

Mahesh Dattani as a Playwright

Mahesh Dattani is a well known craftsman of contemporary Indian English Drama. He has earned fame and respect all over the world. In India drama writing is an old art form representing tradition and culture. In the tradition of Indian drama Mahesh Dattani is a very powerful voice. He is a 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*. He has dramatized problems and issues of the modern urban Indian society ranging from communal tension, homosexuality, child sexual abuse, gender discrimination, marriage and career, conflict between tradition and modernity, patriarchal social system, constraints of hijjaras (eunuch), women, children labourer, interpersonal relationship, workings of personal and moral choices, identity crisis, revelation of past, the problems faced by HIV positives. He is the first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Final Solution*. *Tara* (2000) and *Thirty days in September* (2007) are awarded as the best productions of the year directed by Arvind Gaur. The play *Tara* deals with gender discrimination, *Thirty Days in September* tackles the issue of child abuse head on, and *Final Solution* is about the lingering echoes of the partition.

Dattani has an unconventional approach to theatre. He looks at the theatre as the medium to manifest the cause of the unprivileged segments of our society. His plays externalize the problems and pent up feeling of the subalterns in a very authentic and realistic manner. In his plays, Dattani visits untraversed and unexplored soil of homosexuals, HIV positive, eunuchs, physically challenged people etc. It is touching up radical themes like gay themes, child sexual abuse and eunuch etc. He has greatly expanded new horizons in Indian English drama. Mahesh Dattani started his own theatre group named Playpen in 1984. It can be interpreted as the manifestation of his abstract ideas and knowledge of art and dance.

In response, to the question whether he is distressed to see the problems that he is dealing with in his plays he replies "They invariably do. Social issues move me and I like to examine an idea from different angles". The complexities of human relationship and predicament of the modern men find due expression in his dramatic works. His dramatic techniques and stagecraft are superb. There are rapid shifts in terms of time and space. He has made use of different images, symbols, devices, techniques, etc. to communicate his ideas in a very effective and concrete manner. Dattani's theatrical genius is characterized by diversity, dynamism, and innovative urge. He is an unconventional voice in the theatrical firmament of India. He seeks to present volcanic dimensions of rage and resentment as well as distrust and discontent shrouded inside the psychological domain of human consciousness.

Dattani's entire composition and work might be observed as a ruthless attack on Indian male controlled society. He attained his initial setback by authorizing female characters in his maiden play *Where There's a Will* (1988). Sexual characteristics also occupy main character in his next production. *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* revolves around the women characters and their

brave attempt in the end. His other play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with the homosexuality characters. *Seven Steps around the Fire* represent the hijra girl and her secret marriage with the politician's son. Demonstrating the transgender society on play further adds to the range of unusual and strange characters portrayed by Dattani and emphasizes his enduring concern in aberration, relegated sexualities. *Final solutions* (1993), the play addresses the Hindu-Muslim split-up. 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. Mahesh Dattani has got a very strong urge and affinity for Indianness. He uses Indian dramatic devices, techniques etc. in a very ample measure. He has made sustained and sincere efforts for making stage befitting to Indian milieu. He uses Indian words profusely in his English plays. His characters are fond of using Gujarati dialogues. He has used a good number of Gujarati, Kannada and Hindi words in his plays. He is one of few dramatists who write their plays originally in English. He doesn't follow western dramatic canons.

English is a link language or contact language. At national and international level, it unites larger sections of society or civilization. About the use of English, he explains, "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 intends to develop theatre which can be understood and enjoyed by multi-lingual community of India and abroad. 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.

Tara is a kaleidoscopic image of an Indian family oozing with patriarchal values where the identity of a female exists only in terms of her relationship with men. Here a boy (Chandan) and a girl (Tara) are joined together at the hip since their birth, they are Siamese twins. The twins were born with three legs that were supposed to be operated surgically but this operation led to the death of one of the two. It is later revealed that the decision taken by Tara's mother left Tara crippled for life. Not only Bharati (Tara's mother) but also her father plays a fowl game of providing the third leg to the boy, influencing the doctor monetarily. This act not only leads Bharati towards insanity out of guilty in which she seems to compensate her daughter through excessive love. She says to her son: "I plan

to give her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give ...Love can make up for lot.” [349]

Even Chandan (Dan) is fighting back to find his own neglected self of himself. He says: “I have my memories... but now I want them back. To masticate my memories in my mind and spit out the result to the world in anger” [323, 324].The anguish of Tara is not only the discrimination her own mother inflicted upon her but the betrayal by a mother crushes her down deep inside. Tara gets disillusioned of her so called happy and caring family settings. This deepens the agony of Tara. She becomes petrified on the revelation that it was her mother who chose Chandan to be benefitted by the third leg in spite of the fact that the chances of survival of the leg were bright with Tara. Mr Patel in his conversation with his children:

“A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third led was provided by the girl ... The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive on the girl. Your grandfather and you mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I was not asked to come...I could not believe what she told me – that they would risk giving both legs to the boy. J[378]

The play ultimately draws our attention to the very fact that Tara is not the physically handicapped girl but who has been handicapped due to her gender.

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 sexuality abused by their own family members. 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.

A plot in drama grows out of characters. Since drama presents us directly with scenes, which are based on people’s interactions, characters play a pivotal role in the genre and thereby need a close scrutiny. The characters in the plays with their characteristic traits, create an indelible impression on the mind-sets of the audience apart from contributing immensely to the development of the plot. As Mahesh Dattani writes of the contemporary scene, the characters contain the modern sensibility. His characters are rooted in the urban cosmopolitan setting of modern middle class in India.

In Dattani’s plays there are no male heroes or female heroines. But there are central characters in his plays that are under the microscopic lens of the dramatist. In this sense they may be called protagonists. They are ordinary human beings who exhibit the crisis, meaninglessness, confusion, frustration, disintegration, bickering relationship and disillusionment of the twenty-first century. The characters display the gap between what the individual aspires for and the harsh reality of what he achieves what he professes and what he practices, what he really is and what he really would like to be taken for. Much more important is the revelation of the character through speech and action, through what the character says and what he does or does not do. In view of the limited number of

overt actions that can be represented on the stage, characterization by means of speech may be even more important than characterization through action. For, every dramatic feat of a character is driven by a strong motive. “Mahesh Dattani,” says Das “believes in the magic of the spoken word. . . .” (125) Dialogues disclose what a character thinks of other characters and how s/he feels towards them; the opinion of others expressed through dialogue throws light on own intelligence, judgment and ethical and cultural demands. And finally, the character’s speeches provide insight into his scale of values—selfish or altruistic, idealistic or cynical, moral or immoral, religious or secular—and reveal what values constitute his life-goal. In the preface to *Collected Plays* Dattani gives full credit to his characters and says, “Every time audiences (critics too!) have applauded, laughed, cried or simply offered their silence in response to some moment in the play, I am completely aware that it is my character that has done the work for me”.

Dattani creates conflicts of various sorts by setting up his “male and female characters against each other” comments Das. For example, when husband characters and wife characters confront each other in a verbal duel in Dattani’s plays, we come to know of their incompatibility. From the confessions they make, we understand that there are many social, cultural, economic, political, religious and personal issues on which they disagree with each other. Similarly, Dattani kindles conflicts between the aged and the young characters of the same sex to present his ideas on individual freedom, intergenerational gap, and tradition versus modernity. It is through such verbal arguments between the characters that are pitted against each other, that Dattani addresses several familial and social issues confronting the individuals indirectly because he has “a lot of things to say and I am not good at saying them well” (CP). As the conflicts unfold, the characters communicate through dialogues, their attitude towards life, personal ambitions, sacrifices, struggle, compromises, inner psychological conflicts and the way they try to cope with the life thus becoming Dattani’s mouthpiece on the stage.

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. This is why Dattani is held as a playwright of world stature.

Mahesh Dattani’s plays have a universal appeal. They can be staged anywhere in the world drawing full attention of the audience. He says theatre ceases to be an art form once it becomes dialectic. It is a powerful tool to examine and then translate what is around us. Through theatre he tries to bring change in the society and its set norms. In the true sense, Mahesh Dattani, the most unorthodox and contemporary playwright of Indian English drama has used the medium of stage to present the invisible issues to the audience as theatre is the mirror of real life. Alyque Padamsee calls him “one of the most serious contemporary playwright” (title page *Collected Plays* volume 1).