

Culminating a Confluence of Cultures: A Study of Dattani's Plays

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Mahesh Dattani is a modern Indian English playwright who has successfully staged his plays in India and abroad. He maintains himself among some notable playwrights and directors such as Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and, Mahesh Elkunchwar, who contributed much to the growth and development of play scripts and transhistorical and modern interculturalism. They also juxtaposed various strands of Indian culture simultaneously in their works.

Dattani is a socially committed artist. He writes about the real life situation of Indian society – a society which poses to be Indian by heart and soul and desires to be slave of Western culture for it is lashed with liberty, freedom and fraternity. All his plays are about the different social concerns. His plays exemplify the artistic blend of Indian and Western cultures and concerns.

The dramatic works of Dattani depict different mental states, emotions and ideas, desires and aspirations, strengths and weakness, basic moral and social questions as well as individual predicaments. They also present a many-layered, fascinating picture of the social, political, economic and cultural life of present times. Plays like *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) and *Thirty Days in September* (2001) are glorious works that would bring credit to any literature. For their keen insight, delicate aesthetic sense, structural skill, variety, dramatic and theatrical quality of the language, and excellence of stagecraft, they have a distinct place in world dramatic literature. In almost all his plays he has tried to bring on the forefront the different aspects of Indian culture and class conflict.

Dattani's plays celebrate the modern Indian nation's cultural heterogeneity. They exhibit a visible and desperate development, both in terms of performance aesthetics and politics of representation. They differ from their predecessors in the choice of subject matter and dramaturgic practice. According to the Indian view of life, the purpose of Drama and theatre was to create a feeling of pleasure or bliss (Rasa) by delineating different situations, mental status and feelings of human beings. The purpose of western drama on the other hand, was to reveal the struggles of life in their various forms. The western Drama and theatre entered India as elements of the culture of the conquerors, which, in a well-planned manner deliberately tried to prove that when compared to the western the Indian culture was inferior, trivial and undeveloped. Dattani's plays are tremendously the amalgamation of both.

A culture means ideational aspects of the social life we live, experience and observe. It includes artistic, philosophical, the inherited artefacts, ideas, habits and values, knowledge and belief, law, morals, customs, and all other capabilities and habits acquired by men as members of a society. It also embraces languages, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, and images. Thus, culture is complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

India is a land of plurality whether it is the question of culture or language. It has diverse cultures, religions, customs, classes, and languages bearing golden heritage and universal appeal. Culture in India is a beautiful blend of diverse ethnicities, customs, traditions, and

religions (all are the parts of culture) which all together portray an inimitable image of the nation having unity in diversity.

Dattani has realistically dramatised the Indian social concern and culture. The cult that Dattani has followed in his plays has been fully Indian, which is the secret of the success of his plays. In Dattani's Plays human relationships and family value play important role. What is important is that they preserve Indian values. In *Where There's a Will, Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions*, *Do the Needful*, and *Thirty Days in September*, Dattani takes the family unit as the locale. The plot of *Where There's a Will* revolves around the life of a rich businessman, Hasmukh Mehta and his family. Though, it begins with the patriarchal attitude of Hasmukh for which he "forgoes an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationships." (Chaudhuri: 67) but ends with the beginning of a new era in which there will be no patriarchal dominance and which will lead ultimately to the improvement of interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, Kiran Jhaveri, a mistress of Hasmukh being nominated as the Trustee of Hasmukh's property after his death forges establishes a good understanding and interpersonal relationships with Hasmukh's wife, son and daughter-in-law with the family members of Hasmukh. The fact gives base to the Indian traditional belief that a woman can be a real caretaker of home for the establishment of harmony. *Dance Like a Man* reflects the thrust of ambition for himself or herself and their children within the boundary of family unit. *Tara* is the most beautiful family play. Though "Tara is a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is male." (Dattani: 2000:319) But Chandan's love and emotion for his sister Tara preserves the core of Indian spirit. Dan, who is nobody but Chandan himself writes Tara's tragedy is that of Chandan himself as he says, "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy." (Dattani: 380)

Bravely Fought the Queen is a multi-layered story of an Indian joint family and "Dattani like a skilful surgeon peels off, layer by layer, the sham that covers patriarchy to expose the dysfunctionality of traditional gender roles." (Mandal: 39-40)

In *Do the Needful*, Dattani deals with the traditional theme of marriage. The marriage negotiation of Alpesh and Lata indicates the changing trend of Indian society in which marriages take place across castes are permissive and sometimes preferred. The dominance of modernity, rationalism in socio-cultural realm of life and milieu gives birth to the inter-caste marriage. In spite of these realities, Dattani, for all the time, is worried of the deterioration of Indian culture. Though the play has been written for the British audience, he chooses the Indian setting and the Indian system of arranged marriage, which bears wider and universal significance for it weaves multicultural society. Further this play deals with cultural conflict, doubt and bias as well as unification of two families – one Gujarati (Patel's family) and another Kannadiga's (The Gowda's family).

But Dattani's plays are not only concerned with the traditional values of Indian culture. In fact he is more conscious to the changing socio-cultural, socio-economical, and socio political changes and development which have very worse impact on our society.

According to Dattani gender identity ultimately makes way for national identity. The portrayal of Indian culture which comprises the role and status of women, Indian traditions and their importance, Indian culture ethos, Hindu culture and Islamic and other religions' culture and heritage et.c. play significant role in fostering national identity.

Dattani is aware of the fact that class difference and gender difference are prevalent in Indian society. Violence against women in form of patriarchy and matriarchy, gender discrimination, and child sexual abuse (paedophilia) are rampant throughout the society and they have become the part of our culture. In Indian society and home domestic violence against women and gender discrimination are highly prevalent irrespective of caste and colour. Physical violence as well as explicit forms of aggression is used by the more powerful in the

household as methods to ensure obedience of the less powerful and therefore related to power dynamics in a household. At every stage in the life –cycle, the female body is both the objects of desire and of control.

Dattani, through his plays such as *Where There's a Will, Dance Like a Man, Bravely Fought the Queen, Tara* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* hints and makes aware the readers and audiences that patriarchal cultures and gender discrimination are against rational civilisation. He objects such culture and discrimination which give suffering to individual and ultimately eats up the progress and harmony of the nation. This underlines the fact that the dramatic canvas of Dattani is coloured with real life situations and the vivid experiences related with middle class Indians. Most of the issues taken up by Dattani in his plays are radical, unconventional and contemporary.

The structure of an Indian family is patriarchal. Be it a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mistress all are dependent on man for financial and physical security. Women have been looked down upon by men as an object to meet their needs. They should be there to cook their food, smile cordially, run around attending to their needs and sexually satisfy them whenever they have the urge. If the wife is unable to satisfy the husband, there is always a mistress to do that. Further he finds gender connectivity with class in India, which is a destructive force for national integration. Due to such malice class division between men and women and the postcolonial culture, women have been raising voice against their exploitation. There is much noise of women reservation and separate space for them which are really destructive for Indian society where women are considered 'ardhangini' of men. That is why the plays deal with patriarchy dominance and gender discrimination end with the symbolical note, which is indicative and suggestive of liberation from patriarchal authority.

Dattani's plays have heralded an awakening in women for their rights and brought up a feminist look in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. He perhaps bothers about the deterioration of women in our society, which has hampered the spirit in Indian society. Women played a place of honour in Rig-Vedic Civilisation have lost their dignity and status in contemporary situation.

Again culture plays important role in *Final Solutions*. India is known for unity in diversity. There was no distinction between the Hindus and the Muslims till the British came to India to divide and rule on the religious ground. The disgruntled voice heard in the Indian life is an offshoot of dirty politics which relies on communal difference and caste vote issue. Dattani maintains the truth, the love, and the beauty of these cultural ethos and culture to achieve the goal of making a real and ideal world. *Final Solutions* highlights communal hatred caused by lack of understanding. It addresses an issue of utmost concern to our society i.e. the issue of communalism. However, the play comprises the issues of class and communities, identity, terrible human suffering, loss of faith, perpetual hatred, aggressiveness and nothingness within the larger socio-political context. Dattani gives the message that the final solutions comprise in the words like tolerance, generosity and respect for other human beings, which are the strength of Indian culture.

Dattani strongly believes that the degeneration of values in society culminates into degradation of quality of life which leads to misery and unrest. India, with its diverse and rich cultural heritage upholds the tradition of moral values. Culture is the way of thinking. Dattani has presented the changing of the mind of the generation without affecting Indian cultural ethos. He has explored the vital areas of individual consciousness and has projected the fascinating images of cultural changes. He strongly believes that sex is meant for the attainment of inner harmony. Homosexuality is not our culture but a Western and South-Asian gay culture. Same sex is abhorrent in our culture. However everyone's experience of sexuality is unique, one chooses it in one's own way to find happiness and harmony in life. So Dattani hints to fulfil the desire behind the curtain so as to maintain the sanctity of our

culture. On the stage also In *Muggy Night in Mumbai* he has dramatised the discussion of homosexual characters in the dark and back chamber to present it as secret and private episode. In *Do the Needful*, Lata is engaged with a Muslim boy, who is a terrorist while Alpesh has same-sex love relationship with Trilok. Both these relationships are prohibited according to Indian socio-cultural norms. The play ends with the trend of contemporary changing Indian society in which old prejudices as well as values are making way for new adjustments.

As said above Dattani writes about human relationships, he does not ignore the most neglected and marginalized communities like women, eunuch, and homosexual. Dattani takes them as the weakest class of the society. They are integral part of our society and culture. Dattani has thus unfolded words of Beena Agrawal are worth to be quoted here:-

“Theatre is not a mute and mechanical representation of social dynamics but it is a lively representation of the voices resounding in context of totality of human experiences that consciously or unconsciously affect the existing dynamics of human sensibility. Dattani, in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences, tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order.”(34)(Emphasis mine)

Dattani deserves lots of accolades for a full-length study on their life. This is a radical effort and with it, he contributes to the matrix of the process that Erin Mee refers to as “a way of decolonizing of theatre.” (14)

In India classical Indian music, dance and drama are closely linked together. Repeating and representing the trend and culture, Dattani gives proper place to dance and music in his plays. Dance is the issue that has been raised in the plays like *Dance Like a Man* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. *Dance Like a Man* is a highly acclaimed play, intelligently crafted and powerful providing an insight into the contemporary Indian social scene. “... the universality of its theme and the quality of Dattani’s script (in English) has made it something of a cultural flagship for contemporary Indian theatre.”(Antares)

In the play male protagonist, Jairaj and his wife, Ratna are taking training in classical dance, Bharatanatyam which is intolerable to Amritlal, the father of Jairaj. Dattani is well-aware of the Indian middle-class society which considers dance is for women and he exploits it fully to his advantage in the portrayal of patriarchal culture. Beena Agrawal gives her overall impression about *Dance Like a Man* in the following manner:

“The play *Dance Like a Man* begins with a socio-cultural spectrum, passes through psycho-cultural dynamics and culminates in psycho-philosophical suggestiveness and here lies the distinction of Dattani’s art.”(104)

The interest of Dolly and Alka in Thumri by Naina Devi and its audition by them gives blow to patriarchy, but an integral part of drama.

Dattani’s plays become the strong witness of the double standard stand or culture of our society. Though the middle and upper-middle class, English-speaking, educationally privileged urban elite in India professes an allegiance to the secular, Westernised and trendy aspects of a global culture, the women find themselves constricted by traditional role expectations. Dattani wastes no time in confronting this double standard at play that pays a mere lip-service to the idea of woman as an active social agent. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, one finds that Dolly and Alka are the victims of this double standard which although emphasizes participation of women in public life, at its heart it prefers to preserve the structures of female subordination. Thus, the play exposes the hypocritical modern urban society. To quote Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri,

“The fissure between conventional and current cultures having thrown up a new landscape, the play races towards a brave culmination, laying bare the gruesome truths that lie behind the pretence of conservative Indian morality.” (32)

Dattani’s plays are deeply rooted in Indian linguistic culture in post-modern sense. He loves his culture vehemently. So he has brought innovation by using natural language which comprises code switching and code mixing in abundance. He must accolade praise for his discovery of the language which is very close to the middle and upper-middle class, English-speaking, educationally urban elite in India - a natural language which is comfortably spoken by maximum number of Indians.

More significantly Dattani’s plays transcend the cultural and linguistic barriers. They have a universal appeal because of the tremendous stage presentation and direction and therefore, they are as popular in India as abroad. The element of continuity, versatility and destiny in the Indian culture is best reflected in the plays of Mahesh Dattani in every aspect. It is interesting to note Dattani writes about middle class Indian society and milieu – its cultural and social practices.

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