



MAHESH DATTANI - AN AUTHENTIC VOICE OF A CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PLAYWRIGHT

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After years of active urban usage and the homogenization of the English language in India, with audiences becoming more at ease with the different varieties of Indian English internalized and used without conscious meditation, Indian theatre in English started to emerge in the 1980s with a distinctive identity of its own. Mahesh Dattani is undoubtedly the most significant playwright to make this happen. Born in Bangalore on 7th August 1958, Dattani studied in Baldwin's High School and St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science, Bangalore. He recalled his experiences at these Christian institutions where the medium of instruction was strictly English and speaking in the vernacular was frowned upon. Dattani also refers to this in his interview:

[U]npleasant distinctions were made between the 'vernies' and the ones who were fluent in English. Snob values were inculcated early on and you generally, were made to feel privileged to belong to that school. We were taught English literature with a capital E! (Ayyar n.p.).

In fact, it was not till the end of the 20th Century and the arrival of Mahesh Dattani on the theatre scene in India, that English became the language of popular indigenous drama in India. In an interview given to Raj Ayyar in 2004, Dattani spoke about the general need for accepting English as an Indian language:

I really feel that people have to come to terms with the fact that English is an Indian language! Just as it is American or Canadian or Australian. We should celebrate the fact that India has this enormous capacity to absorb from all sources. This is exactly how we have survived colonization, unlike the poor Native Americans. We may claim to be rigid and pure, but we are the most flexible and impure of all races! The sooner we come to terms with that, we can get on with the rest (Ayyar n.p.)

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Even as a child, Dattani longed to be a part of the exciting world of drama for the popular Gujarati plays he saw during his childhood in Bangalore had left an indelible impression on his mind. Young Dattani was struck by the aura of the stage and the illusory world of the theatre and this stayed with him. Watching Gujarati and Kannada plays in his late teens, he realized:

I didn't know the world at my doorstep ... [...] Seeing] Gujarati theatre in Mumbai, I realized I had to unlearn a lot that I learnt in school. That is when my true education really began (Ayyar n.p.)

In 1984, he founded Playpen and began to look for Indian plays in English and not the usual Western canonical texts that were generally performed in Indian cities. Already confronting the essential problem that was enmeshed with the reception of such plays, Dattani chose colloquial English as his medium – a hybrid language that is spoken unobtrusively and in an uninhibited way, by his characters who are all essentially Indian. Dattani commented upon this and clarified his intention, thus:

Like many urban people in India, you're in this situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your hometown. And you use English to communicate, so you find that you're more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English [... but] I wanted to do more Indian plays [and that] became a challenge, because there weren't many good translations – or, there may have been good translations, but they did not do anything for me (Mee 22).

The English language used in Dattani's plays is thus contemporary, comfortably 'Indian' without any self-consciousness and pretension. Interspersed with native words that give his plays a definite local touch, his speaking characters come very close to the Indian audiences who watch his plays. Of course, given his chosen medium of expression, the language of his plays obviously restricts them from reaching a wider, more expansive, grassroots audience in India. But Dattani claims that he writes for the urban Indian upper and middle class audience and not for the working class audience:

The more your basic needs are taken care of, the more space you have to reflect on certain things. Whereas, if you don't have that space and are concerned 24 hours about your basic needs, then you want to escape into something else [...] (Vardhan n.p.)

In his plays, Dattani focuses on contemporary issues that affect middle class Indian life, like homosexuality, gender-identity and alternate sexuality, and he also highlights commonplace Indian attitudes towards communal differences and consumerism. Often these issues are veiled or masked or concealed behind facades that need to be penetrated, but these are nonetheless issues deep-rooted in a definite space and time and within a stimulating societal context. Most of his plays are constructed around social issues, though not written to pontificate on any specific 'message'. Dattani takes on the 'invisible issues' of Indian society and portrays them with both caustic truth and vivacity. By pulling out taboo subjects from under the rug and placing them on stage for public

discussion, Dattani induces his audiences to think over certain issues that they would have preferred not to come to terms with.

Dattani's plays are about the marginalized sections of our society – the minorities, women, gays and the eunuchs. His characters usually live on the edges and fringes of society and they, while not looking for acceptance, are often shown to be struggling to get as much fringe-space for themselves as they can. Dattani's plays can also be seen as relentless assaults on Indian patriarchy. He struck his first blow on patriarchal domination by empowering the women characters in his first play, *Where There's a Will* (1988). Dattani described the play as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. Women – be it daughter-in-law, wife or mistress – are dependent on men and this play “shows what happens when they are pushed to the edge” (Dattani, Vol 1 451). In a line rich with suggestiveness, he makes a mistress say of her benefactor, “He saw in me a woman who would father him.” (510) Indeed, the ‘Other’ woman, the conventionally maligned ‘keep’, turns out in this play to be a positive factor in stabilizing her former lover's family. The play also exposes the social corruptions of the nouveau riche and the dynamics of power and domination operational within a family.

Dance Like a Man (1989) amounts to being a multi-layered social commentary reflecting not only on the stigma that was associated with the dance form Bharatnatyam in the 1940s, but also with conventional notions of masculinity. Dattani raises in this play important questions on the very constituents of a man's identity – in terms of his sexuality, as the head of the family, and finally as an artist. The play makes us ponder on the constituency and the signification of the ‘other’, through the framework of gender and patriarchy-assigned gender roles. The play makes us confront the question:

Are we the liberal - minded persons we would like to believe that we are or do we blindly kowtow to unwritten laws of family conduct that is the easier path to take? (Dattani, Vol 1, 383).

Final Solutions (1993) foregrounds the Hindu – Muslim divide, the prejudice and the deep-rooted mistrust that lie just beneath the skins of our liberal, secular attitudes. The play presents different shades of the communalist attitude prevalent among Hindus and Muslims in its attempt to underline the stereotypes and clichés influencing the collective sensibility of one community against another. Yet the issue is not moralized, as Dattani shows that the demons of communal hatred are located not out in the street, but deep within us. *Final Solutions* is a disturbing play because it erases any comforting distance between the actors and the audience. The characters in the play think, speak and act as we do in a communal crisis. The play thus forces us to look at ourselves in relation to the attitudes that persist in the society. Dattani enables us to confront these questions:

Is life a forward journey or do we travel round in a circle, returning to our starting point? Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever-locked in combat ... Arabs against Jews, whites against blacks, Hindus against Muslims? Are there any final solutions? (Dattani, Vol 1 161).

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Seven Steps Around the Fire, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful* are pointers to Dattani's growing thematic preoccupation with alternative sexualities. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) shows 'civilized' society's brutality towards the hijras. In the play, Dattani focuses on the plight of the hijra or transsexual community by fashioning a plot that involves the killing of a hijra because she was having a relationship with a government minister's son. Representing the hijra community on stage further adds to the spectrum of different characters created by Dattani and underlines his abiding interest in non-normative, marginalized sexualities.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai and *Do the Needful* deconstruct the social construction of sexualities. These plays depict the lives of homosexuals – their struggles to come to terms with their own sexuality, their loves, longings, bondings and betrayals. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) speaks about honesty in a relationship and the importance of being what one is. It was the first play in Indian theatre to deal openly with the theme of gay love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is also about society's expectations of behaviour and it shows how individuals fall victims to those expectations. Dattani has a special talent for not only involving his characters but also his audiences in the tensions that are embedded in the social context of his plays, a technique whereby both his characters and his audiences are directly confronted with their own expectations and attitudes. In *Do the Needful* (1997) the heterosexual Lata who is in love with another man decides to marry the homosexual Alpesh, so that they can lead separate sexual lives, yet keep up the appearance of being a happy couple: a common compromise in a society that till as recently as 2009 had criminalized non- procreative sex.

Gender, patriarchy and contemporary social issues form the conceptual and thematic staples of the drama of Mahesh Dattani. In play after play he has highlighted the plight of the socially marginalized, the underprivileged and the unfortunate who have been victimized. A conscious dramatist deeply concerned with the flaws and defects in contemporary Indian society, he repeatedly brings to light aspects of human reality that are often obscured, hidden away, or ignored because they are regarded as shameful. As at least one critic has pointed out,

His plays articulate, hold up as to a mirror, the very instincts of protest we vitally emote with, share in or identify, even if without any strict, rigorous commitment or proactive involvement. Dattani's plays in short, project scenarios of dissidence and articulations of resistance and dissentience which are familiar to us, deeds and acts ... that we are either acquainted with or know to be enacted in the houses and streets of India today (Dhar 105).

Through his plays, Dattani tells us, his readers and audiences, that it is important for us to confront our instincts and prejudices, to acknowledge our limitations, our blindnesses and even the wrongs we may have committed in the past in our dealings with the other human beings around us. Such a confrontation, such an admission of failure and guilt, both personal and communal, is the only way we can become better men and women. And this confrontation is cued in by Dattani by exposing our minds and visions to the alternative realities that surround us. Indeed, it is because of

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this that Dattani puts on display the invisible realities that run counter to our understanding of whatever we accept as normative values. Undoubtedly, Mahesh Dattani is an authentic and realistic voice in the arena of contemporary Indian plays written in English.

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