

A Critical Study Mahesh Dattani Plays

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What does one mean when one refers to 'Indian theatre' spattered India's cultured fabrics. "A closer look at theatre in India from the times of the emergence of Sanskrit drama and its traditions, or the folk performance still current in rural India is, however, beyond the span of this study. Our attempt will be to assess the place of *modern Indian* theatre that is predominantly urban, manifestly influenced by Western traditions even as it tries to find its own feet, still evolving and searching for a distinctive identity.

This drama, nonetheless, is part of the larger 'Indian theatre', decidedly influenced by, and drawing inspiration from many of its traditional forms. To narrow down our focus further, we shall look at the place of English language drama in postcolonial India, a genre that unfortunately, (until recently) retains a somewhat mongrel nature, especially so when one juxtaposes it with the flourishing tribe of Indian novelist who write in English".¹ Indian theatre decidedly complex and difficult to encompass, has displayed different types of folk culture, traditional songs, instrumentation, puppet shows and Indian myths. Given such a situation, it is hardly possible to fit this convergence in to neat categories of western theatre and performance that a student of western literatures wants to do, although it is possible to find working categories within its own socio-historic and political ambit within its own tradition.

Indian theatre has emerged predominantly with Sanskrit drama and its tradition on the folk performance. Modern theatre in India is not a rural phenomenon. Its owes its origins to the growth of large urban settlements like Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. By the time India finally achieved independence; theatre had been struggling to survive in the face of the tremendous popularity of cinema. Modern theatre in India as however come on long way, Indian society headlights different types of movies by radical departures, heterogeneous or homogenous, there are three categories of theatre in our country - Professional Theatre, Amateur Theatre and Experimental Theatre.

Professional Theatre – In Calcutta, perhaps the hub of this form substantial employment is generated though art and entertainment. The star, Circarena, Rangmahal, Minerva, Rangana, Bijon, Tapah, Muktangan are a few examples of theatre that is self-sustaining and active , and an audience that is faithful . *Amateur Theatre- In fact, the scenario is such that one could easily venture to say that mostly all modern Indian theatre is amateur urban theatre. This theatre works only because those who participate in it do so knowing full well that there would be no question of actually earning a livelihood through theatre. Experimental Theatre – While experimental theatre is not absolutely different from serious amateur theatre, there is a slightly distinctive category that seems to have emerged with the work of a few serious practitioners.*² The political street theatre of Badal Sircar in Kolkata, who delineates its some major characteristics in his book, the third theatre (1978), and that of Safdar Hashmi in Delhi has left a strong imprint upon contemporary performance.

Mahesh Dattani has achieved international name and fame as a playwright. He is a versatile genius. He is at the peak of his creative powers, continuously experimenting with new forms and manners of expression. Dattani

*is one of the Indian's emerging playwrights, whose expectations of his audience is high.*³ Dattani, being an experimentative and enterprising dramatist, takes up radical issue of the homosexuality. Dattani had an intense **Mango soufflé** design to direct. Such a film on a **Muggy Night in Mumbai** struck a chord.

Mango soufflé is a cinematic re-origination on a **Muggy night in Mumbai**, there is no change in characters and themes etc. Kamlesh, Sharad, Kiran, Prakash, Deepali Banni and Ranjeet are the characters in the play. The theme of homosexuality finds no alteration in the film. Dattani exhibits the contemporary issue in his plays in an honest and sincere way. He doesn't attempt to display himself as a scholar. He adopts all those techniques and devices which impart a touch of reality, universality and systematically.

Mahesh Dattani has narrated different plays through interior and exterior world. He explains mental space and mental flashback of the society. He has also depicted passionately love in the modern society. Dattani's most of the characters are the homosexual either gay or lesbian. He has described different urban and rural issues in the play. His invisible issues are homosexual, eunuch, child sexual abuse, gender discrimination, social apathy and massage parlour towards the marginalized etc. There is a beautiful combination of rural and urban life depicted in his plays.

It is essential to note here that Mahesh Dattani generally describes post modern issues in his plays. Most of his plays are deeply rooted in issues related to urban milieu and social taboos. Human life is rationed by the destiny and God. Human self is at constant struggle with the collective forces of selves. Dattani has encountered between individual self with hostile surroundings. He is universally acclaimed as one of the great playwrights in modern India. Born on 7 Aug 1958 in Bangalore. He studied in Baldwin's high school and St. Joseph College of arts and science, Bangalore. He is a graduate in history, economics and political science. He did his postgraduate in marketing and advertising managements. He worked as a copy writer in an advertising firm and later on joined his father in the family business. About his interest in Drama, Dattani says "**the love of my life drama and I want to write more plays**" that explains the true dedications of this playwright for drama and theatre. He has established theatre group Playpen in 1984. He remained associated with BBC radio and worldwide popular plays. Dattani is not only a good director but also a good actor, dancer, teacher and more importantly good thinker.

Dattani has selected theme of gender discrimination, communalism and homosexuality. Therefore, Dattani like **W. Shakespeare, John Osborne** and **G.B. Shaw**, his thematic presentation is having universal approaches and applications. But Dattani's plays present the contemporary society and its problems in the fashion of **Ibsen's** realism. Dattani has established vibrant, new thematic techniques and all kinds of themes seriously concerned with contemporary society raising him as a playwright of world stature in the contemporary Indian English drama.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most innovative playwrights of Indian English drama. He is a versatile theatre person. He has directed and acted many plays. He first performed his play at his Playpen. Theatre also made his Directorial debut with **Mango Soufflé**. He has besides authored a film script, **Ek Alag Mausam**. Most of his plays are directed by himself. As a director, Dattani is par excellence. His plays have been performed successfully to public and critics. Moreover, he has written plays for the BBC radio and most of his radio plays have been aired on BBC radio.

Dattani is very prompt and passionate for the stage production of his plays. He performs the plays as soon as the writing of the script of the play is over. He puts-

*“I always direct first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instruction, which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors. There is no conflict, and the other directors can interpret, as they will”.*⁴

Mahesh Dattani is India’s first playwright in English to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for his ‘Final Solution and other plays’ in 1998. Dattani is one of few dramatists who write their plays in English. English is a link language or contact language at national and international level. He wants to globalize the Indian stage and theatre through his English plays, but he does not follow western dramatic cannons. Therefore, Mahesh Dattani incorporates several aspects of his own life into his plays; His earliest influences are non- detailed text of Shakespeare and BBC recordings of Shakespeare’s plays with heavy English accents.

Dattani’s achievement is to make that Shakespearean mirror reflect society and characters which audiences can believe in, and can see themselves in for a moment. The audience or reader can identify with the crises and conscience of others, on the stage, in that vast space of the universe that the dramatist creates. To use Wilde’s words from his preface to the picture of Dorian Gray, **“The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium”**⁵ Dattani has convincingly made himself of his chosen medium.

In this world we glimpse great insights by flashes of lighting and art is frequently our means of reaching such insight and illumination. Dattani’s plays give us time and again the joy of these great flashes. He has described mental weakness of the human being. The artist gives us those flashes of lighting, those movements, scenes and dramas of illumination in his own personal and individual way. The essence of theatre lies in the transitory nature of the art of performance. We are lucky that we can see ourselves in these flashes in the plays of Mahesh Dattani; it is even a grater privilege to recognise how we live in the flicker.

Dattani has described realistic and poignant conditions of the exploitations at various stages in the advertising world in the way that it into the domestic scenario. At the end of the day what is important is the profit motive of the manufacturer, the owner of the means of production and Ad agency that thrives because of it. Selling has been glamorized and in the Ad world women are used to sell women for men. Dattani choice of the advertising agency as a patriarchal construction, the sale of products for women and women as targets for the male gaze is apt. It reveals the complete inadequacy of a capitalist economy to create a space for women as primary consumers.

Dattani’s play challenges society’s stereotypical constitutions of female and male identity. He has described men and women’s divergent pictures of heroism. He has revealed loyalty and exposed disloyalty of human beings. He has favoured the freedom and liberty reflected through his protagonists. Dattani has marginalised flashback of the society.

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