enemy of the People* deals with political and municipal corruption.

In the same way Dattani handles every problem from gender issues to sexuality. In his play *Tara* he deals with the issue of gender discrimination, in *Thirty Days of September* he deals with the impact of child sexual abuse, in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* he very boldly deals with the issue of homosexuality and in his award-winning play *Final Solutions*, he deals with the issue of communalism. Gay relations—homosexuality—is one of the issues that figures prominently in some of his plays. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with this sensitive subject. While the traditionalists consider such a relationship as something unnatural, obnoxious and even sacrilegious, the gays think otherwise. They are a happy and proud lot. They would even like to assert their true identity and sanctity.

The wedding music heard constantly in the background in the final Act is an ironic commentary on the lives of these homosexuals for whom 'marriage' can only be a doubly twice-four letter word.'(*The New Indian Express*).

Dattani's achievement as a playwright depends on the fact that his plays are a slice of life. They present reality as it exists. He writes about what he observes and an excellent example of his

observation is the play *Thirty Days of September*. Dattani wrote this play after being approached by the NGO-Rahi (Recovery and Healing of Incest). In this play he wished to show the impact of child sexual abuse for which he met seven or eight adult women who spoke to him about their childhood experiences where they were sexually abused by their own family members. In *Tara*, he presents before the audience the problem that even in an urban family living in a metropolitan city like Bangalore, the parents have their bias towards the son and the daughter is neglected even though she might be smarter than her brother.

Mahesh Dattani is the writer who boldly and unhesitatingly handles the issue of homosexuality in his plays. His play *Bravely Fought the Queen* is about women suffering due to the husband's misdoing and the involvement of one of the husbands into homosexual relationships. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is one play which portrays women exploitation by men since time immemorial. Writers like Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande have also portrayed the plight of women in their novels *My Story* and *That Long Silence*. Marriage as an institution nauseates Kamala Das because it legitimizes violence and gives men a legal control on women's bodies. Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* addresses marriage as "legalized prostitution" as the husband can do whatever to a woman's body at his own free will. *Bravely Fought the Queen* also presents the concepts of gay culture prevalent in big cities. In this way Dattani presents to us the grey realities of the urban families and the conflicts and dilemmas they face.

There's no topic which has not been handled by Dattani in his plays. One has to just think of it and Dattani has a play on it. Dattani is not only a playwright but also a theatre practitioner like Badal Sircar and his written text comes out best when performed in the theatre. His meticulous direction adds wonders to his written text as Mahesh Dattani believes that his work is complete only when it has been performed in front of the audience. In order to convey his message to the audience and the reader as well and to make them realize and accept that such things do happen in the society he does not restrict himself to using common Indian day-to-day abuses. While writing plays he explores both the masculine and the feminine self within him. This is why Dattani is held as "a playwright of world stature."

*Final Solutions* is just one successful play by Mahesh Dattani that handles one such social reality. Dattani has to his credit many other plays that depict other social issues in a bold new light. Dattani's plays are at once expressive, informative, persuasive and refreshingly enriching.

"The roots of Hindu-Muslim animosity are explored in this play which is set in an atmosphere of communal violence—Religious beliefs are put under the microscope and popular myths are exploded. The unstated comment seems to be: every religion is inherently oppressive."(Naik)

A reading of Mahesh Dattani's plays brings to the fore many burning issues that beset the post-Independence Indian society. A Patient review of some of these social concerns will greatly help in understanding and appreciating both the playwright and his predominately middle-class characters. It can be stated that every one of these central thematic issues stem from the opposition between tradition and modernity in perception of matters relating to core human relationship like love, sex, marriage and even faith. Discrimination against the girl child ( a microsm of the world of woman ) is handled boldly by Dattni in his play, *Tara*. The play deals with the courage and strong will of a handicapped Siamese twin who could have survived but for her mother's unwise and preferential decision to give up the extra leg to her twin brother, Chandan.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Mahesh Dattani through his plays focuses on many contemporary social issues. " 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 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 individuals"(The Hindu). This playwright/film personality 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.

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