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Revitalizing the Tradition: Mahesh Dattani's Contribution to Indian English Drama

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Indian drama has had a rich and ancient tradition: the *natyashastra* being the oldest of the texts on the theory of drama. The dramatic form in India has worked through different traditions-the epic, the folk, the mythical, the realistic etc. The experience of colonization, however, may be responsible for the discontinuation of an indigenous native Indian dramatic form. During the immediate years following independence, dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Dharamvir Bharati et al laid the foundations of an autonomous "Indian" aesthetic-a body of plays that helped shape a new "National" dramatic tradition. It goes to their credit to inaugurate an Indian dramatic tradition that interrogated the socio-political complexities of the nascent Indian nation. However, it's pertinent to point out that these playwrights often wrote in their own regional languages like Marathi, Kannada, Bengali and Hindi and only later translated their plays into English.

Indian English drama per se finds its first practitioners in Shri Aurobindo, Harindarnath Chattopadhyaya, and A.S.P Ayyar. In the post-independence era, Asif Curriumbhoy (b.1928) is a pioneer of Indian English drama with almost thirty plays in his repertoire. However, owing to the spectacular success of the Indian English novel, Drama in English remained a minor genre and did not find its true voice until the arrival of Mahesh Dattani. Dattani (b.1958), a Bangalore-based playwright belongs to the tribe of literary entrepreneurs to whom English is a first language, devoid of any self-conscious postcolonial unease. Asked why he does not write in his own language Dattani quipped: "I do". This points to that complete internalization of English by a generation of Indians, spoken without premeditation and completely "Indianised". Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian English dramatist who wrote Indian plays in English and was not content with the usual western canonical texts that were generally performed when he founded his own theatre company -*Playpen* in 1984. The first English playwright to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award, in recognition of his "probing of tangled attitudes in contemporary India . . ." the citation also describes his work as "a brilliant contribution to Indian English drama" (quoted in Das 2003: 126).

Mahesh Dattani is a path-breaking Indian dramatist who takes taboo subjects centre stage and "kicks up a storm within the four walls of an auditorium" (Ali online). Mahesh Dattani's plays are most remarkable for the portrayal of contemporary urban living in India. He probes and unearths some compelling social realities that are otherwise silenced by an orthodox normative patriarchal order: whether it's the problem of gender discrimination, familial affiliations, alternative sexuality or communalism. Dattani excels in tackling social concerns through a brilliant use of language and stagecraft. His commitment to give voice to the marginalized is evident in his plays that often

are constructed around social issues though not on any specific, sermonizing message. His own remark is worthwhile:

The function of drama in my opinion is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It's ugly but funny.

(Quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 26).

The first significant thematic formation to appear after independence consists of a succession of major plays that invoke the nation's premodern and precolonial past through the two principal modes of retrospective representation- myth and history. For instance, the inaugural playwrights such as Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh and Girish Karnad were major exponents of such thematic concerns. Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*(1954) is a verse play which subjects the main story of the Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata*, to create acute compression as well as elaboration. *Ashadh ka ek din*(1958) by Mohan Rakesh, places the historical figure of the archcanonical Sanskrit poet and playwright, Kalidasa, within a largely invented action to create an ironic portrait of the artist. Karnad's *Yayati* (1961) uses an early episode from *Mahabharata* for its counter-oedipal narrative of a son, Puru, who temporarily accepts the curse. Thus, the first active decade in Indian drama after independence established narratives of both myth and history.

Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, K.N. Panikkar, Ratan Thiyam and Mahesh Dattani are authors, actors, directors and founder-managers of their own theatre groups. Utpal Dutt was the leading Indian practitioner of his Little Theatre Group and People's Little Theatre from the late 1940's until his death in 1993. His theatre covered a wide range of political forms, from elaborately scenic proscenium productions to street theatre, poster plays and agitprop. The dominant political thematic of Dutt's work was a transhistorical interest in the theory and practice of rebellion and revolution, but as manager of the Minerva Theatre in Calcutta(1950-1970) he developed a singular repertoire of spectacular multimedia productions that urged the spectator to 'fall in love' with the experience of theatre itself. Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre had developed more than a dozen major productions around folk narratives and tribal performers. His theatre had maintained a singular identity between narrative, performer and performance style, providing an influential example of how the urban and rural may interpenetrate. Panikkar is best known as for his revivals of the *Mahabharata* plays of Bhasa. Ratan Thiyam's work testifies to the survival of Brahmanical Hinduism and Hindu epic traditions. The above mentioned directors have developed an antirealistic, stylized, indigenous musical forms that enhance the theatricality of their productions. Like the texts of literary drama, their plays also appear in the print medium. Sircar became interested in developing minimalist theatre that could provide an alternative to urban realistic drama as well as rural folk forms.

Mahesh Dattani, the most successful contemporary playwright in English, combines essentially text-centered literary playwriting with extensive

work in the theatre as actor, dramaturg, dancer and director. His own distinctive brand of realistic, cynical and quasi-melodramatic urban tragicomedy provided him with several leading roles on the stage, and provided his Bangalore-based group, *Playpen*, well-received original productions throughout the 1990's, while his recent published work has signaled a stronger interest in gay theatre and avant-garde performance.

Dattani's work, which began to be published in the late 1980's, does much to challenge the stereotype that Indian English drama was just a light amusement. Dattani himself admitted:

A lot of the damage colonization has done is reflected in the theater, in the English language. The way most people speak the English language, most of it is imitative, there is an embarrassment about speaking it with your own background, there is a need to sound different, to sound British. (Mee, 1997:25)

Dattani's plays do much to dispel this barrier by promoting an Indian English familiar to the urban middle-class audiences he writes for. However, like other writers who write in English, he also receives a fair share of criticism for his choice of language. In this connection John McRae writes to the introduction to *Final Solutions and other plays* (1994):

When challenged [for writing in English] at a recent seminar at University of Bangalore [with the question], 'why don't you write in your own language?' [Dattani's] reply, with a gentle disarming smile, was 'I do'. (1994:9)

Dattani admits later in an interview:

Its not that I have a political motive to promote Indian English, but it is a part of Indian culture, so it has to be given it's reflect in India and in the world.(Mee,1997:26)

This liberal use of language exhibits Dattani's favour to write effective plays in English on contemporary Indian issues:

I am reluctant playwright. I would choose to direct first before, I write. But I wanted more plays written primarily in English language for Indian audience. (Nair, *The Invisible Observer*)

The use of English language has been a central concern of playwrights as well as critics of Indian English plays for obvious reasons. A very few experiments that succeeded, such as the plays of Gieve Patel and Cyrus Mistry, unfortunately were not followed up, as the plays received modest productions and publicity. But Dattani's use of an authentic Indian English on the Indian English plays stage was widely applauded.

Tendulkar was the most significant screenplay writer for the Middle Cinema movement in India in Hindi and Marathi between the 1970's and 1990's. Along with Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Mahesh Dattani are among the major contemporary practitioners who work predominantly in the realist mode and possess a social imagination that expresses itself primarily through the psychodrama of family relationships. The contemporary tradition of urban, realist, predominantly domestic drama is large and varied and includes some of the most influential plays of the last five decades: Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (1967), *Sakharam binder* (1972) in Marathi; Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Raktapushpa* (1972), *Wada chirebandi* (1985) in Marathi and Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990) and *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), in English. The preferred mode of writing plays after independence in indigenous languages such as Bengali, Kannada, Hindi and Marathi was realism, for it was felt that it was through this mode that the 'modern' sensibility could best express itself. By expunging melodrama, spectacle and sentimentality from the forms of realism inherited from the pre-independence period, a playwright like Vijay Tendulkar fashioned serious new vehicles for the stage that determined the direction of his work. His drama of ideas represents perhaps the most substantial exploration because his customary method is to translate social and political conflicts into personal dilemmas and resituate them within the domestic sphere. Tendulkar's generation in Marathi theatre, therefore, epitomizes the position that realism is an indispensable modern mode for understanding, coping with, and representing the post-independence present.

Dattani, through his plays makes an authentic representation of several topical contemporary issues, which was to some extent unthinkable in the past. His dramatic creed is not guided by some definite principles of stagecraft. Theatre, for him is a platform on which he believes real-life situations can be performed. He admits:

My milieu is theatre. You can't operate in isolation...I do not want a theatre movement to happen. The major block for that is lack of sound training and professionalism. We have the talent, but theatre is more than that, it is a craft communicating through language of action. (Dasgupta, 2000)

Therefore, Dattani clearly admits that the success of drama consists in the manipulation of appropriate language. It is the only valuable device that can establish a chemistry between the dramatists, the actors and the audience. It becomes the responsibility of the dramatist to use apt words, expressions, images and dialogues to make the experiences more lively and authentic on stage. Dattani also admits that he has been influenced by several Marathi playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar. Unlike Girish Karnad who lays emphasis on history, myth and purana, Dattani concentrates on contemporary urban India and his plays address on subjects of gender, sex, religion, communal tension, feminine identity, same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian relationships.

Over the last two decades, Dattani's use of language and his range of subjects have been resonating more and more strongly with urban Indians both at home and abroad, who can identify with his plays on many different levels. He often tries to seek psycho-philosophical justifications to make his plays more subtle and authentic. He dramatizes them not as a social critic but reflects the idea that theatre brings life to a drama. Dattani cautiously maintains a balance between exclusive theatrical art and seriousness of thought. Michael Walling comments:

His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of Indian theatre with the textual vigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It's a potent combination which shocks and disturbs through its accuracy and its ability to approach a subject from multiple perspectives. Post-colonial India and multi-cultural Britain both have an urgent need for a cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place. Through this fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh Dattani creates such a space. This is in itself a political and social statement of astonishing force. (Dattani, 2000:229)

Therefore, Dattani's theatrical art is a process of social content, psychological element and philosophical truths that help him to make his art a compact pattern of strong dramatic situations.

European and conventional models of drama did not fascinate Dattani and he made efforts to carve out his own dramatic convention to expand the brand of 'Indian Theatre'. His mission as a dramatist is to assimilate the art of drama with living life experiences. Dattani's Indian Theatre in English addresses us in its own voice of traditions, of problems and situations, which we encounter in our routine daily lives, and it speaks in our own accents, not borrowed or cultivated ones. He confronts all of them with a warmth, spontaneity and clarity tinged with a comic over view. The tone, ambience, characters and ideas, almost everything is Indian in his plays.

Drama is a performing art. Dramatic art is the most wide-ranging, the most polyphonic of all the arts: it both represents life and is also a way of seeing it. Written words don't matter in a dramatic art, as they do in a novel or in a poem. When a play is staged, a multitude of signs are unleashed for its reception and the perceptive capacities of the audience. The stage direction, movement and setting of the play matter most in our understanding of the text. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri comments:

The dramatic script, like an operatic score or the scenario of a ballet, is no more than a raw material from which the performance is created. The actors, rather than merely reflecting a creation that has already been fully expressed in script, give body, voice, and imagination to what was only a shadowy indication in

the text. The text of a play is as vague and incomplete in relation to a fully realized performance as is a musical score to a concert. (2008: 100)

Therefore, it's the performance through which the text reveals its meanings and intentions. And Dattani primarily writes his plays in order to be staged or performed.

We find a significant number of theoreticians, who have worked out reading strategies, both in terms of the written or performance texts. In the field of semiotics, the text-performance dialectic that is put in the scene, the system of association those unities have, the diverse stage devices which forge a performance. The dichotomy between the ontological paradigms of the text and performance would leave no room for mutual co-operation and fulfillment, hence would itself be against the pluralist agenda of the postmodernists. Bert O. States comments:

From the phenomenological standpoint, the text is not a prior document; it is the animating current to which the actor submits his body and refines himself into an illusionary being...it is by virtue of the absent text that the actor becomes a real living person... (1985:128-29)

Patrice Pavis, another semiotician adds:

...a performance text is only decipherable in its intertextual relationship with social discourse. (1982: 139)

Thus, these theoreticians suggest that the way to go for theatre theorists is not just through text or performance, but the audience and its associated pragmatics that need further clarifications. Reader-response theory along with semioticians like Umberto Eco (1979) have set out detailed criteria for the 'model reader'; Wolfgang Iser's (1974) 'implied reader'; or Stanley Fish's (1980) theories have all prioritized the reader of the print world.

Dattani's position differs because the problems seem to ease out a little due to his stage productions in which he writes, directs and sometimes also acts in his plays. He came to writing play from acting and directing experiences that had stressed group work, and like Tendulkar, he underscores the importance of practical experience in the theatre:

...because you realize that your are not writing to be read...that the actors are going to take your script and they are going to do other things with it.(Dattani:21)

The fact that Dattani is intrinsically a theatre person, therefore, enables him to structure stage mechanism effectively. He knows well enough how he at times, allows the texts to speak for themselves. In this regard Dattani many times had to edit his original scripts for stage production. Also there was hardly a playwright who had actually begun with roots in theater. Dattani admits:

I think that's the tragedy. I think that's what they lose out on. They have to have a theatre background...you should begin by getting involved in a production. Because there's nothing like that experience. (Katyal: 2000)

The notion of team work is a primary force in theatre for the director who is putting together all the efforts in the staging of a show. Dattani observes:

If you look at my plays, you would find that each character, every character has, you know, his or her space in the play, which an actor can develop. (Katyal: 2000)

So according to Dattani, it's evident that a playwright has to realize that he is not meant to be only read but has to stage actors and no theatre is possible without an actor or without an audience. Dattani comments:

Everything is geared towards 'rasa'. Which is why I always direct the first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instructions, which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors. That way, there is no conflict. (Nair, 2001)

For instance, in a play like *Bravely fought the Queen*, which surfaces the realities that Dattani deals with are multiple, and stage directions from the house and office are incorporated, hence the play moves from without to within, a kind of internalized terrain is observed by the spectator. The stage space in Walling's production was defined and redefined by lighting design and by the actor's bodies showing diverse terrains on the peripheries, whereas the centre stage continues with parallel narratives. The extensions and stylized shifts are conveyed within the text and the sub-texts. As soon as Dolly makes her revelation, she begins to dance as Daksha would dance uncontrollably until she collapses. In this act, there is a profound inwardness, a pure moment of theatre is unearthed. The actor is to perform Dolly; Dolly will perform Daksha; and Daksha will perform the dance. Michael Walling comments:

...about performance; and uses of theatre to demonstrate how, in a world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life. Paradoxically, it is only by the overt performance of the theatre that such acting can be exposed for what it is...By exploiting layer upon layer of performance, of unreality, Mahesh allowed his actress a route to emotion in its rawest form: the pain, the anguish in the blood-knot of the family, which is his constant theme. 'Isn't that the way she dances?' It seems an innocuous line on the page. But this is writing beyond words: this is theatre. (Dattani, 2000: 230)

In order to revalidate the value of theatrical interpretations Dattani had to edit his original script several times for this production in concrete terms.

Similarly, Lillette Dubey's production of *Dance Like a Man* is distinct from Dattani's own use of stagecraft. Dubey's stage production is extremely intricate in this play, the text echoing with multiple meanings. In this play the idea of playing different roles by the same character is unique in the history of Indian drama:

...it is an amazing script...beautifully crafted. The way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than a role which really tests the actor's talent and how seamlessly all is done. (Sumanaspati, 2000)

Mithran Devanesen, a Chennai based theatre director comments on Dattani's stagecraft:

I used a minimalist approach to set design, which gave me freedom to choregraph movement composition with the broad strokes, sometimes sculpture in quality and often fluid like a dance in full flow. (Dattani, 2000: 383)

Dattani affirms that the perfect dramatic structure can be invented through the synthesis of the understanding of human relationship and the dynamics of social order. The formal dramatic structure in creating an art is not an essential component of dramaturgy. In an interview Dattani comments:

...it is more to do really with dramatic structure and less with literary skills. I think the skill of playwright is listening to the day-to-day speech and not making it sound flowery...I think, it has more to do with understanding of human relationship and how conflict can be present on stage. (Mohanty: 170)

A survey of contemporary Indian drama shows that the works of Mahesh Dattani represent a powerful resurgence in Indian English drama. This playwright has given new directions to Indian theatre, with his innovative and experimental work that resonates with contemporary relevance. John MaRae acknowledges Dattani as "the voice of India" and states:

They are the plays of today. Some as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time they are the plays which embody many of the classic concern of world drama. (2000:)

Dattani has an unyielding drive for experiment and innovation. He unearths newer issues and stages them with a befitting stage mechanism. In his dramatic world, the experience has to pass through five stages – the organization of words in script, the contextual suggestions, tone and direction, gestures and postures of actors and most importantly, the effect of the action on the audiences. He conceives the position of theatre not in 'isolation' but as a 'totality' in which the distinction of page and stage diminishes. For the performative stage mechanism, a balance is required to the dramatist's show

vision in concrete images. The text of drama gets life in theatre through the appropriate tools of performance. Julian Hilton writes in his book, *New Directions in Theater*:

...in the theatre any plot or action exists only in the moment of performance and has no stable meaning or identity outside the performance process...there is no single or necessary definition of what plot or action is, even in the case of play with an authoritative source 'text' for every performance redefines, however marginally the nature of performed...(1994:7)

Dattani has been making conscientious efforts to showcase the issues and problems of contemporary urban Indian, society making them an integral part of his dramatic credo. He does not merely deal with human sensibility and human experience but his dramatic world projects something that is challenging and new which differentiates him from other dramatists at work in the present times.

A close study of Dattani's plays reveals that his plays are protests against the imposition of restraints and constraints, of social myths and conventions that often exhibit a dehumanizing treatment towards others. His theatrical creed strongly implies that he is a thinker and a devout humanist. His theatre vehemently asks us not to discriminate among people on the basis of colour, gender, religion or country.

Dattani's theatrical credo therefore established a new phase in Indian English drama. This new 'English Theatre' in India signals a drama of substance that would be produced in future theatre. Dattani's theatricality is characterized by a realistic tone and humanist approach. He tries hard to diminish the disparity between the 'page' and 'stage' enabling theatre as an instrument in articulating the voice of the masses. He dramatizes the stark reality of life without much romanticizing because for him 'stage' is the manifestation of 'human self'. For him, therefore, theatrical art can be enhanced and enriched by affiliating it to the truth of real life human experiences. He observes human life very closely and interprets the same through his theatrical performance.

In Dattani's own words:

I would like to challenge the assumption of what is Indian. Does that mean traditional theatre forms? Yes, they're wonderful, they're very sophisticated, they're very impressive, but are they really India? That's something I would like to question and challenge. Are they really reflecting life as it is now, that is the question that I would like to ask. They're fine, but there is the danger that if you look at them as if they're quintessential India you're doing those forms a great disservice, because you're not allowing them to change. What we need to do now is to look at those forms and say we're approaching the twenty-first century, this is

were we are and this is our legacy, so where do we take that. (Mee, 1997: 25)

By examining and evaluating different dramatic traditions from a historical perspective, I would like to argue that Dattani's plays highlight new ways of being 'postcolonial' 'feministic' 'humanistic' and 'naturalistic' in the twenty-first century. He does not totally discard the past but presents it as an artifact by reinventing different aspects of drama in order to make meaning for our present and future.

Dattani's theatrical premises are built upon innovative techniques and novel themes. All his plays stand testimony to his unique ability as a dramatist. His plays bear the unmistakable imprint of his profound thought processes and imagination. He is an authentic theatrical voice in the world of shifting values and changing phenomenon. His understanding of human nature and human relationships are extensive and profound and with his vivid imagination and uncommon theatrical ability, Dattani's vision is beyond cultural diversities and linguistic variations.

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