

THE LIFE AND LITERARY JOURNEY OF MAHESH DATTANI

Professor Shilpa

Department of English , University college,
Bahadarpur (Mansa)

Abstract : This study explores the theatrical oeuvre of Mahesh Dattani, one of the most significant contemporary playwrights in Indian English theatre. Dattani's works, deeply rooted in the urban milieu of modern India, address critical social issues including gender identity, sexuality, family conflicts, and marginalized voices. Growing up in a Gujarati household in Bangalore, his personal experiences of cultural duality between traditional expectations and modern aspirations shaped the thematic core of his plays. From his early training in Bharatanatyam and theatre to the founding of Playpen, Dattani developed a unique dramatic style blending Indian performance traditions with Western theatrical techniques. Notable works such as *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Dance Like a Man* reflect his bold engagement with taboo subjects, including communal tensions, homosexuality, gender roles, and child sexual abuse. His innovative use of non-linear narratives, spatial dynamics, code-switching, symbolism, and psychological realism established him as a pioneering voice in Indian drama. Recognized nationally and internationally—most notably as the first English-language playwright to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award—Dattani's contributions extend beyond his plays to mentoring emerging artists and reshaping Indian theatre to address urgent social questions while retaining artistic integrity. **Keywords**:- Consumer trust, Digital consumer behaviour, Online reviews, Consumer ratings, Trust perception, Electronic word of mouth, Online purchase decision, Digital consumer behaviour, Influence of reviews.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani; Indian English theatre; gender identity; sexuality; urban drama; marginalized voices; *Dance Like a Man*; *Tara*; *Final Solutions*; Bharatanatyam; postcolonial theatre; LGBTQ+ representation; communal tensions; psychological realism; modern Indian drama

1.0 Introduction

The works of Mahesh Dattani are mainly based on the urban settings and on the issues of gender identity, sex and family life. Mahesh Dattani who grew up in a middle-class Gujarati household of Bangalore, imparts to his plays the sensibilities of contemporary urban India where the traditions pit against the aspirations that are modern in nature. His studies of the English literature and the dramatics as his profession have influenced his artistic vision greatly allowing him to create complex stories that are contrary to the current societal norm and can be understood by different people. Mahesh Dattani have become notable voices of modern Indian drama – as far as representing marginalised communities is concerned. The biographical information provided here is not only informative but also crucial contexts for reading the thematic issues and the narrative strategies of their plays.

Mahesh Dattani was born in Bangalore, which now is Bengaluru, on August 7 1958. He is from a Gujarati family who had migrated from Gujarat to Karnataka. His family background gave him an experience that mixed the conventional values of the household of Gujarati along with the cosmopolitan culture of Bangalore. This cultural bifurcation would later reflect on his dramatic writings, specifically on discussions on identity and belonging. His father Laxminarayan Dattani, was a business person who dreamt of having his son succeed him on his business as was the tradition. This expectation early created a tension in Dattani's life to reconcile between family obligations and his personal aspirations in what became a recurring theme of many of his plays, especially in "Dance Like a Man".

His early years were influenced by his education in Baldwin Boys' High School, one of the best schools in Bangalore, India, through which he was in touch with English literature and the theatrical arts from the West. It was incubated through school plays, cultural activities, even if the passion for theatre was not initially accepted by the family. Having finished his schooling, he went on to earn a Bachelors' degree in History, Economics and Political Science from the St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. The academic surrounding in St. Joseph's with focus on critical thinking and analytical skills molded Dattani's intellectual style, equipping him with methods to analyze social setups and human behavior.

While in college, Dattani started to become more interested in the aspect of performing arts and taking part in different theatre plays. However after his graduation, he yielded to his family expectations and joined the family business and worked as the manager of his father's company, Latours Private Limited. This time of loyalty to the expectations of the family, while at the same time having the emotion for the arts, is a representation of the inner conflicts that most of his characters go through as they are between societal norms and individual desires. The dualism of his experience –hanging between the spheres of business and art-gave Dattani observations on the complexities of human relationships and social demands which he would later use as the materials of his dramatic work.

2.0 Education and Theatrical Training

Dattani's official debut into the theatre was rather late, but once he had decided on theatre, his passion to learn was frantic. After spending some years in the family business, he decided to seriously focus on his passion in dance and drama. He studied classical Indian dance form, Bharatanatyam, under the tutelage of Chandrabhaga Devi and Krishna Kumar in Bangalore. Not only did this training present a greater understanding of the traditional Indian performance arts to him, this training allowed him to understand the rigid gender norms associated with the classical dance forms in which male dancers tend to fall victims to prejudice and skepticisms. His experience, being a male Dancer in an industry that was historically female dominated would later play a part in influencing incidence of his most acclaimed plays namely "dance like a man" .

Dattani's inquisition of theatrical knowledge made him attend workshops and training programs on acting and direction in the early 1980s. He went to the Suryodaya Theatre Institute in Bangalore and learnt several theatrical techniques and traditions. His education in theatre was further augmented by his attendance to the workshops conducted by the reputed directors and playwrights of India as well as outside India. These various influences set the stage for his distinctive dramatic vision that integrates the Western dramatic structures with Indian content and background. The training that he received in both classical Indian dance and modern theatre gave him a lush artistic lexicon that would translate into his staging and performance .

The fact that Dattani decided to pursue post-graduate studies in the particular field of drama and theatre studies also indicated his determination to undergo professional training in theatre. This formal education provided him with the general knowledge of dramatic theory, techniques of stages and the context of theatrical history. Such diverse trainings in classical Indian dance, contemporary methods of acting and theoretical studies, all contributed to the formation of his characteristic directoral style and dramatic senses. The juxtaposition of the traditional Indian performing arts and the Western theatrical processes in his education stands for the cultural hybridity that can be found in many of his plays in which the playwright examines the frictions between the tradition and modernity in modern-day Indian society .

3.0 Founding of Playpen and Early Theatrical Work

Inspired by his love for theatre and need to establish a platform for the dramatical experiment, Dattani formed Playpen – a theatre branch in Bangalore in 1984. Playpen meant a lot more than just the first theatre, rather it was a great turning point in his career, as he got an opportunity to experiment in his artistic ideas, improve his directing and playwriting capabilities. Within the case of Playpen, Dattani started producing and directing plays, working with adaptation of works by the foreign playwrights like Beckett, Shaw, and Tendulkar at first. Those early productions gave him freedom to experiment with various theatrical styles and techniques and establish a reputation of innovative and fine quality performances.

Playpen soon became an influential force to be reckoned with on the theatre landscape of Bangalore, noted for its dedication to testing socially meaningful subjects and overriding the nation's traditional concept of theatre. The productions carried by the group were marked by the professional level, intelligent direction, and readiness to touch upon the topics that raised doubts. Playpen allowed Dattani to build a collaborative platform that would enable actors, directors, and technicians to join forces in order to produce meaningful theatrical performances. The workshops and training programs by the group also helped in developing theatrical talent in Bangalore, making Dattani not only a creative artist but also a devoted teacher and mentor.

Dattani's change from the direction of plays written by other authors to development of his own dramatic pieces occurred at the end of the 80s, when the writer felt himself urged to communicate his own views in original terms. His debut original play, "Where There's a Will" (1988) established the mood of his future work with its sarcastic look at the patriarchal family settings and the collision of the old values and the new wishes. The play based on the struggle for control between the dominating father and the family that tries to gain freedom from his grasp even after his death, which did happen despite his request, is a reflection how an Indian middle class family is observed keenly and how one can joke about real social problems. The play "Where There Is a Will"

became a success due to which Dattani continued to write till she became one of India's prominent playwrights in English.

4.0 Major Works and Themes

Mahesh Dattani theatrical body of works extends over three decades and covers a very broad spectrum of issues, problems and topics, but among the all things earnestly addressed by the author there are, primarily, the issues of gender, sexuality, family relations, and social prejudices. Psychological depth, complex characters and subtle analysis of human relationship are features of his plays. One of his greatest works is "Tara" (1990) – a strong play that utilizes the story of conjoined twins, a boy and a girl, whose separation via the medical operation takes place in favor of the male child. In this heart-wrenching story, Dattani carries out an expose of the underlying orientation towards male offspring in Indian society that requires sacrifices by female children.

Dattani's another milestone work, "Final Solutions" (1993) relates to the theme of the communal tensions in India. The play elaborates the prejudices present within the Hindi and Muslim communities through the story that goes up several generations of a family and against the backdrop of communal riots. Dattani calls complex narratives by presenting multiple perspectives and time periods and challenging such simple religious identity and communal harmony notions. The novel play staging whereby the audience is engaged in the communal divide, makes it a strong theatrical art that demands viewers reprimand their own biases and prejudices. "Final Solutions" won Dattani the Sahitya Akademi Award back in 1998 becoming the first English language playwright to win this award .

In "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" (1998), Dattani blazed a trail in Indian theatre because he discussed homosexuality, and LGBTQ+ people's hardship in a world where same-sex relations are illegal and scorned with. The play is based on a group of gay men living in Mumbai, trying to negotiate for personal relationships, societal calls, and internal demons. By telling their stories, Dattani examines the effects of growing up in a heteronormative society where queer individuals have to conceal their identity and adhere to the traditional norms. The frank portrayal of homosexual relationships and the critique of hypocritical society struck right into the conservative sensibilities and opened spaces in the Indian theatre for discussions on sexuality and human rights.

One of the most popularly-performed plays by Dattani, "Dance Like a Man" (2000), explores the roles of genders and societal expectations by following the story of a Bharatanatyam dancer, a male practitioner of an expressly feminine art form in which he faces mockery and resentment. The play stretches for three generations and, through the text, we can see how gender norms are maintained and even questioned throughout a family. In the struggle of the protagonist to be a male dancer, Dattani challenges traditional perspectives of masculinity and confines of strict gender roles. The way the play has explored art, identity, and generational conflicts has had considerable success both in India and around the world with many productions being staged and a film adaptation.

Other important works by Dattani are "Bravely fought the Queen" (1997), which focuses on the hidden dysfunctionality of a normally respectable middle-class family. "Thirty Days in September" (2001), a vivid drama of child sexual abuse in families and "Seven Steps Around the Fire" (1999) – the play that points out the relegation of hijras in Indian society, that is, transgender/intersex people. These plays reflect a clear mission of Dattani to give voice to the marginalized and speak out about taboo subjects in Indian theatre, which forces people to see uncomfortable truths and re-examine the norm in society (Neela Meghan, 2007).

5.0 Theatrical Style and Techniques

The main features of the dramatic technique Mahesh Dattani is that its original staging, psychological realism, significant usage of theatre devices to present complex social and emotional idea. Non-linear narratives from the past to the present are an integral part of his plays, showing how history and memories inform the current situation. Such temporal flexibility enables Dattani to look for ties between private histories and far larger social problems and to understand the ways in which individual lives are impacted by cultural milieus and historical events. This technique results in a multi-layered narrative in such plays as "Final Solutions" and "Thirty Days in September," which shows the long-lasting effects of trauma and prejudice from generation to generation.

The spatial dynamic is of utmost significance in Dattani's theatrical view and many of his plays contain the multi-leveled set, which represents different space or mental state. For example, in "Tara", the stage is set up in sections to reflect various periods and locations and thus romantic transitions between narratives' strands. Similarly, in "Bravely Fought the Queen," the stage is separated between the living room and the office which is a visual depiction of separation of domestic and professional spheres. Such spatial arrangements manifest Dattani's comprehension that physical environments shapes human behavior & connections, in addition to

functionalities in the presentation of complex narratives.

Usage of language and dialogue in Dattani's plays captures linguistic plurality of urban India and no one switches between English and Indian languages as a matter of course depending on situation and emotional condition. This code-switching reflects the current Indian communication reality and this adds on a social class and education marker and cultural identity. Dattani's dialogue is described for its naturalism and psychological precision of capturing everyday speech so as to reveal the complexities of human relationships and the dynamics of society. That he is able to produce unique voices on different characters from varying age groups, genders and background illustrates his keen observation of human behaviour as well as his war craft as a dramatist.

Through the use of symbolism and metaphor, Dattani's dramatic language is enhanced with layers of meaning to his narratives. In "Dance Like a Man", the Bharatanatyam dance is a symbol which represents creative expression, the question of gender and cultural tradition. In "Tara" physical division of the conjoined Twins is a metaphor of the social division of gender roles and expectations. These symbolic elements heighten the verisimilitude of Dattani's plays so that he is able to raise complex social issues onstage by way of suggestive images. His effective deployment of dramatic techniques produce performances that provoke critical thinking about the social set-ups around them, while at the same time entertaining the audiences .

6.0 Recognition and Critical Reception

Mahesh Dattani's work in Indian theatre has made him attract much attention within the country as well as internationally. His highest reward was in 1998 when he got the Sahitya Akademi Award for "Final Solutions" thus becoming the first play writer in English to receive such award. This award though, from India's national academy of letters, was a watershed moment for English- language theatre in India, its staking of a presence within India's literary space. Apart from this giant award, Dattani has won several other accolades and recognitions for his theatrical work, such as the Playboy Award won for his "Dance Like a Man" and rave reviews for many of his performances.

Dattani's plays have been acclaimed for performance widely both in India and overseas in the areas of United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. His works have been translated to several Indian languages helping spread it out from the English-speaking population. Particularly, the international reception of Dattani's plays has been noteworthy, which points to the positive criticism of how he manages to speak on universal human concerns allowing certain insights into modern Indian reality. His plays have found their place in the academic curricula at various universities globally as important texts for learning about the postcolonial theatre and South Asian literature.

Critical reactions about Dattani's work have largely agreed with his experiment in theatre and his daring to write about controversial issues in the society. His plays have been conducted in different theoretical approaches, such as gender studies, postcolonial theory, and performance studies. In regard to critics, they have highly appreciated his rich development of marginalized identities and the subtle examination of relations of power in Indian society. Whereas some conservative sections of the Indian society have on certain occasions, rebuked him for his bare description of taboo subjects like homosexuality and child sexual abuse, the general criticism has mostly appreciated the artistic value and social relevance of his theatrical endeavors.

Dattani's influence goes out of his own creative work as he becomes a teacher, mentor, and a spokesperson of contemporary Indian theatre. He has run workshops and directed theatrical productions all over India and abroad, thus exposing his knowledge and expertise to the up and coming theatre practitioners. His plays are examples to a new generation of Indian playwrights working in English about how theatre can address urgent social problems yet still have artistic integrity. Via all these channels of influence, Dattani has left an indelible mark on the evolution of modern Indian drama, especially to the emaciated community and the taboo topics.

7.0 Reference

- i. Agarawal, Dr., and Sarika Dubey. "Social Issues in the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar." In *Perspectives in Indian Drama in English*, edited by Gopichand P. and Nagassusela P., Aadi Publications, 2012.
- ii. Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Book Enclave, 2015.
- iii. Bhadury, P. "A Note of Integration in Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* against Religious Differentiation." *Rock Pebbles*, September 2020.
- iv. Bhagat, Chetan. *Making India Awesome: New Essays & Columns*. Rupa Publications India, 2015.
- v. Dattani, Mahesh, and S. Pillai. *Challenging Religious Communalism with Theatre*. 2012.

- vi. Davidson, James. "It's Only Fashion." *London Review of Books* 16, no. 22 (November 24, 1994). Accessed November 7, 2019.
- vii. Escherle, N. A. "Religious Alterity and Violence in Contemporary Anglophone Novels by Indian and Pakistani Writers." Doctoral dissertation, Universität Bern, 2013.
- viii. Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. Verso, 2015.
- ix. Gatt, D. "Will There Ever Be a Final Solution? Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* Revisited in the Light of Communal Divide." *International Journal of English and Literature* 3, no. 6 (2012).
- x. Gokhale, Shanta. "The Dramatists." In *Concise History of Indian Literature in English*, edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Permanent Black, 2016.
- xi. Jha, C. K. *Echoes of the Grim Horror of Partition in Indian English Fiction*. Blue Rose Publishers, 2020.
- xii. Kulkarni, Purnima. "Reconsiderations of Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire: Enthusing, Enlightening and Empowering Eunuchs*." In *The Theatre of Mahesh Dattani*, edited by Mohini Khot, Aadi Publications, 2015.
- xiii. Menon, Jaswant. *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- xiv. Mubarak, S. *Dramatizing Power and Resistance: Images of Women in Pakistani and Indian Alternative Theater*. 2015.
- xv. Multani, A. "Forgiveness Is the Only Final Solution: A Reading of the Play 'Final Solutions' by Mahesh Dattani." In *Forgiveness: Promise, Possibility, & Failure*, edited by M. W. P. Fortes, Brill, 2012.
- xvi. Puri, Jyoti. *Sexual State, Governance and the Struggle over the Antisodomy Law in India*. Orient Blackswan, 2016.