

The Voice of Mahesh Dattani: Where Conflict Overcomes Transition

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani is a playwright of our times who equally writes in English as well as in his mother tongue Kannada. The 19th century is almost a period of decline in Indian Drama. Prior to that Indian drama has seen a fecundity in the number as well as themes that would pull the then audience. In the contemporary Indian theatre Mahesh Dattani's plays are ones that fill in this void whose themes are essentially social. He tries to expose many contradictions rather than reconcile them where his characters are caught in the labyrinth of social and identity conflict. By doing so he articulates a unique Indian modernity, attacks the pervasive prejudice and difficulties of transformation which are deep rooted in Indian tradition, culture and family hierarchy. Be it congenital issues in the lives of siblings in *Tara*, or religious indisposition in *Final Solutions*, or Anarkali's transgender impediment in *Seven Steps around the Fire*, or homosexuality in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* – all such ice breaking themes have received a unsurprisingly their just place by one hand at once into Indian drama tradition. The present paper discusses the treatment of such themes in his adroit style and technique. The transition of Indian drama is no more a subject of discussion when an incisive voice like Mahesh Dattani is before the audience.

Introduction:

Indian drama tradition is indeed very rich. Form the days of Kalidas and Shudraka to the present day Girish Karnad or Vijay Tendulkar or Badal Sircar we have witnessed a prolific legacy. Very often it might come to the minds of the drama critics that when we have our own richness along with the many regional varieties compared to western tradition, whether it is necessary on the part of Indian drama writers to write in English. There was a significant decline of drama in India in 19th Century, the reasons were many. One of them would be probably the natural calamities like famines that brought people a questionable survival. And, the other one is probably the oppression from British Raj. However, the decline of drama was not for long and the general audience, mostly elite, were striving to visit the theatres as part of their entertainment. In this connection, Mahesh Dattani created

an impact through his plays, his plays in English language.

It is generally observed that Mahesh Dattani's plays are so original in that the subtle nuances he makes in his English plays will be certainly difficult or rather impossible in his mother tongue. His plays bring out a qualitative dimension that was lacking in the entire plethora of plays other than Girish Karnard or Vijaya Tendulkar. The way he deals with the social issues has never been before in India. So when a critic says that '*Final Solutions* should be translated into every Indian language and performed throughout the country', I believe it is not for the universality of its theme rather for the effectiveness of the technique. The role switching in *Dance like a Man* is another typical invention of Dattani, who makes this phenomenon so vital to the structure of the play as it deeply involves the other side of the lie than the professionalism for a dancer:

Jairaj: ... My father is always asking me to grow up. Well, that is a perverse way of thrusting me into adulthood.

Similarly, though the plays have a normal urban setting the themes can touch any section of audience with equal efficacy. Mahesh Dattani does not want to be branded with a particular type and therefore, his plays use Indian myth, traditions, classicism, social problems and the individual identity of a human being in terms of money, sex, love, etc. "Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?" (*Where there is a Will*) is such an iconoclastic outcry that every individual might give vent to, at least, unconsciously. Dattani deals with varied range of themes in his plays, a playwright who is never ashamed of to project the realities of India in present time. Even homosexuality can be a core issue as in *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* or issue of eunuchs in *Seven Steps around the Fire*.

Equally powerful is Dattani's characterisation. Mainly his women characters show the skill of Dattani as they develop and learn from the experiences gained in a male dominated society. Mark how Kiran in *Where there is a Will* appears as a foil for Hasmukh Mehta:

Kiran: He depends on me for everything. He thought he was the decision-maker. But I was. He wanted me to run his life like his father had. (pause) Hasmukh did not really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him! ... Man really never grows up!

Like Kiran, Ratna in *Dance like a Man* emerges as an emphatic post-colonial woman contrary to Tara in *Tara* or Old Baa, Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* who suffer as a traditional commodity. I feel that the world of Mahesh Dattani has been still unexplored. This is quite true when Gouri Shankar Jha observes in *Current Perspectives in Indian English Literature* (Atlantic,2006:197): He is like Kafka and Camus, Sartre and Saul Bellow, Ellison

and Malamaud: John Mc Rae in an Introduction to the *Plays of Mahesh Dattani* praises him with having more than Ibsenite talent though the comparisons have been made between Mahesh Dattani's plays and works by such writers as Ibsen and Neil Simon. Dattani's plays bring Indian drama into the 70's with a vengeance. They are plays of today, sometimes so actual as to cause controversy but at the same time they are the plays which embody many of the classic concerns of world drama. Human relationship and the family unit have been at the heart of his dramatic representation. With all adroitness he uses his family unit as a locale which gradually fragments like relations fall apart. Thus, his plays are not static within its time frame. Rather they oscillate between past and present, even between life and death. His plays display a mastery of 'well-made plays' using tension and climax to reveal the story to the audience. The great playwrights of our time like Terence Rattigan, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Beckett, Pinter, Tennessee Williams etc. have shown this craftsmanship to tell their stories in theatre.

John Mc Rae is full of praise for Dattani for the universal significance of the plays yet Indian to the core of their heart: "This is a measure of theatrical power of Dattani's writings. His plays speak across linguistic and cultural divides – they will work equally effectively in England or Italy, India or Brazil. Yet they need never be transposed out of their clearly Indian settings. As Chekhov remains resolutely Russian while his plays speak universally, Dattani has created images, characters, and plots which reverberate with the reality of India today. They use Indian mythology, Indian traditions, Indian dance, Indian English, and Indian social problems – yet speak of themes which touch any audience: the search for individual identity inside and outside the family; the need for happiness, love, sexual fulfilment, security; the loveliness and emptiness of superficially successful lives; belonging and not belonging; the pain and pathos of keeping up appearances." Very often critics make comparisons between Ibsen and Dattani. Undoubtedly Dattani has Ibsenite talent to reveal the secrets of a family but Dattani's characters possess more efficacy to look into future and transforming the past. Unlike Ibsen, Dattani's plays talk of healing than destruction. The treatment is rather comic than tragic without losing any string of seriousness of the purpose – a style that we notice in absurd plays of Beckett or Pinter. The problems that he raises do not excel and human spirit is never crushed as in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts* or *The Pillars of Society*. Dattani's characters successfully discover a new truth and the present triumphs over the past at the end, more focussed than Shaw's 'drawing-room comedies'. As Dattani's plays are ideas with action, his characters constantly search for changes in tone and new insights. Thus, his characters are enough rounded and 'juicy' and full of challenges – they are complex and ever-changing. We may fall into the stigma of 'colonial consciousness' in Dattani's plays but he proves he is a citizen of the modern world. He is proud to be an Indian writing in English, like Vikram Seth. He lives in Bangalore but

writes about the whole nation called India, about the whole world where he lives in. This is not ‘post-colonialism’.

India’s literature is quite rich and opulent in dealing with mythical traditions of Ramayana, Mahabharat as well as historic family feuds as a result of property-minded, money-oriented society. However, the flow relapses in terms of “our indispensable Eighteenth century” or “the long Nineteenth Century”. Here is Mahesh Dattani who overcomes all barriers to bring out the modernity from a long Indian tradition with fine craftsmanship to deal with complex human relationship, and to save the theatre art in India. Of course, there are few other joining hands like Girish Karnard or Vijay Tendulkar but, Mahesh Dattani as a playwright earns international stature to fill in the void in Indian Drama by evincing a variety of conflict which has been all pervasive in our society and was not dealt with exclusively in the past.

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