Chapter-7
Conclusion

Questions why Dattani has been regarded as a radical, unconventional and contemporary voice in Indian theatre get answered once the reader appreciates the new depths and directions he has given to Indian drama by his thought-provoking treatment of his theatrical art both in terms of form and content. Without adhering to any established dramaturgy, Dattani has created a dramatic tradition of his own by bringing theatre close to real-life experiences. He exhibits a keen awareness and penetrating insight into the socio-psychological spectrum of human behaviour that affects human relationships at personal and interpersonal levels and adds new dimensions to the area of his theatrical canons.

The main area of his focus is, of course, the human relationships. Within the periphery of theatre, Dattani dramatizes human pursuits and desires that determine the dynamics of relationships inside and outside the family. Besides depicting the ‘visible’ social reality, Dattani’s preoccupation with the ‘invisible’ issues inspires him to provide space to the marginalized sections of society like the gays and the eunuchs. While bringing out their psychological fears, guilt and pressures, Dattani also highlights the roles of the creeping influences of societal set-up that consciously or unconsciously determine the fabric of human relationships around them.

Dattani’s plays reveal the intricate family relationships with authenticity and accuracy. Marital relations, parent-child relations, extra-marital relations, outrageous relations like incest and other various issues shape Dattani’s attitude towards family. He is a dramatist who reveals how some family members, motivated by their whims and desire to control, abuse others within the precincts of family.

Patriarchy, for example, has been depicted in his plays as a system of domination and control over the family members to impose the will, needs and desires of the patriarch, i.e. the head of the family. Domination of patriarchal authority is manifested through the fathers in Dance Like a Man and Where There’s a Will.
Hasmukh Mehta tries to control the life of his son by dictating him terms and conditions and makes a mockery of his wife’s submissiveness. Similarly, Jairaj’s passions and his individual identity are of not much significance for his father. The gender-defined roles rooted in Amritlal’s psyche add to the conflict in father-son relationship.

In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, through the characters of Jiten, Nitin and Praful, Dattani shows how prejudiced patriarchal figure functions in families. Dattani never appreciates the anarchic behaviour of such people who are hell-bent on causing troubles and are not able to see the dangers that are bestrewed on the road they are embarking upon. He explores the psychological, social and cultural causes of their actions and the effects of these actions that produce corresponding results. Dattani condemns dishonesty and hypocrisy in relationship which may ruin the lives of people around.

He also presents women, placing them in the background of familial relationships. The female images projected by him are neither weak nor nervous. They, no doubt, suffer at the hands of the patriarch in the family, but are aware and confident to retaliate against the wrong-doers. They are sensitive to preserve their self-respect and identities and make protest against the irrational conventions of traditional society. In their quest for self-realization, Ratna in *Dance Like a Man*, Smita in *Final Solutions* and Uma in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* are some of the unconventional women characters who refuse to be dominated by those who try to undermine their spirits. Sonal, Kiran and Preeti in *Where There’s a Will* are projected as sufferers of patriarchal dominations, but their behaviour, particularly in the later half of the play, are certainly striking and expose the hollowness of the patriarchal authority. In *Tara*, the eponymous protagonist is not a silent sufferer. Dattani’s idea of womanhood is not based on the conventional or traditional archetypal female images. His women characters are essentially humans endowed with basic urges and impulses. If they possess the feminine attributes of love and compassion, they can also fight back to resist the forces that are hazardous to their existence and identity. Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are capable of challenging the oppressive authority of their husbands and ultimately show the gestures of resistance and defiance.
In dealing with the dynamics of human relationships within the range of family, Dattani reveals how families also give rise to incest and child-sex abuse and become witness to the betrayal of human relationships. In *Thirty Days in September*, Dattani portrays vividly the victims of incest through the characters of Mala and Shanta and categorically points out that negligence in family relationships is responsible for the bitter experiences and the worst horrors in children’s lives. Dattani reveals how the dark shadows of mistrust, suspicion, incommunication and above all silence between parents and children generate unparallel sufferings and leave permanent prints on human consciousness. The playwright deftly explores the reasons which keep the families together and keep them apart.

Dattani’s plays express the sufferings and woes of people, within or outside families, who fail to adjust or align with the established norms of society and long for liberation. They refuse to accept defeat even if it means violating conventional standards of moral behaviour. Dattani dramatizes the crisis in relationships which the gays, lesbians and the homosexuals and the physically challenged people face in a society that does not permit individuals to go beyond the patterns set by it.

In Dattani’s plays, we find that realization of relationships and acceptance of social norms are two distinguished facets of human experiences. The gay community suffers from guilt, self-torture and victimization as it stands marginalized in society. Dattani explores the possibility of relationships in ‘grey-areas’ in his play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. He admits: “I have found out that sexuality can’t be straitjacketed or compartmentalized. There are varying degrees of love and bonding one feels for another person irrespective of gender.”

His concern for the gays has been a motif in *Do the Needful* where he depicts the futility of marriage based on heterosexual relations. While expressing sympathy for the homosexuals, Dattani exhibits an exceptional dexterity in unfolding the layers of human consciousness on these hidden issues and seems to be seeking social approval for taboo-relationships.

Dattani has tried to articulate the voice of that oppressed society which is doomed to survive in darkness and silence in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Taking his play beyond the familiar track of family drama, Dattani explores the fringes of Indian
milieu, where the ‘hijras’ survive as they are not allowed to mix with public in society. The play expresses their yearnings for relationships in a society that emphatically rejects them. The elimination of Kamala and Subbu’s suicide show society’s scorn and irrational hatred towards such unacceptable relationships. The sexual identities of the eunuchs lead to their social exclusion. Seven Steps Around the Fire is a plea that the kind of sexuality other than straight and gay should also be acceptable as there is nothing immoral or obnoxious about it. Lack of compassion and human qualities results in adverse and hostile relationships between the jail authority and the eunuchs. Dattani points out unambivalently that the behaviour of the educated officers and their junior subordinates is equally prejudiced and blatant towards the transgendered.

A close study of Dattani’s plays reveals that they are a protest against the imposition of restraint and constraints as well as the forces of social conventions and myths that offer a dehumanizing treatment to others. Dattani is a humanist who articulates the voice of the oppressed against all maladies prevalent in contemporary society. The play, Dance like a Man, explores how a convention-bound society fixes gender roles and thus hampers the aspirations of a male dancer. The play dramatizes conflict resulting from the individual interests and social traditions. In Tara, the girl-child, Tara, suffers acutely due to the society that gives preference to male-child. The whole Patel family and particularly Chandan undergo mental pain and agony of guilt which can be deemed as a response to the scheme and patterns of society. In this play, through the doctor-patient relationship, Dattani makes people aware of the corruption rampant in medical profession. Many unfortunate practices plaguing the society are exposed and castigated through the negative peer relationship which reflects the prejudiced public attitude towards individuals with disabilities. In On a Muggy Night in Mumbai and Seven Steps Around the Fire, Dattani dramatizes the victimization of human beings in the name of culture, customs, community and gender. He shows how established norms of society repress individual urges and passions causing them mental agony. His plays are ‘non-conformist’ in the sense that they criticize the dominant culture for its hypocritical values.
Dattani presents the ills of society which make human life miserable and generate conflict between individual self and established patterns of society. His characters make perpetual struggle to liberate themselves from the evil grip of contriving and stifling social patterns.

While he brings this phenomenon to the attention of the audience, Dattani himself takes the stance of an observer and he does not pass judgments over these issues. He presents reality as it exists in contemporary society. With his dexterous art and craft, vision and ability, he reconstructs real life experience on the stage. Dattani’s plays manifest his dissatisfaction with the prevailing social order. He draws naked truth out of shuttered closets, pulls the hidden issues from under the carpet and has the audacity of calling a spade a spade. His plays address vital aspects of Indian culture and society, highlighting how ruthlessly the established cultural patterns stifle the minorities, and thwart human aspirations.

Dattani, sometimes, shocks the conventional sensibility by revolting against the social and cultural values and by introducing the forbidden and taboo subject matter. However, he always seems to have sound arguments to present the unperceived realities. His plays are rooted in realism that has multifarious shades. His world is peopled with ordinary men and women with their peculiarities. Instead of heroes or villains, he presents human beings with vices and virtues. He seems to think like Chekhov who says: “Life on stage should be as it really is, and the people, too, should be as they are and not on stilts.”

Dattani uses stage not merely to provide entertainment but also to bring about the change in the mindset of the audience. The chief impact of his plays is one of shock, agitation and awakening of the audience’s consciousness to the maladies of society. Like Ibsen and Shaw, Dattani withholds easy solutions and facile denouements in his plays. He provokes people in order to sensitize them towards the more serious issues and encourages them to be self-critical and analyze their thoughts, feelings and prejudices in real life and to work out solutions.

Dattani’s humanism is based on a concern for positive growth of individual and rejections of determinism. It is a plea to accept diversity and difference. In projecting the revolt of his protagonists, Dattani displays his love for humanity and
his commitment to human values. His depiction of the dehumanizing conditions and suffering of the minorities and ostracized sections of society is his endeavour to speak for their lives which hinge on the stereotypical mindsets of the majority. His characterization of the agony and anguish of men and women in families, in fact, represents their desires and efforts to break free from the repression of patriarchy and social oppression. With his keen and minute observation, Dattani seems to emphasize that one of the main causes of man’s insensitivity to others and rigidity of behaviour can be attributed to his tendency to conform to the blatant stereotypes and obtrusive myths that prevail in modern educated society.

In many of his plays, he vehemently tries to destroy the outdated pieties and stereotyped beliefs. In Dance Like a Man, he has problematized the traditional view of gender as to what constitutes a ‘man’ and what constitutes a ‘woman’. A tradition-bound Amritlal questions the propriety of his son, a ‘man’, for overstepping his jurisdiction by taking to dancing like a ‘woman’. Patel in Tara tries to push his children into stereotyped gender roles of his choice. He feels that it would help them fit in society.

Bias for blaming women for their barren state is another social phenomenon that Dattani exposes in Seven Steps Around the Fire and Bravely Fought the Queen. Dattani’s sympathy for the silence and emotional crisis for the individuals, who suffer and struggle against the odds of social constraints, renders his plays highly persuasive. The emotional crisis of Bharti in Tara, Jairaj in Dance Like a Man and Shanta in Thirty Days in September not only bring the purgation of pity and fear but also bring an elevation of human sensibility to modify traditional ideologies rooted in human consciousness.

Dattani keeps an eye even for the national identities that have taken place in accordance with the ideologies that are formulated on the basis of religious myths and stereotypes. In Final Solutions, Dattani depicts the picture of culturally flexible and liberal Indians who strive towards a certain social status but are unable to overcome their bigotry with respect to basic behavioural and moral codes of conduct. Dattani forces the reader to realize that the irrational prejudices and the subconscious fears of diversity are the factors that lead to resentment and bigotry. A study of human
psychology in his plays offers valid explanation of proclivity and susceptibility of people to perpetuate the stereotypes that make society an unpleasant and uneasy place to inhabit. Dattani points to the shifts and changes that have taken place in the modes of human thinking and behaviour. His dramas record human sensibility and experience framed under the shifting cultural values. Hence, he emphasizes the need of reshaping and redefining of traditions and culture. He assumes that every man has his own unique way of perceiving and understanding the reality around. Each individual has great freedom in directing his life.

Dattani emphasizes the need that in the world of rapidly shifting values, tradition and modernity must fuse to create a new social landscape. In the depressing scenario, the hope and resolution lie in the new generation’s realization and open mindedness and courage. Dattani’s vision is that the realization of human sensibility is above all differences and clashes. He presents modern man with his predicaments and complexities and projects life as it is seen. He makes no effort to moralize and does not provide easy solutions, wherein lies the greatness of his art: “Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre.”

Dattani has faith in human spirit that has enormous potential for self-fulfillment and cannot be crushed: “…the theme of the triumph of the human spirit over societal oppression is reflected in his writings.”

Thus, what makes Dattani remarkable is his attempt to focus on the realistic exploration of inner reality of the unexplored dimensions of human psyche and sensitive apprehension of the existentialist vision of anguish. He does not negate the dark aspects of human life and arrives at the light of truth through darkness. He is a maverick dramatist who has amazing insight into human nature and captures the qualities and idiosyncrasies of his characters in an interesting and credible manner. Dattani’s dramatic oeuvre has undoubtedly carved him a distinct niche in contemporary dramatic world. K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger comments: “Modern Indian dramatic writing in English is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole, of high quality. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English – but seldom for actual stage production.”
But with an impressive corpus of performed plays to his credit, it would not be farfetched to say that Dattani has created a dynamic and new theatrical form which is a marked development on the hitherto dormant Indian drama in English.