CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

Indian Drama

Indian drama and theatre has the longest and richest tradition in theatres across the world. Bharata is considered the founder of the Indian dramaturgy and he described drama as the “fifth Veda.” His *Natyasastra* in Sanskrit appears to be the first attempt to develop and arrange the technique or rather art of drama in a systematic manner. Bharata says in *Natyasastra*: “The drama as I have devised will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all” (111-112).

*Natyasastra* advises the reader not only about what is to be portrayed in a drama but also how the portrayal is to be executed. *Natyasastra* deals elaborately with both the theoretical and practical aspects of traditional Indian drama such as rituals, voice, choreography, theatre architecture, costumes, ornaments, music and other related dimensions. It consists of minutely detailed precepts for both playwrights and actors. The much renowned Bharata talks about ten types of drama ranging from one to ten acts. The history of drama states that he had also laid down guidelines for stage design, make-up, costume, dance, acting, directing and music culminating in the theory of *rasas* and *bhavas*. Written in six thousand verses, *Natyasastra* is irrefutably a unique text on dramaturgy, exerting a profound influence over genres, theatre formation and structure.
Talking about the efficacy of what has been formulated by Bharata in *Bharata-The Natyasstra*, Kapila Vatsyayan writes:

Bharata shows a deep understanding of the senses, body and mind relationship. This is the sub-stratum of his entire work. The inner states of consciousness find expression at many levels. There is an intrinsic relationship and mutability of mind, intellect, brain and body. Diverse configurations emerge which can be identified as distinct states of being or as what is commonly called emotive states. (19)

With the impact of Western civilization on Indian life, a new chapter began in Indian arts, including drama. While the theatre movement in the Indian languages had already gathered momentum mainly under the influence of British drama, the theatre in English in India as such did not flourish on expected lines.

“Modern” theatre in India originally began in the colonial cities set up by the British as commercial ports in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. These cities had an urban middle-class audience with values and tastes shaped by the English education they received and by the need to work with the British in administration and commerce. Much of the theatre in this era copied the British troupes that toured the country and took on to some extent the aesthetics, dramaturgy and even the architecture of Western drama. Significantly, most performances did not take place on a proscenium stage. Nor did they depend upon ticket sales but upon patronage. The proscenium which was adopted later
separated the participants from the observers and; ticket sales put an emphasis on theatre as a commodity, making it available to a smaller and wealthier group.

**Contemporary Indian English Drama**

The description of English as an "Indian" language no longer needs elaborate defence. English is officially recognized as a national language in India. Drama is a much neglected genre in the domain of Indian writing in English. Indian English drama is a relatively recent phenomenon and a gradually developing literary form. Indian writing in English is steadily gaining popularity and acceptance in literary circles today the world over and has become an important branch of Literature in English. When we consider the contributions made in other branches of Indian writing in English like novel and poetry, Indian English drama is almost a non-entity. Although there are many Indians who have written plays in English, Indian English drama remains the “Cinderella” of Indian English Literature (M.K. Naik and Shyamala Narayan, *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey* 201).

There are four important factors that explain the slow growth of Indian drama in English. Language is a fundamental factor that has impeded the growth of plays in English in India. For Indians, English is a language learnt and acquired in academic circles and, at best, it is a second language. This has affected both the playwrights and the audience. Formerly Playwrights wrote in verse or stylized speech which was different from the socio-cultural idiom and
sensibility of the common masses. The great exuberance of thought and language which Aurobindo exhibits in his plays may have an appeal to the scholar but that cannot fulfill the demands of the stage. Similarly Kailasam’s language in his English plays cannot equal the natural, easy-flowing spoken language of his Kannada plays.

Some hold the opinion that there are very few “actable” plays in English because Indian characters speaking in English will not sound convincing unless the characters are drawn from an English speaking milieu of the urban society or are Anglo-Indians whose mother tongue is supposed to be English. Some playwrights, therefore, have confined themselves to the urban milieu. It is absurd to expect all the characters in Indian drama to have English as their mother tongue or imagine that they normally use it in their everyday conversation.

The lack of a living theatre in English in India may be attributed chiefly to the language factor. A playwright needs a living theatre to put his/her work to an acid test, evaluate its total effect on the audience and thereby get a chance to improve upon his/her performance. Although Indian plays in English have been staged abroad, the success or failure of those plays cannot be measured in those terms because the “foreign” context is very different from the one in India. A foreign audience may not always understand the Indian and local idiom and sensibilities expressed in those plays. The absence of a living theatre in English in India has prevented the experimentation, growth and development of the Indian drama in English.
The failure of most Indian playwrights in English to recognize and use Indian models such as those found in Indian classical drama as well as folk theatre is another important reason for the stagnation of Indian plays in English. Not making any creative use of Indian myths, legends, folklore and history has been another major setback for Indian playwrights in English, Naik, in *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*, levels a sharp criticism against the Indian playwrights in English:

It is a shocking fact that he [the Indian playwright in English] has mostly written as if he belonged to a race which had never had any dramatic traditions worth the name, and must therefore solely ape the West. Actually what a rich and varied dramatic tradition he can draw upon! Drama was the ‘fifth Veda’ for the ancient Hindus, the Indian classical drama which flourished for ten centuries and more can safely challenge comparison with its counterparts anywhere in the world. And even when this tradition was broken after the Muslim invasion, it did not die but was absorbed into folk forms in several Indian languages actually gaining fresh vitality in the process, by drawing closer to the common man. (157-58)

In recent years Indian drama in the vernacular has been increasingly turning to folk forms and has been using folk techniques with splendid results. While the playwrights in English have failed to use the folk forms those writing in Indian languages such as Karnad, Tendulkar, Gandhi, Tripathi, Dutt, Sircar, Rakesh, Bharti and Tanvir are prominent examples of those who have
successfully employed folk forms in their plays in regional languages and secured vital artistic leverage.

Indian English drama has never reached the high status of the other genres mainly because the English language is not the natural and authentic medium of communication in India. However, Indian English drama has achieved a considerable measure of success in the recent decades but has to go a long way to compete with the other literary genres in Indian writing in English. It has all the possibilities and potential to carve out a niche for itself in the years to come.

The evolution of Indian drama in English has been quite extensive but without “notable gains” (Naik and Narayan 255) as in the vernacular. The process of change had two phases: the first was smooth and new but belonged to the English stage in style and deliberations as in the major pre-independence playwrights like Tagore, Aurobindo and Kailasam; the second was rid of the colonial mind-set and was enriched with an East-West encounter to create socially relevant themes as in some post-independence playwrights like Currimbhoy, Das, Karnad, Sircar, Rakesh and Tendulkar.

While discussing the status of contemporary Indian English drama one can identify three varieties of Indian plays in English. They are: plays in the vernacular that have been translated into English by Indians who are not the authors of the originals, plays in the vernacular that have been translated into English by the authors themselves, and plays written originally in English by Indians. This section investigates the second and third varieties mentioned
above. There are not less than 700 plays written in English by Indian authors since 1831. Of these dramatists, hardly fifteen to twenty have made their mark in that genre.

Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote the first Indian English play *The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* in 1831. This play presents the conflict in the mind of a Bengali youth between orthodoxy and the new ideas introduced by Western education. For more than a generation this play remained the lone dramatic output in the whole of India. A more consistent attempt to write plays in English began with Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s translation of his own Bengali plays into English: *Ratnavali* (1858), *Sermista* (1859) and *Is This Called Civilization?* (1871). His *Nation Builders* was published posthumously in 1922. Ramkinoo Dutt’s *Manipur a Tragedy* (1893) is the last Indian drama in English that was published in Bengal in the nineteenth century.

Modern English Theatre in India, emerged in the late eighteenth century to entertain the British soldiers and citizens who were residing in India. Proscenium-arch auditoriums based on London models were built in major cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The British expatriates enacted famous English plays in these playhouses. Quite frequently drama groups and individuals from England staged performances in these specially built theatres. But the educated Indians were not interested in these British shows; they yearned for an Indian theatre. Consequently, rich and young Bengalis in the nineteenth century established temporary private theatres in their houses.
By the early twentieth century, the theatre movement in the Indian languages had already gained momentum under the influence of British drama, but the theatre in English still lagged behind. Several dramatic organizations were launched from 1940 but none exclusively for drama in English. The National School of Drama was established after Independence. Institutions for training in dramatics such as Rukminidevi Arundale’s Kalakshetra in Madras and Mrinalini Sarabhai’s Darpana in Ahmedabad were founded. Several universities like Baroda, Calcutta, Punjab, Annamalai and Mysore started departments of drama. The Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi started the annual National Drama Festival in 1954. The British Council and the U.S. Information Service arranged visits of foreign troupes from time to time. With all these initiatives it was drama in the Indian languages that did well but drama in English remained impoverished. An exception was Gopal Sharman’s Akshara Little Theatre putting up a few performances occasionally. Though some plays like Gurcharan Das’s Mira, Pratap Sharma’s A Touch of Brightness and Asif Currimbhoy’s The Dumb Dancer were successfully staged in the West they did not fare well in India.

Pre-Independence Phase

In the pre-Independence phase, many playwrights in English emerged but only a few among them were prominent. This phase presents plays and playlets, the themes of which were from legends and epics, events from history and the problems of contemporary society. The major playwrights of this period were Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, A.S. Panchapakesa Ayyar, Bharati Sarabhai, the first woman
playwright during the colonial period, J.M. Lobo Prabhu, T.P. Kailasam and V.V.S. Ayengar.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) is one of the leading writers in Indian English literature. His writings bear testimony to his intense knowledge of Eastern and Western thought. He wrote five complete blank verse plays besides six incomplete verse plays. His complete plays are *The Viziers of Bassora-A Dramatic Romance*, *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Rodoquine* (1958), *Vasavadutta* (1957) and *Eric*. These plays were written in English as original dramatic creations in five acts and in blank verse. Of these, only *Perseus* was published during his lifetime. His incomplete plays are *The Witch of Ilni: A Dream of the Woodlands* (1891), *Achab and Esarhaddon*, *The Maid in the mill: Love Shuffles the Cards*, *The House of Brute*, *The Birth of Sin* (1942) and *Prince of Edur* (1907). The most striking feature of Sri Aurobindo’s plays is that they deal with different cultures and countries in different epochs. Commenting on the significance of Sri Aurobindo’s plays, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes: “Like the poems, the dramas too were a part of Sri Aurobindo’s life! The outer projections of the richer or quintessential part of his life—the imponderables of his ‘inner’ life” (204).

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the major Indian dramatists in English, wrote all his plays originally in Bengali and later translated a few into English. A versatile, multi-dimensional personality, Tagore used the dramatic medium to convey moral values and philosophical ideas. While his dramas have artistic richness they are also dramas of ideas. He made a prolific use of imagery and symbolism and “saw the universals behind the particulars” (*Indian Writing in
Iyengar further observes that Tagore created his dramas out of "certain traditional national attitudes . . . unshakable obscure racial memories . . . [and] perennially recurrent archetypal memories . . ." (122).


Another playwright who has made significant contribution to the growth of Indian English Drama is Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. He wrote his first play *Abu Hassan* in 1918. There are seven verse plays to his credit which he published under the title *Poems and Plays* (1927) and these plays are based on the lives of Indian saints. His *Five Plays* (1929) is written in prose and reveals his social consciousness, and displays a touch of realism.

A.S. Panchapakesa Ayyar’s first play *In the Clutch of the Devil* (1926) has the superstitious practices of witchcraft and ritualistic murder that were prevalent in the rural South India of his time as its central motif. *Sita’s Choice and Other Plays* (1935) contains the title play and also *Brahma’s Way* and *The Slave of Ideas*. *The Slave of Ideas and Other Plays* (1941) is yet another collection of his plays where he uses the prose medium effectively and is seen as a vigorous critic of contemporary life. His plot and characterization are subordinated to the message. His last play *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity* (1942) is allegorical.
Bharati Sarabhai is the first and most distinguished of the women playwrights of Indian drama in English during the colonial era. She wrote two plays, namely, *The Well of the People* (1943) and *Two Women* (1952). The first is symbolic and poetic, and follows the Gandhian social order while the second is realistic and is written in prose, and investigates the private world of a sensitive individual. *The Well of the People* is based on a real story published in Gandhi's *Harijan* and is a poetic pageant. *Two Women* brims with poetic feelings and is packed with thought.

Joseph Mathias Lobo Prabhu has written more than a dozen plays. But only *Mother of New India: A Play of the Indian Village in Three Acts* (1944) and *Death Abdicates* (1945) appeared before the Independence. His *Collected Plays* was published in 1956.

Thyagaraja Paramasiva Kailasam wrote both in English and Kannada and is considered the father of modern Kannada drama. His genius finds its full expression in his English plays such as *The Burden, Fulfilment* and *A Monologue: Don’t Cry*—all three published in one volume titled *Little Lays and Plays* (1933). His other plays are *Kama or The Brahmin’s Curse* (1946) and *Keechaka* (1949). He has a uniform technical excellence in both Kannada and English. His English plays are inspired by Puranic themes but he renders them brilliantly in the intellectual idiom of the present day. In *The Burden*, Kailasam has shown that he can make prose a fit vehicle for the expression of tragic emotion. *Fulfilment* is the best of Kailasam’s plays. In it, Krishna fails to persuade Ekalavya from joining the Kauravas and so stabs him. This raises questions about life and death, good and evil, and means and ends. Kailasam
wrote only a few plays but these are enough to establish him as an original
talent,

V.V. Srinivasa Ayengar was a master of social comedy. He delighted in
the incongruous, ludicrous and droll elements in the lives of the sophisticated
middle-class people in the cities. His plays are collected in two volumes of his
Dramatic Divertisements (1921). Some of his plays are Blessed in a Wife
(1911), The Point of View (1915), Wait for the Stroke (1915), The Bricks
Between (1918) and Rama Raj’ya (1952).

The Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and popular
Puranas like the Bhagavata have been a perennial source of themes for Indian
writers during the pre-Independence phase. There have been many plays with
the following social themes: widow marriage, evils of caste and dowry
systems, superstition and witchcraft, domestic problems, corrupt practices of
doctors, lawyers and religious personalities. Other themes are scholarly
discussions on the conflicting opinions on social customs and the consequence
of wielding excessive authority over youngsters. Bhatta observes:

But, in dealing with these themes, most of them show greater
enthusiasm in composing dialogue on these topics than in
creating appropriate situations and dramatizing them. However,
except for a few playwrights like V.V.S. Iyengar . . . others like
Narayan and A.S.P. Ayyar show some seriousness in exposing
the evils of the contemporary society, (81)
Post-Independence Phase

Indian English drama continued to occupy the back seat in the post-Independence phase as well. A prime factor for this dismal scenario is that even after India became politically independent there was no living theatre so far as the Indian English playwright was concerned. Highlighting the post-Independence phase of Indian drama in English, Naik, in *A History of Indian English Literature*, remarks, “As in the earlier periods, the number of playwrights with sustained dramatic activity remains very small, thought stray contributions are quite numerous” (255-56). Although many plays by Indian playwrights like Currimbhoy, Sharma, Das, Karnad and Dattani have been successfully staged abroad, a full-fledged school of Indian drama in English is yet to be established in India.


Currimbhoy handles a wide range and variety of subject matters like history, contemporary politics, social and economical problems, the East-West encounter, psychological conflicts, religion, philosophy and art. Iyengar, in *Indian Writing in English*, notes that Currimbhoy “with his feeling for variety and talent for versatility” is “the most prolific and the most successful of our dramatists. Farce, comedy, melodrama, tragedy, history, fantasy: Currimbhoy handles them all with commendable ease” (732). But Naik, in *A History of Indian English Literature*, levels several criticisms against Currimbhoy’s plays. Though he admits that isolated scenes in his plays do give evidence of a genuine dramatic talent, his plays have not been successful in general because of “a woefully superficial treatment of promising themes and pasteboard characters” and the “extreme poverty of invention” in his dialogue (260). He observes further that Currimbhoy “appears to confuse dramatic technique with theatrical trickery, and stage gimmicks with dramatic experience” (260).

Nissim Ezekiel was a poet, scholar, dramatist, critic and Professor of English at Bombay University. He limits his themes to the urban, middle and upper middle classes of Bombay in particular. His *Three Plays* (1969) includes *Nalini: A Comedy, Marriage Poem: A Tragic-Comedy* and *The Sleepwalkers*. *An Indo-American Farce*. These plays exhibit a skilful use of ironical fantasy.

*Nalini* is a comedy in three acts. It exposes corruption in the field of advertising and the alienation of some educated Indians. *Marriage Poem* presents a husband caught between marital duty and love. *The Sleepwalkers* is a one-act farce and satire that deals with the Indo-American encounter of the 1960s. It attacks the absurd vulgarism of the Americans and the Indians flattering the Americans. Ezekiel’s fourth play is *Songs of Deprivation* (1969).

Ezekiel’s plays focus on conflicts within families and the plight of the individuals in a conventional society. He has largely succeeded in creating the right idiom for his characters because he knows the life situations and lifestyles of his characters. His other plays include *The Wonders of Vivek*, a comedy in three scenes, and *Don’t Call It Suicide* (1989), a tragedy in two acts. Both these plays are “well-written, stageable and remain focused on those themes that Ezekiel understands best, the English-speaking urban middle and upper-middle classes of Bombay” (Karen Smith, “India” 124-25).

Gieve Patel is a doctor, playwright, painter and poet. His *Princes* (produced in 1970 but unpublished yet) is remarkable for its experimentation with language, successful handling of characters, dialogue and dramatic situation. The play is set in Southern Gujarat immediately after Independence. It deals with the death of a landed, rural Parsi family. The family loses its male
heir and patrimony due to its ineffective response to external changes. Patel’s second play is *Savaksha* (completed in 1981 and produced in 1982 but unpublished yet). This play also is set in Southern Gujarat. It depicts “the collapse of an intended marriage . . . [and] the fragile state of traditional patronage-based authority within the family and a rural community” (Smith 120). *Mister Behram* (1988) also is set in Southern Gujarat in the late nineteenth century. It is a psychological play that explores the complex relationship between an old Parsi landowner and his adopted tribal son-in-law. Ethnicity, class-consciousness and Behram’s dormant homosexual attraction towards his adopted son-in-law are some of the themes dealt with in this play. These three plays “are intense portrayals of family relationships.” Patel’s “main characters are Parsis, the community Gieve Patel belongs to and understands intimately, but his plays’ concerns are pertinent to Indian society more generally” (Smith 119-20).

sexism, racism, imperialism, greed, lust, megalomania, and personal spite” (Smith 127), They are complex and are portrayed as individuals who are products of their culture, environment and social position.

R. Raj Rao’s *The English Professor* (1985) and its sequel *White Spaces*, deal with the absurdities of higher education, including nepotism within departments, professional incompetence, falling class attendance and academic standards. His important one-act plays are found in *The Wisest Fool on Earth and Other Plays* (1996).

Badal Sircar is another notable playwright of this phase. He uses contemporary situations to highlight the existential predicament of modern life. Popularly known as a “barefoot playwright,” Sircar stands in the forefront of a new theatrical movement in India. He has created a genuine people’s theatre, known as Third Theatre, a theatre supported and created by the people, and not just performed by the people.

The avant-garde Marathi playwright Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar symbolizes the new awareness and attempts of Indian dramatists to depict the agonies, suffocations and cries of ordinary people, focusing on the middle class society. Many of Tendulkar's plays derived inspiration from real-life incidents and/or social upheavals, which throw clear light on harsh realities. Tendulkar is a recipient of many prestigious awards like Padma Bhushan, Katha Chudamani, Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya award, Sangeeth Natak Akademi Award and Kalidas Samman.
Of the thirty full-length plays of Tendulkar, only seven have been translated into English. His plays highlight intricate human relationships and reveal uneasy truths, pregnant with meaning, as in his *Silence! The Court Is in Session* (1979) and *Sakharam Binder* (1972). Tendulkar raises several questions about love, sex, marriage and moral values in the Indian context, making ample use of irony, satire, pathos and mock-element to highlight the hollowness of middle-class morality. He exposes the hypocrisy of the traditional Indian society. *The Vultures* (1961), *Kamala* (1981), *The Cyclist*, (2001), *Kanydddn* (2002), *His Fifth Woman* (2004) and *Encounters in Umbugland* are his other notable plays. In his latest plays *To Hell with Destiny* and *The Tour*, he highlights the typical middle-class mentality and value system.

Tendulkar’s plays along with those of playwrights like Sircar, Rakesh and Karnad, have changed the face of Indian theatre. Tendulkar has changed the form and pattern of Indian drama by demolishing the three-act play and creating new models. He has managed to bridge the gap between traditional and modern theatre by creating a vibrant new theatrical form, an example of which is *Ghashiram Kotwal* (*Ghashiram, the Constable*) (1984) which has included the folk art of ‘thamasa’.

Tendulkar is a sarcastic critic of contemporary politics. His *Mitrachi Goshta* (1982), translated into English as *A Friend’s Story: A Play in Three Acts* (2001), is regarded as the first Indian play with a lesbian protagonist, and faced empty halls when premiered.
Girish Karnad, a theatre and film personality, is a living legend in the arena of contemporary Indian English drama. Karnad has received many awards including the Padma Shri (1974), Padma Bhushan (1992), Sahitya Akademi Award (1994) and Jnanpith Award (1998). Most of his plays were originally written in Kannada and then translated into English by the playwright himself. Like Tagore, Karnad turns to Indian epics and myths for his themes. His journey from *Yayati* to *The Fire and the Rain* holds a mirror to the evolution of Indian theatre in the last four decades. Saryug Yadav remarks that Karnad “represents a synthesis of cultures and his formal experiments have been far more rigorously conceived and have certainly been far more successful than those of some of his contemporaries” (9). Karnad has succeeded in creating an Indian theatre which is true to its long tradition and at the same time sensitive to contemporary concerns. He has been successful in employing various techniques of Indian classical and folk theatres in his plays.


Karnad is perhaps the boldest of the Indian playwrights in English to experiment with the stage techniques of Sanskrit drama, folk theatre and
Western drama. He has experimented with the English language by introducing slang, Indian English idioms and expressions, and vernacular and Sanskrit words. He has used Indian myths, folk tales and history to interpret socio-cultural, political and religious realities of modern India. Such interpretations combine disciplines such as psychology, philosophy and ethics. Karnad has thus demonstrated that there is a truly Indian theatre, which can be true to the Indian tradition and at the same time responsive to modern and contemporary concerns. Karnad and Tendulkar concentrate on giving an intense theatrical experience to the audience.

Quite recently young writers like Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani have gained national and international recognition. Playwrights like Karnad, Dattani and Padmanabhan have proved that Indian English drama can claim its rightful place in both national and international arenas. In this context, Dattani emerges as one of the “princes” of Indian English drama. His Final Solutions and Other Plays appeared in 1994, Collected Plays in 2000 and Collected Plays Vol. II in 2005.

Final Solutions and Other Plays contains four full-length plays: Where There’s a Will, Dance Like a Man, Bravely Fought the Queen and Final Solutions. Collected Plays (2000) has six full-length plays and two radio plays. The full-length plays are: Where There’s a Will, Dance Like a Man, Bravely Fought the Queen, Final Solutions, Tara, and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai. The two radio plays are: Do the Needful and Seven Steps Around the Fire. Collected Plays Vol. II contains two stage plays, four radio plays and four screen plays. The stage plays are Thirty Days in September and Seven Steps
Around the Fire; radio plays are Clearing the Rubble, The Swami and Winston, Uma and the Fairy Queen and The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child. Dance Like a Man (written with Pamela Rooks), Mango Souffle, Morning Raga and Ek Alag Mausam are his screen plays. Underscoring the complementary nature of Dattani’s themes, Naik and Narayan write:

In a sense, Dattani’s drama complements Karnad’s, in that mythology and history are Karnad’s favourite subjects, while Dattani is preoccupied with social and political realities in India today. His themes are the Indian joint family and its impact on the individual; the plight of women in Indian society; and homosexuality - an explosive subject (for an Indian). Dattani is the first Indian English playwright of note to deal with this theme. (206)

In Where There’s a Will, the main theme is the negative influence a father has on his son whom he loves dearly. At the end the son realizes the truth but it is too late to change himself. His wife, Sonal, is also in a similar situation, for she had lived under the influence of her elder sister. But Sonal realizes it early enough to change herself.

In Dance Like a Man, the protagonist takes up dancing and marries a dancer against the wishes of his father. Besides the clash of generations, social prejudice against male dancers and the plight of the temple dancers are the other themes. Both these plays portray modern women who are bold and self-confident.
In *Tara*, the protagonist is a woman but this time she is a victim of gender discrimination. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the queen is the Rani of Jhansi. But her name is brought in “as an ironic parallel to the women in the play who are passive, helpless victims of male tyranny” (Naik and Narayan 207). This play also touches upon homosexuality as its theme. Homosexuality is at the centre of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. *Final Solutions* is a political play and deals with communal clashes.

Both the radio plays of Dattani deal with homosexuality. *Do the Needful* has family relationship as its theme. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is partly a detective play in which the mystery of the murder of a hijra is solved. The play offers insights into the lives of the hijras, their beliefs and customs.

Dattani’s stage technique is important. He makes optimum use of the stage space to create maximum dramatic effect. In *Where There’s a Will* “there are three stage spaces” (Naik and Narayan 209). Another device of his is the use of “double dialogue” as in *Do the Needful*. The character’s reaction is heard first as thought and then it is presented as speech. Dattani also uses the Chorus and masks in *Final Solutions*. His dialogues are short and functional and he employs monologues only where necessary. He has an innate sense of dialogue that is vital, stimulating, lucid and effective. He mixes modern English colloquialism, Indianism, and words and expressions from Indian languages such as Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada.

The plays of Dattani are perhaps the first to challenge effectively the assumption that Indian drama written in English represents a disjunction
between language and sensibility, material and medium. Dattani does not see
"the empire writing back"—a phrase which he incidentally describes as
politically incorrect" (Final Solutions and Other Plays 11). English is simply
the language in which "he can best express what he wants to say" (Final
Solutions 9). Dattani's work signals a new phase in the naturalization of
English as a medium of theatre in India.

To the canonical list of playwrights like Sircar, Tendulkar, Karnad and
Rakesh who have shaped contemporary Indian theatre, one must add the name
of Dattani, who is the first playwright writing in English to receive the
prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for his Final Solutions. Dattani is
one of the most interesting and important playwrights writing in India today
and his work demonstrates the wide range of styles, philosophies, and issues
being dealt with in the contemporary Indian theatre. Naik and Narayan write,
"Karnad seems to have a worthy successor in Mahesh Dattani, who enjoys the
distinction of being the first Indian English playwright to win a Sahitya
Akademi award" (Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey
205).

Padmanabhan is a novelist, playwright, cartoonist, illustrator and artist.
Her play Harvest (1998), which won the Onassis Prize in 1997, portrays a
world of poverty and its shocking effect on mothers who sell their children. It
is a “futuristic play, a frightening vision of a cannibalistic future, in which the
sale of human organs has become all too common” (Naik and Narayan 213).
The leitmotif of her play *Lights Out* (2000) is the victimization of women in Indian society.

Vera Sharma’s *Life is Like That* (1997) is about the plight of a middle class woman without much education. It is an exercise in social realism. Her *Reminiscences* (1997) is also about a middle-aged and childless woman who has been abandoned by her husband. Her *The Early Birds* (1983) contains five one-act plays, mostly about middle class life. *The Chameleon* (1991) is a collection of her radio plays. Sharma is good at light social comedy as in *The Early Birds* than at tragedy.

Uma Parameswaran’s *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* (1998) contains plays which were written over many years on different topics. *Sita’s Promise* is a dance drama which showcases different kinds of Indian classical dances. *Meera* is another dance drama. “*Sons Must Die* is a war play against the background of the Kashmir conflict in 1948” (Naik and Narayan 212). *Dear Deedi* is a stylized play that features ten women from ten countries and is set in Canada. Her most successful play *Rootless but Green Are the Boulevard Trees* is a social play with a modern setting and presents the problems of the immigrants in Canada.

Most playwrights of the post-Independence phase have gone beyond the models and techniques of classical Sanskrit drama. The post-Independence drama has experimented with typical Indian expressions and idioms in English translation. The playwrights of this phase died not confine themselves to our myths, legends, folk tales and history but went beyond these themes. They
Mahesh Dattani

Mahesh Dattani was born to rural Gujarati parents in Bangalore on August 7, 1958. He completed his schooling at Baldwin High School and his graduation and post-graduation at St. Joseph’s College of Arts and Science at Bangalore. After his education he started as a copywriter in an advertising firm and also supported his father in the family business. With a Master’s degree in Marketing and Advertising, he thought he would lead a normal life helping his father in the family business.

When he was ten, his parents took him to watch a Gujarati play. Living in Bangalore, theatre was, for his parents, one way of staying in touch with their community. Quite frequently he went along with his parents and two elder sisters to watch Gujarati plays performed in Bangalore. This experience helped him to keep in touch with his roots and also kindled his interest in theatre. As a college student in the early eighties, he joined Bangalore Little Theatre and participated in workshops, and started acting and directing plays.

In 1985, he made his debut with an English play *Surya Shikar, Five Finger Exercise* in Bangalore. His first play as a director came a year later with a drama titled *God*. But it was not until he directed Woody Allen's *God* that Dattani realised that theatre was his vocation. From 1984 to 1987 he underwent training in ballet at Alliance Fran?aise de Bangalore from Molly Andre, He also learnt Bharathanatyam from Chandrabhaga Devi and Krishna

Dattani created his theatre group called *Playpen* in 1984, and started directing plays ranging from classics to contemporary ones. *Playpen*’s aim was to train and showcase fresh talents in acting, directing and stage craft. It is around this time that he started his search for Indian plays in English. He writes:

At that point I felt the need to do plays, Indian plays in English language. I wasn’t entirely happy with the translations available. I felt that the language was stilted. It just didn’t present any real speech; it was either far too academic or just did a literal translation of the original. So I felt that there ought to be more plays to be written originally in the English language. I decided to try my hand at it. That’s how I began writing. (169-170)

Dattani wrote his first full-length play *Where There’s a Will* for the Deccan Herald Play Festival in 1986. His maiden play was an instant success. The encouraging response and acceptance from people motivated him to write and direct Indian plays in English. He is a reluctant playwright but a passionate director. He says, “I sometimes get itchy fingers as a director . . . The minute I write a play, the minute it’s ready and finished on my computer, I want to direct it”. And on another occasion he commented, “When I’m directing a play, I feel like I’m a complete human being. That makes me happy” (“Mahesh Dattani - The Invisible Observer”).
Dattani directed a thriller *Double Deal: How Far Would You Go* early this year. It is an adaptation of Richard Stockwell's *Killing Time*, and tells the story of two strangers Jeet and Rhea, their initial encounter and the dramatic revelations that follow. Dattani’s latest play is *Brief Candle*. It was written by him and directed by Lillete Dubey. This play is on cancer and cancer hospices.

Dattani writes in English and takes the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family as his subject. Reeling under the oppressive weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desire, his characters struggle for freedom and happiness. "I write for my milieu, for my time and place—middle-class and urban Indian. My dramatic tensions arise from people who aspire to freedom from society," confesses Dattani (*The Hindu*, March 09, 2003).

Dattani’s plays question some of the norms and conventions of the Indian society. In the process, significant questions arise regarding gender and other issues like homo—sexuality, lesbianism and, paedophile. He tackles issues that afflict societies the world over. Dealing with issues like male-female divide, patriarchy, consumerism and, communalism, he holds back nothing. "I'm not looking for something sensational, which audiences have never seen before," asserts Dattani. "Some subjects, which are underexplored, deserve their space. It's no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalised, including the gays. Each of us has a sense of isolation within given contexts. That's what makes us individual" (*The Hindu*, March 09, 2003).
Dattani is one of the two Indians, the other being Rukshana Ahmed, among the twenty one writers commissioned by BBC Radio to write plays to commemorate Chaucer’s six hundredth death anniversary. Dattani quite frequently writes plays for BBC Radio 4. His radio plays are popular in UK as he is able to create the right ambience and context through sounds and word pictures. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* caught the imagination of the British audience because of the character Uma Rao, the wife of the Superintendent of Police who investigates a murder. After its huge success, Dattani was asked to write a detective story having Uma Rao to investigate interesting cases. Michael Walling, The Artistic Director of the multicultural theatre company, *Border Crossings*, in his introductory note to *Bravely Fought the Queen*, comments:

His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It’s 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 his fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh creates such a space. This is in itself a political and social statement of astonishing force. (229)
Apart from being commissioned by international and national bodies to write plays, Dattani has won many reputed scholarships and held senior positions in theatre groups and institutions. In 1992, he was the recipient of USIS Visitorship to study American theatre and culture. He received British Council grants in 1992 and 1998 to interact with UK theatre professionals. Charles Wallace scholarship was awarded to him in 1997 to visit the University of Kent as a writer-in-residence. Dattani is a visiting professor at Portland State University in the US, where he has been conducting classes and workshops on a regular basis.

Despite his hectic schedule, Dattani conducts theatre workshops on acting, playwriting and directing to nurture new talents. In 1993, he was invited by Xavier Institute of Communications, Mumbai as a Guest Faculty to conduct a workshop in screenplay writing. The same year he conducted a special communications programme on Dramatic Structure and Playwriting at Media Centre in Bangalore. He conducted workshops for playwrights and actors in the major cities in India in 1996. In 2000, he conducted weekend classes on Dramatic Structure at Haystack, Canon Beach, Oregon, USA.

Dattani made his entry into the tinsel world through Mango Souffle (2002), adapted from his highly successful play On a Muggy Night in Mumbai. Even though it was his maiden attempt, the film won the best motion picture award at the Barcelona film festival in 2003. The next film that he directed was Morning Raga, which glorifies Indian heritage and classical culture. It also mourns the loss of Indian culture and identity due to the advent of technology and modernity. Pamela Rooks directed the film version of Dance Like a Man.
Dattani wrote the screenplay for this film and it won the National Award for the best feature film in 2004.

Dattani uses his plays as a platform to discuss issues and problems confronting the middle class twentieth-century Indian. He lays bare the social taboos and inhibitions in the Indian society. He deliberately brings the marginalized sections to the center stage. He does not shy away from sensitive issues and sensitizes the public in a subtle and gentle way to the complexities surrounding the issues. Without being didactic, he quite artistically turns his plays into catalysts of social change.

**Why Mahesh Dattani?**

Mahesh Dattani is a playwright with great potential. He has charted his own course as far as theatre is concerned. He does not hark back to the past or draw themes from a tradition that no longer sustains him or his audience. His plays deal with gender disparity, communalism, sexuality and other socially relevant issues. Through his characters, he highlights the dynamics of personal and moral choices while focusing on human relationships.

Dattani’s perfect cueing into burning issues of social relevance, those we have collectively stashed away in dusty closets for generations, is what sets him apart from other contemporary Indian English playwrights. Fringe issues that remain latent and suppressed or are pushed to the periphery occupy the centre stage of his plays. He believes that much of the mainstream society lives in a state of forced harmony out of a sense of helplessness or out of lack of alternatives. His recurrent depiction of homosexual characters also sets him
apart from other contemporary Indian playwrights. An analysis of select plays of Dattani which address these “closet” issues throws light on gender and sexuality.

In his introduction to *Homographesis. Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, Lee Edelman theorizes the radical potential of gay writing. He shows the ways in which gay writing can deconstruct "the binary logic of sexual difference on which symbolic identity is based, effectively disrupting] the cognitive stability" of culture itself (12). For Edelman, gay identity is something to be established in opposition to the rigorous heteronormativity. Writing holds this radical potential, he argues, because it is only within writing, or textuality, that homosexuality is culturally produced in the first place. Through his plays, Dattani attempts to present gay identity as an opposition to the heteronormative social order. He presents homosexuality as a normal sexual orientation. In an essay titled "English Literature" in *The Encyclopedia of Gay Histories and Cultures*, Barry Weller reminds us that:

Gay or queer criticism has signaled, from the outset, that its project entails not the examination of a circumscribed canon of gay-centered or gay-identified texts but a rereading of the way in which the entire body of Anglo-American literature and beyond delineates among other things the boundaries of sexual identity, the norms of sexual behavior, the grotesque and classically desirable body, and the terms of social inclusion and exile. (279)
Research Gap and Potential

The focus of research on Dattani so far has been feminist and postcolonial. Researchers have worked on topics such as feminism in Tara, communal issues in Final Solutions, stage craft in his plays and postcolonial elements in his plays. The focus of this study is the theme of sexuality which is a key issue in Dattani’s plays, and it is this theme that demarcates him from other playwrights. This study is unique because no such study has so far been conducted on issues relating to the homosexuals and transgenders in Indian English drama and in Dattani’s plays in particular.

This study gains relevance in the context in which debates are going on in India about decriminalizing homosexuality and the landmark judgment of the Delhi High Court in the Naz Foundation case delivered on July 2, 2009 striking down the provision of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that criminalizes even consensual sex between same-sex individuals. This ruling has opened up public space for the queer movement in India.

Having done an extensive literature survey and a comprehensive study of Dattani’s plays, the researcher identified an area waiting to be explored. The research gap thus identified was Dattani’s pioneering effort in addressing the issues of same-sex relationships and transgenders. Recognising this research gap and the potential for an in-depth study in this area, the researcher has attempted to examine the psycho-sexual dimensions in select plays of Dattani based on the queer theory framework.
Five plays of Dattani have been selected for the present study. They are: *Night Queen* (1996), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999). Out of the five, four (*Night Queen, Bravely Fought the Queen, Do the Needful* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*) deal with the theme of homosexuality and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* deals with transgenders. The researcher has attempted to critique these plays using the queer theoretical framework.

Through these five plays, Dattani has articulated ideas that pose a challenge to the binary sexual and gender categories, and to heteronormativity. Realizing the potential of the theatre as an agent for social change, Dattani, through these plays, has critiqued our society for the marginalization of the homosexuals and transgenders. While the major Indian playwrights and directors have not yet explored same-sex relationships, Dattani has taken a bold step to address these issues in an explicit manner.

Sexual minorities are epistemologically constructed as the “other”; that is, the construction of both hetero—and homosexuality is contingent upon a binary relationship that upholds heterosexuality as the only way of knowing the world. Dattani has used the medium of the theatre to dismantle the hegemonic sexual tradition in the Indian scenario. The strong taboo against any form of sexuality that is outside the limits of heterosexuality prevents writers from addressing these issues. But the playwright has taken a bold step to bring out the dormant realities and closet issues in the Indian society, and presents sexual behaviours that breach the heteronormative social or symbolic boundaries.
The present study, titled “A Critique of the Psycho-Sexual Dimensions in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani—A Queer Approach,” examines Dattani’s plays which address homosexuality and transgender issues. Out of the five plays selected for the present study, four (Bravely Fought the Queen, Do the Needful, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai and Seven Steps Around the Fire) were published in Dattani’s Collected Plays which came out in 2000. Night Queen (1996) which deals with the topic of same-sex relationship, has not been published so far but the playwright has provided a copy of the play (typescript) to the researcher. (Please refer to the Appendix) Considering the relevance of this play to this discussion, it has been included in this study.

The present study intends to take a close look at how the concept of heteronormativity is contested in Dattani’s plays. The term “heteronormativity” implies that human beings fall into two distinct and complementary categories, namely, male and female; that sexual and marital relations are normal only between two people of different sexes; and that people should strictly follow roles determined by their gender.

In the present study, the term “queer” designates a range of acts, identities, propensities, affectivities and sentiments which fissure heteronormativity. Only the word “queer” can adequately capture the fluidity and amazing plasticity of the labile categories of gendered identifications and sexual identities.

Queer has generally meant "strange," "unusual" or "out of alignment". It is a term that by its very use questions “conventional understandings of
sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them” (Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* 97).

Queer theory emerged in the early 1990s out of gay and lesbian studies and feminist studies. Queer theory's main aim is to explore the contestations of the categorization of gender and sexuality. Queer theorists claim that identities are not fixed because identities consist of varied components and to categorize an individual on the basis of just one characteristic is, therefore, wrong. The focus of queer theorists is the problem of classifying individuals on the basis of gender; therefore, queer is less an identity than a critique of identity.

**Methodology and Structure of the Thesis**

The researcher has examined five plays of Dattani with the help of the theoretical framework provided by queer theory. An analytical and interpretative approach has been followed to critique the psycho-sexual elements in each of the five plays selected for this study. The rules and guidelines laid down by Joseph Gibaldi in *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (6th edition) have been followed as far as methodology is concerned.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The introductory chapter presents a brief survey of the history of Indian English drama and locates Mahesh Dattani within that history. This chapter presents a brief survey of literature which leads to the identification of the research gap and its potential. It also presents the thesis statement and includes a note on the structure of the thesis.
Chapter two presents an in-depth study of queer theory, highlighting the development of the theory and the contribution of key queer theorists. Chapter three presents a detailed interpretation of Dattani’s *Night Queen* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* which openly present homosexuality. Chapter four continues the thread of the third chapter and investigates Dattani’s *Do the Needful* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* which present homosexuality in the Indian family context. This chapter also discusses *Seven Steps Around the Fire* which deals with transgender issues. The concluding chapter brings together the common elements found in all the five plays of Dattani selected for the study within the framework of queer theory and sums up the main arguments and major findings of this exploration.