A Critical Study of Social Realism in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani.

PREFACE

&

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Mahesh Dattani who has been acknowledged as "a playwright of world nature" has given a new direction to the current of Indian English drama. He did not adhere to any established dramatic tradition but created a tradition of his own by bringing Indian Theatre close to real life experiences. He has already produced about fifteen plays of different category – Radio Plays, Stage Plays, Screen Plays and Dance Drama. In Dattani's dramatic art, there is a variety stretching from light comic caricature to the serious reflections of various problems of human life. Individual versus the conventions of society is the central motif in the plays of Dattani. The relevance of his dramatic art lies in the fact that he introduces radical subjects like the issue of taboo relationship, homosexuality, child sexual abuse, suffering of AIDS victims, etc., on the stage. Dattani proceeds with the vision that drama is not a mechanical representation of human experiences but a lively representation of new dynamics of social relationship.

Ever since his first play, Where There's a Will in 1988, he has chronicled the social victim and the follies, foibles and prejudices of Indian society. He has criticized and exposed the Indian middle class in many of his plays including Where There’s a Will and Dance Like a Man. Some of his plays are eloquent defences of society's outcasts and would-be rebels, people forced to live double lives in order to satisfy the prying eyes of society. These plays include On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, a compassionate look at the life and tensions of a homosexual community tucked away in Mumbai. Do the Needful, Dattani’s earlier radio play for BBC, also deals with the coming out of homosexuality. Both On a Muggy Night in Mumbai and Do the Needful are probably the first Indian plays to boldly deal with the subject of homosexuality. The play Final Solutions is about partition and how the engendered suspicion only deepens from generation to generation.

Dattani tackles issues that afflict societies the world over. Just like Ibsen and Shaw, Dattani also exposes the evils prevalent in the society. Dealing with issues like male-female ascendance divide (Tara), the patriarchal tradition (Where
There’s a Will & Dance Like a Man, consumerism, communalism, Dattani holds back nothing. He uses the world of comic theatre to encase the bitterness of the truths he is dealing with and like Bernard Shaw, Dattani also wants to use the theatre as a powerful tool for bringing about the necessary social change. Dattani excels in mirroring his society. He, like his predecessors Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar, believes in the fact that a playwright should write about the evils present in the society of his time and present it before the audience. For this purpose Dattani uses the medium of stage to present the problems to the audience as theatre is very close to real life.

Dattani takes on what he calls the 'invisible issues' of Indian society. By pulling out taboo subjects from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of 'India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre. His plays have varied content and varied appeal. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire. He writes about issues which are very contemporary in nature like gender issues, homosexuality, lesbianism, communalism and religious issues. His plays depict marginalized groups of society, people who are considered misfits in a society where stereotyped attitudes and notions reign supreme. He deals with issues which are very much a part of the educated urban society but the people do not want to confront them and Dattani provides a platform for these issues, so that the people are aware of the fact that they are a reality and not just the fantasies of a playwright. Dattani writes for the theatre. He believes that the written texts are fully realized only through the process of performance. He manages the stage performances of his plays meticulously giving full description of rooms, persons, and vital actions through stage directions.

Dattani’s achievement as a playwright depends on the fact that his plays are a slice of life. They present reality as it exists. He writes about what he observes and an excellent example of his observation is the play Thirty Days in September.
Dattani wrote this play after being approached by the NGO-Rahi (Recovery and Healing of Incest). In this play he wished to show the impact of child sexual abuse for which he met seven or eight adult women who spoke to him about their childhood experiences where they were sexually abused by their own family members.

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(Handibag Y. S.)