

## Mahesh Dattani: Theatre and Techniques

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### Abstract:

*The Indian English drama and theatre has been resurrected, re-invoked and revitalized by Sahitya Akademi awardee Mahesh Dattani. His plays like Tara, Dance like a Man, Final solutions, Seven Steps Around the Fire and others act as the harbinger of new themes, concepts, aesthetics, and dramaturgy. Dattani's plays probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender discrimination. It's a brilliant contribution to Indian English drama. Dattani considers theatre as the most dynamic art form which connects the author and the audience, it's appreciated by anyone either educated or uneducated, both can feel the pulse or the soul of the enacted story on the stage. Dattani uses some theatrical devices in his plays which make his plays innovative and unique in style. He used techniques like multilevel sets, split scenes, flashback technique, voice over, Interior-Exterior technique and thought technique. Music too plays a vital role in almost all his plays. Dattani infused new spirit in Indian English drama and theatre.*

**Key words:** Indian English drama, Mahesh Dattani, contemporary India, consumerism, gender discrimination, modern techniques.

Dattani's most celebrated play *Tara* sets a good example of stage craft and technique. *Tara* deals with gender discrimination where a male child is preferred over a female child. *Tara* is directed by Dattani himself. It was first performed as 'Twinkle Tara' at Chowdiah Memorial Hall;

Bangalore on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1990 by Dattani's Playpen performing arts group. In *Tara* Dattani exquisitively used multi level sets, flashback technique, voice over and thought technique in a brilliant manner. He used family unit and family setting (home) as his locale and divides them into parts or levels. As the modern world and relationships are fragmented so does the visual stage setting of Dattani. The different levels of the stage unmask the distorted psyche of the urban man and picture the society and the troubles in the mechanized world. The lowest level represents the house of Patels and occupies the major portion of stage. The next level is the only realistic level which exhibits the bed sitter of Dan in London suburb. At the higher level one can see Dr. Thakkar seated on a chair throughout the play. His presence is just a god like presence who never interferes but wherever his presence is required he appears. Dan plays a tri role; he is the narrator organizer of action and character in the play. Dattani through Dan brilliantly uses the flashback technique; there is proper blending of past and present. The role of dan can be compared on a level to Harry of The Family Reunion by T S Eliot. Both are suffering from guilt consciousness and are expiating in their own way. Asha Kuthari Chaudhri makes a valid observation that Dattani uses chorric voice- the godlike doctor's commentary runs parallel with a sense of nostalgic memories whenever required. Another important parallel is drawn by Dr. Thakkar by surgical procedure that he orchestrates and theatrically echoing through it. He dramatically explains about the operation theatre "we had had about six rehearsals with dummies to make sure that every detail was considered, in terms of the physical movements of the surgeons during the operation as well as surgical procedure."(CP, 363)

Shakespeare holds out a mirror of manner to his audience similarly Dattani also holds a mirror to his audience and brings them face to face with the staunch realities of life. The mask which the audience is wearing, which they are scared to unfold, Dattani through his artistic measures brings forward

and deals with various issues such as the ‘invisible issue of gender discrimination and subaltern issue in Tara. Dattani brings an authorial note through his character Dan by voice-over technique. Voice-over is used to create the effect of story telling by character or narrator. Sometimes it’s also used to create ironic counterpoint. Dan in voice over says:

“Someday after I die, a stranger will find this recording and play it. The voice is all that will remain. No writing, no masterpiece. Only a voice...I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move without meaning. I forget Tara. I forget that I had a sister-with whom I had shared a body. In a comfortable womb, till we were forced out...and separated.

A spot faded in empty.

But somewhere, sometime, I look up at a shooting star...and wish. I wish that a long forgotten person would forgive me...forgive me for making it my tragedy”. (CP, 379-80)

Another innovation which makes Dattani’s plays unique is the use of language especially regional language such as Gujarati. Roopa the girl next door speaks Gujarati words frequently. She says “Prema! Prema-a (no response) Prema-a! Oh, Hello Aunty. (in broken Gujarati) kem chcho? majjhha ma...?” (CP, 327). The title *Tara* is emblematic in itself as it suggests that a girl child cannot shine because she was not allowed to twinkle in an Indian society. The hypocrisy of the society is brought out by the dramatist where a male child is preferred over female.

Dattani’s first play *Where There is a Will* is exorcism of patriarchal code. It not only marginalizes the female but male also. The play both teaches and delights. The play was first performed by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall; Bangalore on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1988 in Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. The most important technique used by Dattani in his plays is the narration of stage. In *Where There is a Will* the stage is divided into four rooms-two bedroom a living and dining room. Each room is created with specific details to set the tone for the play. The play has Gujarati milieu and fuses tragic and comic insights. It satirizes the water tight patriarchal code .The

dramatist peeps into the past which helps the character understanding in present. He interestingly introduced the supernatural element in the play. It has two Hasmukhs –alive and the ghost of Hasmukh. Sita Raina in ‘a Note on the Play’ observed “what interested me particularly was its philosophical twist, to be the watcher of one’s self is to make intelligent changes in life. In *Where There is a Will*, Hasmukh controls over his family through his money and forges an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationship...consequently when he became the watcher of his action, he perceives that his desires for control has led him to be the victim of his own machinations unlike Kiran who uses power play to essentially improve her relationships.”(CP, 451)

The humour and sarcasm another important element in Dattani’s plays can be witnessed in the speeches of ghost of Hasmukh as he says “have you ever swung on a tamrind tree? upside down? you should try sometime. You can see the world the way it really is”. (CP, p.496) Hasmukh’s soul comments on the ongoing incidents and is a unique device for the self assessment of characters. Another notable technique employed by dattani is the names of the characters. The characters are just opposite to their names as Hasmukh means a smiling person but Hasmukh rarely smiled throughout the play. Sonal means gold but according to Hasmukh she was good for nothing equivalent to mud. Preeti means affection but she was unaffectionate to almost every member of the family. Only Kiran was in a way the real hope for the family. Traces of symbolism can be found in the play, the baby’s kicking in the womb of preeti symbolizes the advent of new life in the lives of family members. The banishment of Hasmukh’s ghost symbolizes the exorcism of past. Another innovative technique used by dattani is injected dialogues of Hasmukh which is unheard by other characters but introduces further dimension of implication for audience’s benefits:

Kiran: He was just like his father, wasn’t he?

Hasmukh: No I wasn’t. Sonal: Yes he was

Hasmukh: Don't contradict me woman!  
Kiran: the same bossy nature?  
Sonal: (together) No!  
Kiran: Did he ever disagree with his father!  
Sonal: (together) No!  
Hasmukh: Yes (CP, 509)

*Seven steps around the Fire* is initially a radio play but later has been staged by many theatre groups. This play is about the taboo topic of deplorable and miserable conditions of the trans-genders in the society. The play was first broadcasted by BBC Radio on 9th January 1999 and was first performed on stage by MTC productions and The Madras Players on 6th August 1999 at Museum Theatre Chennai. In this play Dattani used techniques like voice over, interior-exterior, thought technique and so on. The thought device reveals characters reactions and responses as well as their motives and movements. Uma ponders about the origin of hijras (transgender) :

Uma(thought). Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they....why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? How do they come to know of these weddings? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionists... (Pause) Is it true?...did they really put a curse on her because they did not allow them to sing and dance at their wedding? (CP, 16-17)

Through voiceover technique which has a binding effect on audience's mind, Uma comments about the origin of eunuch community and senses the touch of isolation and desolation in the lives of transgender. :

Uma(voice over). ...the term hijra of course is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning neither male nor female. Another legend traces their ancestry to the Ramayana...perceived as the lowest of the low they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable –marriage and birth-ironically are the very same privileges denied to

them by man and nature. (CP, 10-11)

Other important techniques used in this play are the interior exterior technique and the use of music. In a radio play directions of interior exterior helps the listener to understand the situation and position of characters and places. When the dramatist says "Interior. The living room of Champa". Listener imagines the room of champa, the silence in the atmosphere, confused and nervous state of eunuch. It also stresses on the minuteness of the surroundings. Through the exterior device one can sense the state of actions going on outside in the market, or outside the gates of minister's residence and many more. Music (Dull tunes, cheerful tunes) helps to understand the mood of characters and upcoming scenes. The play begins with chanting of Sanskrit mantras and then a scream. The audience can easily sense the tension in the ambiance. Banging on metal plates in jail, traffic noises, singing and dancing of hijras, the gunshot all has its own peculiar effects on the minds of audiences. Jeremy Moteimer says the tone of the play is both modern and traditional.

Dattani was awarded with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for *The Final Solutions and other plays*. He deals with the issue of communalism in this play. The mutual distrust between the two communities –Hindus and Muslims forms the background of the play (before the partition of India and this distrust and hatred continues even after so many years of the Independence). It was first staged at Guru Nanak Bhavan Bangalore in 1993 later it was performed at Tara Theatre Mumbai, directed by Alyque Padamsee. It was also converted into hindi and staged by Arvind Gaur for Asmita Theatre. Dattani used multi level settings, flashback techniques, masks, mob/chorus techniques to produce appropriate dramatic effect. The stage was crescent shaped ramp with the ends sloping to stage level. Within the confine of the ramp a structure suggests house of gandhi's with wooden block for furniture and an upstage for kitchen and pooja ghar.

On another level there was a room roll top desk and oil lamp showcasing the time of late 1940s during which Hardika was a young girl known as Daksha. The entire action is seen through her eyes. The play opens with a scene where Daksha is reliving the past memories through her diary “Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages...31<sup>st</sup> March 1948.”(CP, p.166) Daksha who has now become Hardika (grandmother) realizes that nothing has changed in the span of forty years, the violence; hatred insensitivity which she witnessed years back has not changed even now. The mindlessness of mob outside is exactly the same. Though the play begins delving deep in past but the main actions take place in the present. Dattani in an interview to Sachidananda Mohanty says:

Daksha “through the device of her diary she begins a dialogue with the audience and that is offered to Daksha because she can make fun of her in laws, she could talk very honestly about her feelings, about her friendship with the Muslim girl etc. directly to the audience and that space is denied to her with the other members of her household including her husband and these are memories that she has retained even in her old age and these memories are triggered off and feelings of prejudice that had developed over years are brought out in present day situations. So Daksha becomes a symbol of our historical vision, our sense of history, how prejudice is formed and how we deal with the situation today.

*(The plays of Maheś Dattani: A Critical Response, 181-182)*

Final Solutions bears affinity with the tradition of regional theatre popularly known as Yatra plays in Bengal. Dattani has used a chorus which is as old as Greek drama. Padamsee says that mob symbolizes our own hatred and paranoia. Members of the mob are individual but they become ‘one seething whole as soon as politicians play on their fears and anxieties.’ The chorus communicates the present scenario of communal disharmony. It mingles the public and private affairs. It comprises of five men with ten masks (five Hindu and five Muslim) on stick which is

strewn all over the ramp to be worn when required. "The mob becomes chorus when they wear either the Hindu or the Muslim masks but when referred to individuality, they remain chorus 1, chorus 2 etc. The players of mob/chorus do not belong to any religion and ideally should wear black". (165). The play highlights a riot and the two young men sought by the mob were considered as the members of other community. The aggression of the mob increases the intensity of tension. Dattani through this theme satirizes the whole concept of religion where people in the name of religion goes frenzy and are driven like young cattle by shrewd politicians to fulfill their selfish motives. The words of chorus indicate violence, political and social unrest with no religious beliefs. Wearing of masks either Hindu or Muslim symbolizes the mask of religious fundamentalism through which ordinary people are misled. It also shows that communal differences are sign of divided consciousness. Masking and unmasking of the same person hints that religion is one god is one, only the interpretations are different. Black colour shows justice and impartiality as no other colour could defile black and their identity will be hidden until one wears mask. The black attire of the mob/chorus signifies blackness of heart, complete vacuity. The chorus also becomes the voice of both the community i.e. expresses the hidden thoughts. In the end the author wishes to end this game of hatred but is unable to find the final solution until we kill our inner demon of revulsion.

The dramatist has made extensive use of images and symbols. Animal imagery like mouse and rat are used suggesting fear or strength. In a society the dominant group who has the power behaves like cat and the subordinate one acts as mice preferring to hide. Other images like swine and dead pig signifies hatred and contempt. Gandhi the name associated with the family becomes the mock representation of justice and non violence. The play also had sacred symbols like the bell and idol of Krishna. The bell symbolizes religious fanaticism. The idol of Krishna signifies uniformity of religion

i.e. there is only one god people of different classes calls him with different names. When Bobby, a Muslim boy picks up the idol of lord Krishna, cries out, “your God! My flesh is holding him! Look Javed! And he does not mind! ...he does not cry out from the heavens saying he has been contaminated...I don't believe in Him but He believes in me...” (CP, 224) To Aruna he says “ you cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attar and fragrant flowers because it belong to a human being who believes, tolerates and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world!”(CP, p.225) Behind this disturbing ambiance one can sense the fraternity and love through music. The music of Noor Jahan, Shamsad begum and Suraiya knows no distinction, no boundary; it creates mesmerizing effect on all whether rich or poor, irrespective of caste, class and religion. It was music which brought Daksha and Zarine together however this music was interrupted through breaking of gramophone during the riots.

Daksha...A stone hit our gramophone table, breaking it. Krishna choose to destroy what I loved most. My entire collection of records broken. Lying about like pieces of glass....those beautiful voices. Cracked... (CP, 167)

Thus to sum up it can be said that Dattani is intrinsically a theatre person apart from being a writer which is clearly evident through the effective structure of stage mechanism and the way he allows the text to speak for them and to look at their own workings and methodology. He through his narrative technique brings out the inner quality in human existence. He enriched the Indian English language by using words like Sankar, gallies, mohalla, dupatta, jalebis, chokra and so on. His language is often pungent, clear and sharp. Dattani has perfect control over stage, dialogue, setting, verbal and non verbal signs which forms a perfect synthesis of mental spaces of audience, dramatist and actors. He is truly a playwright who gave sixty million English speaking Indians an identity.

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