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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Influence of Culture and Ancient Philosophy on Mahesh Dattani's Plays and Its Interpretations

Rashmi Jain

Research Scholar,
University of Allahabad

Mahesh Dattani is a contemporary iconic dramatist whose plays are combination of tradition and modernity. In his plays one finds the fusion of various cultures and philosophies. Alyque Padamsee says that at last we have a playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an identity. Drama in India has a great tradition right from the times of Vedic period starting from *Natyashashtra* by Bharat Muni. Indian Drama is the broad concept comprising entire Indian myths, and culture. It is one of the oldest forms of Literature in India as compared to Western Literature. "India has the longest and the richest tradition in drama. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic period. As a manifestation of our national sensibility, Indian drama came into existence as a means of exploring and communicating the truth of things and was popularly hailed as Fifth Veda", (R.K. Dhawan and V.K Reddy, p 4). Ancient Hindus developed the tradition of drama two thousand years earlier than Greek drama which came into existence with the monumental work *Poetics* by Aristotle. Bharata Muni advocated the theory of drama and stagecraft in his famous work *Natya Shashtra* which deals with aspects of drama – stage setting, plot-construction, characterization, music, dialogue and acting. In acting Bharat Muni elaborated about 'Rasa' with eight basic emotions- Love, Joy (humour), Anger, Sadness, Pride, Fear, Aversion, and Wonder. Similarly in Dattani's plays one finds a manifestation of rasa, stage setting, characterization and so on. In *Natyashashtra* Bharat Muni's dramatic theory is described in a verse of its sixth chapter "The combination called natya is a mixture of rasa, bhavas, vrittis, pravittis, siddhi, svaras, Abhinayas, dharmic instruments song and theatre house". (Bharat Gupta, p. 86)

Culture is the way of life of a particular society or group of people, including patterns of thought, beliefs, behavior, customs, traditions, rituals, dress, and language, as well as art, music, and literature it's rather a blueprint of living. The glimpse of Gujarati culture, language customs, dialect and tone can be traced in *Tara* of Mahesh Dattani. In *Tara* his characters struggles for freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desires. Mr. Patel the native of Gujarat is married to Bharati, a Kannadiga. Cultural diversities and cultural prejudices make their relationship a failure .The play explores the theme of gender bias or prejudice, Dattani's play deals with the idea of female infanticide that is prevalent among Gujarati's through various intimations that Roopa makes. She also suggests Patel's hegemonic patriarchy when he insists that proper division in gender roles be made with different sets or plans for the boys and girls. Roopa tells Tara about the age old traditions and customs of Patels (Gujrati tribe) of drowning the new born girl child in bowls of milk which shows the ruthlessness of gender discrimination as well. She says:

"Roopa: (to Tara) Since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true .But this is what I have heard? The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies-you know dowry and things like that-so they used to drown them in milk. So when people are asked them how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk."(CP, p.349)

In a country like India where goddess Durga, Kali, Lakshmi are worshipped ,a female child is considered to be a liability, responsibility and curse and on the other hand male is considered as

an asset this is also an age old prejudiced custom of Indian society. It is possible that Bharti was guided by the age old myth of women's masochism according to which a woman should suffer or sacrifice which is considered to be the very nature of women and in this case it demands that the girl child should sacrifice her leg for her brother willingly. In *The Myth of Women Masochism*, Paula Caplan, discusses the myth that women enjoy their suffering which is responsible for profound and far reaching emotional and physical harm to girls. One also comes across the some addressing lines of Gujarati's like 'kem chcho? ,Majhja ma?' and so on.

Dattani used references of Indian mythology and culture that can clearly be interpreted in plays like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, and so on. Mahesh Dattani voiced the sufferings of homosexuals whose evidence we find in the homosexual tales of Ancient Indian culture. The *Markandeya Purana* carries the story of Avikshita, the son of a king who refused to marry because he believed he was a woman. Gender was fluid, for yakshas and humans alike, in ancient and medieval Indian culture. The great epic *Mahabharata* narrates the famous story of Amba, the princess who was abducted by Bhishma but rejected by the warrior, who had taken a vow of celibacy. She self immolated herself and was born as Shikandini later transformed into Shikhandi — as a man, to avenge her insult. On the battlefield she becomes the cause of Bhishma's death. Another story is of Teeja and Beeja which still echoes in Rajasthan folklore. In a beautifully crafted version by Vijaydan Detha, Teeja and Beeja, two women, are promised to one another in marriage by their fathers. (Beeja is brought up as a boy, married as a man to Teeja; they are happy together until Beeja starts dressing as a woman on Teeja's suggestions. Driven out by the villagers, they pray to benevolent ghosts, and Beeja is turned into a man. This transformation was more socially acceptable but Teeja hates her new husband's bullying and runs away. The story ends with the two living together as women, in the forest with the ghosts, away from the villagers.) So the history of homosexuals in India can very well be marked from the ancient times who were neglected, alienated and insulted from ancient times. Dattani made an attempt to equalize them on the level of humanity. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani deals with taboo relationship of homosexuality and alternate sexuality. Judith Butler views that "homosexuality is a state of mind where individual asserts to protest against sex-binary existing in the social order." *Bravely Fought the Queen* shows suffering of a wife whose husband turn out to be a gay. Alka's anguish and pain aggravates when she comes to know that her husband Nitin has homosexual relations with her brother Praful. She was victim of her brother's treacherous plan. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* too depicts frustration, strong passion, betrayal and conflicts in the lives of homosexuals.

Dattani also narrated a myth from *Ramayana* related to eunuch's origin in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The term 'hijra' is a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, Urdu in origin which literally meant neither male nor female. In *Ramayana* when Lord Ram was going to exile, all the people of city wanted to follow him. "He said 'men and women turn back'. Some of his male followers did not know what to do but they could not disobey him. So they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women to follow him. Rama was pleased and blessed them. There are transsexuals all over the world and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study was to show their position in society" (CP, p 10-11). They are perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. But no one loves them; they are considered as untouchables and are roughly treated. No one cares that they too are humans, a creation of god. Being different is not a crime but they are socially out casted. The two events in mainstream

Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable -marriage and birth but ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and culture.

Dattani's plays give the message of 'to live and let others live' which is the basic philosophy of Jainism. Jainism as an atheist school can be considered as a humanist school of thought. It accepts Non-violence, Non-absolutism, Non-possession, Non-personalism, Equality and Equanimity from human point of view and not for any transcendental reason. All these qualities can well be explored in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. Philosophies of Jainism are still relevant and practiced by people. Humanism in general emphasizes our moral responsibilities in this life and figuring out the way to live ethical lives. The equivalent for Religion is Dharma in Sanskrit, which means moral obligation and associates it with individual's integrity and social solidarity. The universe as envisaged in Jain teaching and the motto is 'parasparopagraho jīvānām' i.e. there should be mutual support between living creatures. The problem of free will is discussed by almost all renaissance humanists, 'Man is the measure of all the things' is the earliest declaration of humanistic outlook. Humanists believe that man is the maker of his own destiny. Free will did not mean slavery to desires of our mind but freedom of 'rational self'. In the Ācārāṅgasūtra it is said "Ahimsa is pure and eternal Dharma". Non-violence is not restricted to humans but it includes the whole Universe. All miseries arise from violence and non-violence is considered as the crux of wisdom. Not to kill or destroy is the good deed par excellence. No one likes pain. One should not do unto others, what one does not want other to do unto one i.e. treat others in the same manner as one wants to be treated by others; this is also a principle/commandment of Christianity. Hence hurting whether by thoughts, words or deed is looked upon as the basic evil to be overcome. The Doctrine of Ahimsa is narrated and analyzed in the Āgamas as follows: Violence deserves to be discarded because it leads to sorrow and fear. Violence means ending somebody's life or torturing others. It has its roots in infatuation or attachment and jealousy etc. which is the basic cause of violence and needs to be avoided. "The purport of the blemish of violence does not depend upon the relative importance of the size, number and senses of the living beings that are killed. It depends upon the result of the violating person or the intensity or otherwise, his knowing or unknowing action or the use of force. This constitutes the purport of non-violence".

Jainism teaches Triratna "Three Jewels" (Right knowledge, Right faith and Right conduct). The right conduct is based on the fivefold moral code called 'panca mahāvratā' which are tenets of Ahimsa. This fivefold moral code maintains killing as the biggest sin which includes harming or hurting not only humans or animals but also insects and plants, because they too are living beings. The basic tenets of Jainism can be summarized in two words – Ahimsa and Anekānta i.e. Non-violence and Standpointism. These tenets are necessary for peaceful co-existence, which are based on the concept of respect for life. Standpointism signifies open-mindedness. It has been observed that if one accepts non-violence as the regulative principle of conduct and standpointism or manifoldness as the basis of our outlook, barbarism and exploitation, conflicts and wars in any form comes to an end.

In the plays of Mahesh Dattani one can find the various philosophies of Jainism and other religions because religion focuses only on one aspect i.e. humanism. In his *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Ek Alag Mausam*, *Final Solutions* and others Dattani tries to bring out message of humanism, compassion and peaceful co existence. Dattani shows how in this modern world human feelings are lost and everybody is just busy in their own lives not at all bothered about the deplorable conditions of others. Rather selfishness and self centricity has made them ruthless and insensitive towards others feelings. Dattani's plays can be called a fusion of traditionalism and

modernity. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* deals with the plight and pangs of life of transgender. This play shows that transgender just need love, care and affection which they are denied. Above all they need a social identification which is their right; they too are human beings like others full of sentiments, feelings. So what God made them different? Being different is not a crime. They too deserve a respectable position in society like other human beings. This is what Dattani pointed out through Uma and her research on eunuchs. The policemen addressed them as 'it' which is used for non living thing devoid of any senses or feelings. The brutality and cruel treatment towards the eunuch community by the cops shows the helplessness of Anarkali through dialogues:

"Uma: You can't do that! You have to report to the police station.

Anarkali: They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail."(CP, p.14)

Uma brings out the fact that eunuchs give their blessings to others throughout their lives and in return gets nothing other than alienation, insults and desolation. Uma in the end reveals that eunuchs already knew who murdered Kamla but 'they have no voice' and even if they had a voice hardly anybody would notice because their existence is negligible ,nobody cares what they say, why they say? It hardly matters to people. Dattani just attempted to show his anguish against the irresistible forces of social apathy and injustice towards realization of human identity of eunuch community.

Ek Alag Mausam depicts the atrocities, pain and sufferings of the lives of HIV patients, the inhuman treatment meted to them. The play is an attempt to respond the call of humanity. Beena Agrawal says: "*Ek Alag Mausam* is a play with a message, it's not a question of love of two people but it is a question of love with life. Dattani takes the place that the misfortune of being marginalized as being HIV positive, cannot crush the urge of life..." (A New Horizon in Indian Theater, p. 130)

In the words of Emerson, "A man is free to speak the truth not to lie, free to serve, not to exploit, free to sacrifice himself but not free to kill or injure". The Ācārāṅgasūtra unfolds that equanimity and non-violence are the essence of religion .The basic tenet of Anekāntavāda/non absolutism is non-violence in speech and thought. One must respect others' point of view as well. If we insist on truth we must also understand the beauty of compromise. This is the philosophy of relativism. According to Jainism, true religion is that which sustains all species of life and helps to maintain harmonious relationship. A similar message is given by Dattani in his *Final Solutions*. It is based on the conflict between two communities (Hindu and Muslim). The play explores how even in a modern and globalized era human minds are not free from cultural conflicts. The people who have lived together for years suddenly cease to recognize each other at the time of riots and become enemy on the name of religion. He also shows how older generation who witnessed the hatred of communal violence is not ready to accept any solution but younger generation thinks differently. Riots leads to spiritual loss, butchering of respect, dignity, love for truth and justice, humanity and brotherhood all are at stake. Padamsee also calls it a play of transferred resentment. Booby and Javed took refuge in Ramnik Gandhi's house to protect themselves from the turbulence going on the streets (where hindus and muslims are after each others lives).Ramnik and his daughter Smita are votaries of humanity and are secularist in their approach however Aruna and Hardika were skeptical about them. They never intended to give them refuge. When Aruna serves water to Javed and Bobby, the glasses are kept separately from the other glasses in kitchen as it's something contaminated. This incident shows that there are no cordial relations between the two communities. When Javed wants to fill her puja's water Aruna

says it's just a matter of understanding "we have nothing against you...we respect your religion and we wish you well. All religion is one .Only the ways to God are many" (CP 209) but she says that outsiders are not allowed to touch this water, it should be pure. Which means by the touch of Javed it's going to be contaminated, polluted. Alyque Padamsee in the introduction to the play writes that "the demons of communal hatred are not out on the streets...they are lurking inside ourselves" he even says "can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Dattani even questions are there any final solutions? The only way seems is that people of both communities should be open minded to understand each other sentiments and the politics that is going on in the country and cease to be a part of it. In spite of considering religion as supreme one must consider humanity as the ultimate religion. One must have that binding faith as Milton said:

"O Welcome purr –eyed Faith,
White handed Hope,
Thou hovering angel, girl with
Golden wings"

This will solve most of the problems. To develop a harmonious relationship both had to try to understand each other and respect each others view with open mindedness. Brutality, violence will lead us nowhere and paths of non-violence will ultimately provide us a calm and peaceful atmosphere to live in. Dattani has used a list of Hindi words to make it more authentic and realistic in approach. He used words like Sanskars, puja, mohalla, supari, mithai, dupatta, jalebis and so on.

Other plays of Dattani for instance *Dance Like a Man* is centered on an Indian Classical dance style Bharatnatyam but as his themes are unusual he presented the struggle of a male dancer who wants to make this his profession and how his life is affected by past and present Indian culture, identities and gender roles. This shows the richness of Indian culture. In *Where There is a Will*, Dattani used the ghost of Hasmukh as a dramatic technique which was used by Elizabethan playwrights especially Shakespeare. The use of ghost can also be traced in Indian myths, tales and folklores, a typical Indian tradition found tales like Panchatantra, Vikram-Vetal etc. India is known for its magic and spirits.

To sum up one can say that Dattani is one of the most innovative contemporary playwright who writes in English with the essence of Indianness in it. His plays are perfect balance of tradition and modernity. One finds collaboration of culture and ancient philosophies in his plays. His plays are plays of healing rather than destruction. The problems are not insuperable, human spirit is not crushed; a redemptive power always finds a place. As G.N. Devy says "...in the minimum, Indian Literature has ingrained in it a spirit of multilingualism and multiculturalism". The credit for it goes to Mahesh Dattani who entered into the area of human experience which otherwise would have remained unilluminated.

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