CONCLUSION

The core issues of Manjula Padmanabhan’s and Mahesh Dattani’s oeuvre are quintessentially city-centric. Urban materiality, social environment and subtle nuances of city space are the key constructs around which their drama revolves. It emerges from this study that both these playwrights do not confine themselves to conventional issues associated with bourgeois society in urban spaces. The domains they traverse are forbidden. While Dattani writes to sensitize the audience about social issues that are generally considered as taboo subjects, Padmanabhan presents the more dehumanized, gloomy, dystopian world. Both the writers have greatly contributed to urban literature by setting their plays in one or the other Indian metropolis in the backdrop of the socio-economic realities of these urban centres.

The mindscape of the city is directly linked to its materiality. All the plays examined in this thesis have metropolises like Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore as backdrop. Though, every city has its distinctive character, yet commonalities can be traced vis-à-vis a rich cosmopolitan culture they share. They are symptomatic of the duality of the city where even in the face of trauma, one finds a comfort zone.

Both these playwrights focus on the inevitability of alienation and social isolation in city space. The individuals they portray are part of the “lonely crowds” as established by the theorists of Chicago School of Sociology, Packard and Riesman. Riesman (1955) gave the concept “the lonely crowd” with reference to middle class people having white collar jobs living in big cities and metropolitan centers in the United States. Riesman warned that people are or can be lonely in a crowd, even in the company of their associates, if they are not attentive to their intimate feelings and aspirations, and fail to pursue their autonomy and social freedom.
Studying these two playwrights also establishes the fact urban spaces are essentially remote and de-familiarized. The heightened urban growth leads to an ever-increasing anonymity and isolation, eroding the old familiar neighbourhoods. De-familiarization also leads to the weakening of stable communities within cities. The popular sociologist Vance Packard (1974) developed the theory of “social disorganization” for interpreting the social changes in terms of blurring of social institutions that traditionally encourage co-operation. Their collapse leads to individual seclusion (Bulmer 1987). All these ideas are illuminated as one confronts the deeper issues dealt with by these playwrights.

Perhaps no other writers understood the extraordinary power of city space as Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani particularly in respect of the “excluded others” in their works. The “excluded others” of the urban set-up are obviously the groups whose identities are constructed as “Others”. They are often segregated and subjected to coercive control. Behind today’s urban materiality and, fluidity of social changes, the “excluded others” point to the relentless inequalities that predominate in the urban space. Cities continue to be places of crime, exploitation, exclusion for many women, men, poor, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, persons with mental and physical disabilities and the other indigenous people. It emerges from the study that the “excluded others” have never received attention they merit in academia or in literature. An attempt, therefore, has been made in this study to articulate the pain and loneliness of those who live on the periphery of society. Charting the unexplored territories in the urban terrain, Mahesh Dattani’s theatre articulates the silent screams of these underlings who are considered “others” by the mainstream. This “Otherness is a basic ingredient of all social identities; and when culture, society or community
marginalizes certain individuals as other, what it attempts to exclude or repress is actually a part of itself," says Miruna George (155).

City space still contains a number of what Michel Foucault (1984) called “zones of darkness and disorder”. Silence, fear, misconceptions, obstruction and barriers to recognition, mark these zones. While the first concept “lonely crowds” is rooted in modernity the second concept “excluded others” is a post modernist concept, nevertheless both regard urbanization and cities as producing exclusions, enforcing numerous forms of social closure, and exacerbating social distances amongst different groups (Hughes 2002). Louis Wirth theorized and popularized the notion of urbanism as a way of life associated with large cities, a life style of values and behaviours characterized by personal stress, aloofness and indifference in social relationships. There is a very close relation between the performance, the spectator and the space in which both come together. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis various concepts of city space, particularly the social issues taken up by Dattani and Padmanabhan show the city as a place of contestation where mind, body and soul are challenged by extreme conditions. The power of literature and specially theatre is immense. It visually highlights all these issues with the help of various techniques.

As far as Dattani is concerned one of the most distinguishing features of his work is the stage craft. The use of a multi-level stage emphasizes the disintegration of social values and the need to consider alternatives. Against this background, several screen images moving rapidly between the past and the present bring to the fore the expressionistic technique. As Michael Walling points out, “His plays fuse the physical and spatial awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It’s a potent combination, which shocks and
Manjula Padmanabhan has a distinct style of writing. The surreal image that she gives to her writing brings forth the theme of dystopia in the contemporary city space. Though the future depictions by Padmanabhan are always disturbing but somewhere in those depictions lies the bitter reality of the present times. Perfectionist to the core, intertextuality in her works makes her distinct from the other contemporary writers.

Articulating the urban materiality and social changes in the city space are the main objectives of Dattani and Padmanabhan. Their theatre signifies the search for an appropriate idiom at a time when Indian English literature faces a crisis of identity. Especially in theatre, there appears to be nothing worthwhile that would reflect the emerging realities of post-independence social space. Dattani appeared on the literary scene, as an “elite” playwright. He was accused of not presenting the “real India”. Protesting against this, he evolved a dramatic style, and continued to refine it, so that the resultant theatre is not only contemporary but also imparts new meaning to the traditional modes. Similarly, Manjula Padmanabhan was never taken seriously by the literary world until she received an acknowledgement internationally in the form of the Onassis Award (1997). Both of them have given a new lease of life to contemporary Indian English drama. In conversation with Angelie Multani, Mahesh Dattani states his views about the Indian English Drama: “It has no roots. The Parsi theatre has died and cantonment theatre is gone. So without these roots, the tree will wither. We need to find new roots” (Multani 170).
The city is the most influential character in their plays. All the plays are about the yearning for urban materiality and how city space brings a lot of changes which in turn change the course of an individual’s life. The urban theories discussed in the Introduction of this research work underpin the fact that we cannot understand these two playwrights without these concepts that pervade their works. These theories give their plays an extra edge in the contemporary literary scene providing a strong and significant interpretation of modern lives. At the same time the universal themes give a deeper meaning to their works.

The concept of the “fourth world” propounded by Manuel Castells is in consonance with the theatrical tradition of Dattani and Padmanabhan. Dattani in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and Padmanabhan through *Lights Out* and *Harvest* present these grim realities of the fourth world. Though the realities may not be so felicitous in the conventional sense, yet they allow the playwrights to bring multiple issues to the fore strongly allowing the readers and spectators to ponder over many hidden facets of our existence.

Similarly Padmanabhan and Dattani have successfully elaborated Edward Soja’s “Third Space” which is an extension of Henri Lefebvre’s “spatial trialectics”. This is the juncture where all the plays are set and create dilemmas in the minds of various characters. In *Dance Like a Man, Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen, Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Final Solutions*, Dattani, has developed the plot around this third space where both the real and the imagined spaces simultaneously interact with the characters and bring a transformation in their lives.

Scott Bukatman’s idea of “Terminal Identity” is well portrayed by Manjula Padmanabhan in her powerful play *Harvest*. The complete dependence on technology
and the concept of man becoming a slave to technology are well presented through the characters of Ma and Virgil/Ginni. The 750 channels self sufficient TV module alienates the people from the world. Similarly Virgil’s craving for immortality results in changing four human bodies. Such “science fiction” provides an oblique but powerful critique of modernity.

Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have made a significant contribution to the realm of Indian English literature in contemporary times. Their plays deal with subjects that had been left on the marginal of the Indian literature, ranging from the disabled girl child to the sexually abused child; homosexuals to heterosexuals who break social norms, the third gender and individuals as well as families who question patriarchy. They write with sensitivity and understanding. But unlike any propagandists who press hard on a point, Dattani and Padmanabhan lay out the changing map of society that they see around themselves. Their attitude is radical in the sense that they strike hard on the worn out and obsolete conventions of society. On their contribution to Indian English drama it is said, “Very recently Indian English drama shot into prominence. Younger writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing” (Dhawan 24).

Manjula Padmanabhan has been instrumental in bringing out the issues of alienation and marginalization through her plays. She is a highly sophisticated playwright. Padmanabhan’s plays are realistic in style and content though she may use sci-fi techniques. She usually depicts the lives of common people trapped in the vicious city space. Her major plays like Harvest and Lights Out start in medias res, at a point where some crucial decision has to be taken.
Society is constituted by individuals, and group behaviour is determined by
convention. If an opposition is seen between individual and society, it is caused by the
assertion of majority consent over the individual objection. Great writers have always
shown that each person has within himself or herself an inner strength to alter the
outer world. This can be accomplished by motivating society to bring about the
desired change. Dattani’s writings and interviews show his awareness of the conflicts
that arise when age old traditions are challenged, when the majority consent is shown
to be hollow or irrelevant as times change. India Today’s Madhu Trehan recently
interviewed Dattani while at a discourse with the Dalai Lama. She believes that
Dattani and the Dalai Lama do the same work and that only their methods are
different.

Mahesh’s plays do not make you feel good. They take you to a place
where you question your own attitudes and perceptions, which may be
embedded in your subconscious, but nonetheless, influence how you
function in your daily life. Would you believe that is also the alerted
consciousness of three days of teachings from the Dalai Lama? Every
word you utter, every act that may seem so casual and unthinking to
you, must be thought through, weighed and then expressed or acted on
(or not). Mahesh’s plays give the same message using a different tool.
The difference is – the Dalai Lama uses altruism and compassion to
change the world. Mahesh’s plays expose the raw, hideous side. But
both make you think and work on yourself to change. (Trehan 2012)

Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan are realists because they show an acute
awareness of the lives of ordinary people. Their characters do not belong to
imaginary worlds but are taken from real life with their frustrations and agonies;
happiness and contentment; defects and shortcomings. In one of his interviews with Utpal K. Benarjee, Dattani enunciates his choice of themes:

I think my one recurring theme is the individual’s struggle over societal demands or inflictions. Whether it is *Dance Like a Man* or 30 Days in September or *Tara*, my protagonists are striving for their own space or freedom from an invisible, self-inflicted form of oppression. Most of my themes are not by choice, but dictated by my current interests. (166)

For Dattani, the primary concerns have always been humanistic. He has brought centre stage the viewpoints of individual men and women who have to fight to assert their own identity in a society of orthodox ideas and beliefs. The in-depth study of his plays shows that Dattani’s characters are persistently searching for an independent identities and strong integrated selves. Since social norms are seen from their perspective, many traditional practices, specially those of the assigned gender roles, appear deficient in social justice.

Like no other playwright, he successfully creates characters who articulate their pain by offering resistance to the traditional modes of behaviour. By dealing with bold subjects, his drama has made a tremendous impact on this genre. More than anything else, it is Dattani’s sensitive handling of these subjects has gone a long way in earning for him a special place in the history of Indian English drama.

Mahesh Dattani’s gender sensitive stance demonstrates that the creative imagination is “androgynous,” partaking of male as well as female capabilities as Virginia Wolf had famously described. In the context of modern India, Dattani has articulated the silence of the marginalized ‘others’—the women and men who appear
on the peripheral margins, barely understood because they defy easy categorization in the mainstream social order.

Naming is one of the very important aspects in the theatrical techniques of both Padmanabhan and Dattani. In Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* all the names are mispronounced by the buyer signifying not only the cultural difference between the east and the west but also about negating the existence of the natives from the oppressed classes. In every culture, name has a lot of significance and a child after undergoing rituals and ceremonies gets the name. Throughout the play, Virgil, the foreigner buying Jaya’s husband’s organs, persists in pronouncing Om as Auum and Jaya as “zhaya”. But at the end of the play when Jaya finally meets him and realizes that it is in her power to decide the further implementation of his plans, she refuses to go any further until he pronounces her name correctly. In such a situation created by Jaya, he is forced to bow to her wishes and finally pronounces her name correctly. Similarly Dattani also accepts that naming is an important tool. The names of the characters have significance in the plots of his plays as they suggests something about the character. Plays like *Thirty Days in September* and *Final Solutions* are perfect example of this. Kate Clark explains this naming strategy:

Naming is a powerful ideological tool. It is also an accurate pointer to the ideology of the namer. Different names for an object represent different ways of perceiving it. An example from another area of violence illustrates this; how do you refer to a person who seeks political aims using aggression? Is s/he a terrorist, guerrilla freedom fighter, rebel or resistance fighter? Different connotations of legitimacy and approval are carried by these labels. The naming of the
assault and its participants as those of religion also works in giving it a positive hue (Clark 184).

Another very important aspect of language that predominates Dattani and Padmanabhan's writing is the use of silence. Silence, as feminist critic Tillie Olsen observes, is the instrument of women to counter the forces of patriarchy. The articulation of silence in an effective manner is a craft that may be practiced by astute writers. This thesis is an attempt to pay tribute to the dramatic art of Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan as well as to point to the capacity of theatre to bring social change in the city space of India by breaking traditional silences.

The present study is an acknowledgement of the unique conditions of the urban space in contemporary Indian English drama. The city reveals the existential trauma of human beings. As Lewis Mumford puts it in *The Culture of Cities*, "Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind." Protagonists with fractured and fragmented consciousness enter the conflicting ground of the city and its sensibilities. The protagonists appear as mere pigmies before the gigantic, anonymous and callously deterministic powers of the city leaving individuals without any freedom of choice.